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# **Aspects of Multimodality in Children's Literature: Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* as an Example (\*)**

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## **Abstract**

This research, entitled *Aspects of Multimodality in Children's Literature: Beatrix Potter's The Tale of Peter Rabbit as an Example*, studies six of the most important multimodal aspects in children's literature. These are design, text-image association, typography, colour, space and size. Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is taken as an example. The research shows that multimodalities cannot be done without when evaluating children's literature. It shows that modalities (modes), especially pictures, are indispensable carriers of meaning that should be considered side by side with the text. The research highlights the history and development of the modalities and their associations with children's literature. The research explores some of the key terms in both children's literature and multimodality. The conclusion asserts the importance of evaluating children's literature according to the criteria provided which makes children's literature different from adults' literature.

Key Words: children's literature, multimodality, interdisciplinary, Beatrix Potter, *Peter Rabbit*

## مستخلص البحث:

يدرس هذا البحث، المعنون ، صور تعدد الوسائط في أدب الأطفال: حكاية الأرنب بيتر للكاتبة بيترس بوتز نموذجاً، ست من أهم الوسائط في أدب الأطفال و هي: التصميم و العلاقة بين النص و الصورة و الألوان و المساحة و الحجم. يتم تطبيق هذه المفاهيم على عمل حكاية الأرنب بيتر للكاتبة البريطانية بيترس بوتز. يظهر البحث أهمية توظيف هذه الوسائط في أدب الاطفال و كيف أن هذه الوسائط أصبحت من أهم خصائص هذا النوع من الكتابة. يلقي البحث الضوء على نشأت و تطور هذه الوسائط و ارتباطها بأدب الأطفال. يخلص البحث الى أن أدب الاطفال له خصائصه و سماته التي تميزه عن أدب الكبار ومن ثم يجب وضع هذه المعايير في الاعتبار عند تقييم أعمال أدب الأطفال.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** أدب الأطفال، تعدد الوسائط، الدراسات البينية، بيترس بوتز، الأرنب بيتر

The aim of this research, as the title indicates, is to explore the aspects of multimodality in children's literature; Beatrix Potter's (1866-1943) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* will be taken as an example. Children's literature refers to works written to preschool and primary grade children. For the last few decades, an important shift of focus has been taking place from the written language to the mixed, written-visual language, which involves more than word-image association, as will be explained. This is particularly noticeable in children's literature books. Such books abound with modalities that depend largely on non-textual codes essential to the author's/illustrator's communication of ideas. The research will deal with the most important modalities authors employ in writing for children. Specifically speaking, these are modalities of design, text-image association, typography, colour, space and size. Each of the modes, as employed by the author/illustrator, offers specific affordances, that is, potentials for communication. It is worth remarking from the beginning that it is sometimes really difficult to draw delineating lines between one mode and another. The fact that multimodality adopts, and aims at, the idea of comprising a mosaic in which the different

modes complement and cohere with one another can further support the idea of two or more modes being introduced and discussed simultaneously. In one image, for instance, space and page design are hardly separable from each other.

The need for this research emanates, among other things, from the fact that the multimodal discourse, especially as applied to children's literature, is a rapidly growing discipline whose tools of judgment should be made clear. In addition, most of research on multimodality is conducted from social and pedagogic perspectives, focusing on linguistics rather than literature. Critics usually differentiate between three approaches of multimodality: the social semiotic multimodality, pioneered by Kress, van Leuwen and Halliday, multimodal discourse analysis, spearheaded by O'Halloran and O'Tool, and multimodal interactional analysis, associated mainly with Scollon and Scollon, Norris and Jones.

The study of illustrations, it is worth mentioning, has become an important part of academic scholarship, especially with children's literature as a case in point. This research will respond to a number of important questions including the following: what is multimodality? What are the most important multimodal aspects in children's literature? Should children's literature be judged by the same criteria used for judging adults' literature? In what ways has multimodality contributed to the development and popularity of children's literature? What are the varieties of word-image associations in children's literature? What are the main terms of multimodality and children's literature? To what extent can meaning be influenced by word-image associations? Should writers of children's literature be more of illustrators than authors? What are the main aspects of multimodality in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*? Why has B. Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* gained such phenomenal success?

The question of whether children's literature should be judged by the same standards used for judging adults' literature has aroused a

lot of controversy. Many critics assert that children's literature should have its own criteria of evaluation. Such critics assert the role multimodality plays in children's literature. It can be said that multimodality has become essential to the composition of children's literature and the secret of success and survival of many children's books. Some critics, however, still insist that the text is the only element of judging a work of literature, regardless of the work being written for children or adults claiming that other elements can well distract readers from the text. Such critics consider the text to be the primary carrier and communicator of meaning. They believe that elements other than the text may impede the development of fluent and confident reading in children" (Maybin 297). It is also claimed that, "the more sensitive child may be alarmed by illustrations, even in so-called children's books" (Maybin 309).

Indeed, children can read and understand pictures and colours a long time before they can read and understand texts. Children can also use colours to express themselves before they can read or write. Furthermore, as assumed by Amos Comenius (1592-1670), an educationalist, "children best remember things that they have seen rather than merely read about" (Maybin 300). Thus, many critics assert that children interact actively with multimodal means in children's books. Such critics, thus, believe that multimodality should be considered essential to judging children's literature.

The framework within which this study will be conducted assumes that multimodal aspects should be explored and studied as means of judging works of children's literature since the real value of a work for children cannot be really realised apart from understanding such aspects. Multimodality is the term used to refer to all such varieties of modes authors can incorporate and employ to get their ideas across to the audience the way they think best conveys their ideas and impresses the audience. The term, thus, refers, among other things, to the various means and resources, images, signs, icons,

design, fonts, font sizes, spacing, gestures, gazes, postures, sounds, graphics and the like that different authors utilise to create and communicate meaning. Multimodality can, thus, be looked at as a semiotic-cognitive activity.

As an object of research, multimodality is a relatively new academic field. It is an interdisciplinary domain in which literature (the text) and art (images) converge and interact to create meaning. The American poet Hart Crane (1899-1932) once said, “unless poetry can absorb the machine then it has failed of its full contemporary function” (Haslam 107). The remark is deeply subtle. The words reveal Crane’s awareness of the challenges that poetry has to face and deal with rather than shun, avoid and recoil upon itself. The scope, however, can be enlarged to speak of literature rather than poetry. In other words, this is a call for interdisciplinarity on Crane’s part; an interdisciplinarity through which literature will create bridges of communication and interrelation with the modern world outright, with the machine being a metonymy of the technological advance characterising the modern age.

To start with, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable interest in the connections between words and visuals and in exploring the interactive play between the two together with other modes. To a good extent, this can be ascribed to the revolutionary shift in communication, i. e. from the written text to the auditory and the visual, which had a profound influence on texts, turning children’s literature into what is termed by some critics as “e-literature” (docs.lib). Many writers have, thus, come to devise and employ means of communication by incorporating a sundry of means that exist side by side with the text. Some others have even gone beyond this by publishing wordless picturebooks in their attempts to prove that meaning can be completely conveyed without words, i. e. solely through images. Molly Bang, an American illustrator and a teacher of illustration, explains that a fairy tale can be constructed

visually using a series of shapes (*Children's* 207). The following is an example of a story told solely in pictures:



(*Children's* 216)

There has been a lot of controversy around three terms much used in the realm of children's literature, i. e. 'illustrated books', 'picture books' and 'picturebooks'. In the first of these, 'illustrated books', pictures add nothing or a little to the story; the story can do totally without pictures. In this case, pictures serve a mere decorative function. Naguib asserts that lack of knowledge of modalities may well blemish or distort the work and vice versa (Naguib 157). 'Picture books' are ones in which "the words and images essentially show the same information or the same parts of the story" (*Children's* 210). In this case, words and pictures can be said to be exchangeable in the sense that one can replace, rather than integrate with, the other. The third type, 'picturebooks', refers to books in which words and images complement each other in telling the story. Both are essential to telling the story in this case. In some picturebooks even, "much of the narrative is conveyed (sometimes it is entirely conveyed) by the

images alone..." (*Children's* 210). To this category belongs children's picturebooks in which the text is itself included as part of the image, as it is the case in Shaun Tan's (1974) *The Lost Thing* (2000). In his turn, Whalley differentiates between the two terms 'books with pictures' and 'illustrated books' as follows:

A good illustrated book is one where the accompanying pictures enhance or add depth to the text. A bad illustrated book is one where the pictures lack relevance to the text, or are ill placed and poorly drawn or reproduced – these are books with pictures rather than illustrated books (*Children's* 211).

To a number of readers the term multimodality sounds loose and, therefore, defining the term can be helpful. Multimodality can be defined as, a "close readings of visual elements of texts in their own right, and of how the visual combines with words in texts to create meaning for readers and viewers" (Maybin 298). Ewa Żebrowska defines the term as "the coexistence and association of different characters (modalities) at several levels in a semantic and functional wholeness on the one hand, and as a "pan-cultural competence and intelligence" on the other (*Journal*). Multimodality can also be simply defined as the use of "visual communication and semiotics" (*Children's* 228).

Multimodality, thus, encompasses a wider range of means other than language in the traditional sense of the word. It represents, in one way or another, a challenge to the long-standing, long-held trust in language, written or spoken, as, to quote Kress, "the most valued form of representation", i. e. the most important means of communication (*Gains*). One example of how non-textual multimodal means can stand independently in a book is provided by David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991), a work that depends almost entirely on images. The book was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1992. D. Wiesner, an accomplished artist and illustrator, depends greatly on



images in his works; he was awarded the Caldecott Medal three times: in 1992 for *Tuesday*, in 2002 for *The Three Pigs*, and in 2007 for *Flotsam*. This puts us face to face with the question of the author-as-illustrator and whether prizes for picturebooks should be awarded to the author, the illustrator or both. The question will sound more problematic if applied to many works in this respect. The problem, however, disappears with such author-illustrators such as Helen Beatrix Potter, known as Beatrix Potter. “[A]uthor-illustrator” is the term coined by Salisbury (woboe) to refer to authors who are their own illustrators. Importantly, Potter was an avid sketcher of black-and-white line drawings and a painter, in water colours, of birds, animals, plants and insects. Furthermore, Potter’s accuracy and attention to anatomical detail is unquestioned (*Children’s* 224).

Roland Barthes is a key influence on the multimodal discourse (Maybin 313). Many critics believe R. Barthes’s book *Elements of Semiology* (1967) to have triggered serious attention towards the domain. Barthes explains that language in picture books may come first and visuals come afterwards, with visuals being dubbed “illustration” in this case. Visuals, on the other hand, may precede language, a case which he terms “anchorage”. If a verbal code extends or adds new information to the visual code, it is termed “relay”. It is noteworthy that Barthes takes illustrations to his focal interest. Barthes, further, suggests that a reversal is taking place in which “the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words, which, structurally, are parasitic on the image” (Kong 242). Barthes’s views are, indeed, revolutionary and Barthes’s influence on advocates of multimodality is far-reaching. To give one example, Gunther Kress, one of the main exponents of multimodality, asserts that “we seem to have a new code of writing and image, in which information is carried differently by two modes” (Kong 243). In his famous research entitled “Gains and Losses: New Forms of Texts, Knowledge, and Learning”, Gunther Kress assumes that, “it seems evident to many commentator

that writing is giving way, is being displaced by image in many instances of communication where previously it held sway". Kress further argues that, "visuals have taken up some of the functions that written language used to perform" (Kong 243). The communicational givens of the past are, thus, put into question. Kenneth Kong, however, does not agree that visual language has replaced or will replace verbal language as the prime means of communication". Significantly, however, Kong asserts "the threats [to language] posed by other semiotic means, including visuals" (Kong 242).

In addition to Barthes's *Elements of Semiology*, two other important influences can be considered here: the role of technology and that of picturebook awards. The role played by modern technology has to be acknowledged here. With its remarkable incorporation of and dependency on images, icons, photos, banners, layouts, etc., in communication and the deliverance of meaning, digital technology has, undoubtedly, contributed a great deal to the development of the multimodal discourse. Significantly, Ewa Żebrowska opines:

Most frequently, static images and texts occur together. Today's technology facilitates the creation of complex multimodal and bimodal embassies especially by computerized transmission and storage of digitized data. In addition, moving images, sound (music, noise) and means such as typography, layout and design are added. Most of the communication is, nowadays, visual and multimodal, with much fewer mono-modal exclusively written texts. (*Journal*)

Still, the idea has to be made clear that it is not actually true to say that employing drawings, images, icons, etc. in communication is new. These "modalities" were, indeed, essential components of communication from earliest times. They can be found on cave walls, on papyri, on obelisks, in temples, in monasteries, etc. The use of

images, graphs and the like of such means multimodality utilises is not, it is to be noted, new as such means and devices have long been in use by different authors throughout centuries. In addition, even young school children can be thought of as multimodal. Young children's drawings, using of signs, colouring and painting at schools can, so to speak, be thought of as multimodal. Even in poetry, some poets employed different modes which they think better communicate their ideas. George Herbert's 'The Altar', 'Easter Wings' and Dylan Thomas's 'Vision and Prayer' poems are but few examples in this respect. The aforementioned poems are "altar" (*Dictionary* 7) or "pattern" (Baldick 251) poems, i. e. poems "in which the lines are arranged so that they form a design resembling the shape of the subject of the poem" (*Dictionary* 7). In his turn, William Blake is considered a visual poet by some critics due to his multimodal endeavours. The achievement of the modern multimodal discourse is, thus, not that of devising a new discipline inasmuch as it is in exploring and studying such modalities in a systematic way and in considering these as criteria for judging works as well as in asserting the importance of utilising such modes in children's literature books.

Illustrated books for children can be said to have started in 1658 with the publication, in Latin, of Amos Comenius's (1592-1670) *Orbis Sensualism Pictus*. James Greenwood's *The London Vocabulary*, published in 1771, is generally accepted as the first English illustrated book for children. Early illustrations, mostly didactic, religious, moral and social, were on woodcuts and were then engraved on copper plates. The nineteenth century, with its advanced technological means of printing, increasing interest in books for children and varieties of subject-matter, including folktales, nursery rhymes, fables, myths and riddles for children is considered to be the "Golden Age" of children's literature (Maybin 297). Since the 1830s, "it was certainly accepted that for the most part children's books should be illustrated" (Maybin 304). It is worth noting here that most

of the authors of children's books of the time, John Millais and Arthur Hughes, were their own illustrators since most of them were actually, "artists in their own right" (Maybin 305).

Some critics assert that researches conducted on children have shown that even very young children are "more than capable of 'reading' the stories that such texts tell, by questioning and interpreting the pictures, their juxtaposition and their sequencing" (*Children's* 215). Others, however, still assert that picturebooks are, "intellectually and visually sophisticated and may demand a range of experience and developmental understandings that are beyond many young children" (*Children's* 218). Indeed, picturebooks are sometimes really complex and require close attention and scrutiny. Arizpe and Styles assert that, "[P]icturebooks...diverge from any concept of children's books as 'simple', if by simple we are referring to such aspects as clear-cut narrative structures, a chronological order of events, an unambiguous narrative voice and, not least, clearly delineated and fixed borders between fantasy and reality" (qtd in *Children's* 247). A child-reader is not, actually, expected to figure out all the details a picture may unfold. It is claimed that when visuals take on with less and less words being used, readers, whether children or carers, take over as narrators, "so, in that sense there is a 'handing over' of the narrative role, literally, to the reader" (*Children's* 212).

Furthermore, a good number of awards that encouraged multimodal writing for children added importantly to the development of the discipline. The Caldecott Medal, established in 1937, is one of the world's most prestigious awards for writing for children. It is awarded to the most distinguished American picture book for children. In addition, in their turn, Children's Book of the Year Award: Picture Book, established in 1956, together with Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA), established in 1945 can be said to have increased interest in and popularity of multimodality. According to the former of these, the award is made to outstanding books of the picture book

genre in which the author and illustrator achieve artistic and literary unity, or, in wordless picture books, where the story, theme or concept is unified through illustrations (cbca).

The appearance of visual narratives, i. e. wordless books, is such a landmark and an important phase of development in the multimodal discourse. Many wordless books have appeared recently, and this, undoubtedly, represents a shift in communication. Wordless books are, indeed, becoming more and more in vogue worldwide. Renato Moriconi's wordless book *Barbaro* was awarded the best wordless picture book in 2014 by the Brazilian Foundation of books for Children. This clearly shows that wordless picturebooks, utilising different modalities, sometimes with no words at all, have been gaining more grounds in children's literature and cannot, therefore, be ignored anymore.

The varieties of word-image associations and relations are worth considering. The text and images are sometimes completely separated as it is the case in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in which the text always appears on one page and the image appears on the opposite one. Potter alternates the text and the image on every two pages. Sometimes the text and the image(s) appear on the same page. The text, in this case, appears above or below the image, as in *Hansel and Gretel* (1812) by Brothers Grimm. Another variety of text-image association is that in which the text is provided within a frame (box) within the image itself, as in *How to Live Forever* (1995) by Colin Thompson. This is actually different from that variety in which the text appears as words within the picture but without a frame (box), as in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) and David Macaulay's *Black and White* (1990). Still words can appear on the margin while the visual occupies the centre of the page(s), as in Oliver Jeffers's *The Incredible Book Eating Boy* (2006). In Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), "the story is told in alternate blocks of visual and then verbal narrative, sometimes running to many pages" (*Children's* 243).

It is worth mentioning that in Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, texts as well as images are surrounded by bold black borders "reminiscent of a cinema screen, the images on sequential pages remind us of the different shots a camera might take, zooming in and out, showing different angles and perspectives. The reader has to assemble these into a filmic narrative by turning the pages (*Children's* 243). The text, in other works of children's literature, has a bare minimum of words, as it is the case in David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991), a book with twelve words in all. Some stories are told completely in pictures, without a single word, as in *Up and Up* (1979) by Shirley Hughes. Eileen Browne's *Handa's Hen* (2003) shows another variety, i. e. some pages have texts above or below the images while others have images only. The author/illustrator chooses the variety (or varieties) he or she believes best communicates his or her ideas. It is, thus, clear that "each mode of communication is delivering a different message: images and words deliver different stories or, perhaps, different aspects of the same story" (*Children's* 227).

## II

### **Multimodal Aspects in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit***

The fact that fifty percent of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is specified for pictures clearly reveals Potter's view that pictures are as important as a means of communication as the text itself. This can further be supported by the fact that she alternates the text and the image on every two opposite pages. Indeed, it can be said that she put much more of the effort in the images than she did in the text itself. Potter was meticulous and scrupulous about every single detail even though this put her in troubles with publishers who sometimes rejected her suggestions and this explains why Potter had sometimes to publish her books at her own cost. It can be said that like many of her central characters, Peter Rabbit as a case in point, Potter was adventurous and revolted against many of the norms of publication at her time. In her meticulousness about illustration details, Potter can be compared with

artist-authors such as Edward Lear (1812-88) and Charles Henry Bennett (1828-1867) who were their own illustrators.

The phenomenal success of Potter's work has encouraged publishers, authors and illustrators to experiment with the work. In addition, as Sharon Goodman explains, the book is now available "in almost any format imaginable, from board and stencil books, to CD-ROMs and dolls" (Montgomery 81). Publishers' adventures resulted in a countless number of different editions, with changes in every single aspect of the book. To give one example, of all the following covers, only the first one is Potter's own:

THE TALE OF  
PETER RABBIT

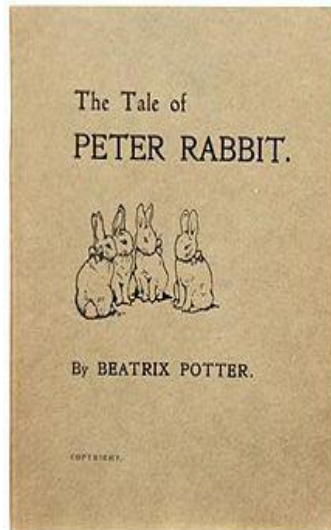
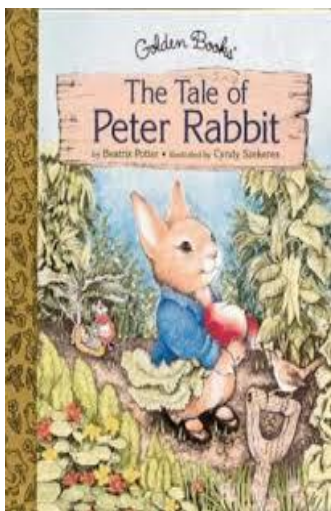


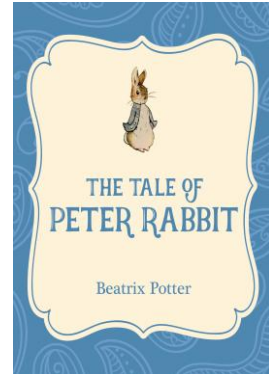
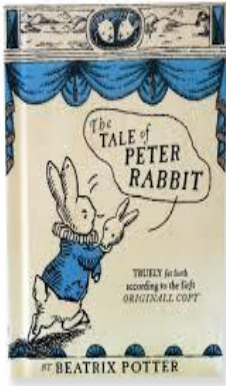
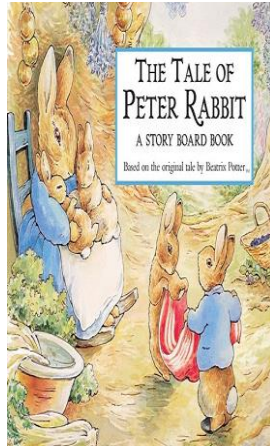
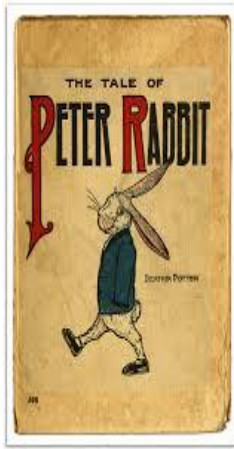
BEATRIX POTTER  
*The original and authorized edition*

THE TALE OF  
PETER RABBIT



By BEATRIX POTTER





The work's well-established reputation has been its best marketer. Margret Mackey says that she has got "35 books of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* each of which is different in some important way" (Montgomery 87). Some of these editions have, actually, "fall[en] short of standards established in the first editions of the Potter books" (Montgomery 88). In addition, there have been many cinematic as well as episodic productions of the work.

The gamut of modes these editions show reveal how authors and illustrators experimented with every single aspect of the book, i. e. with the text, the images, the design, the cover, the book size, the colours, etc. The 1987 edition of the book, for instance, provides an



example of how the copyright page can be employed as one of the modes of communicating with readers. The following paragraph appears on the copyright page:

The reproductions in this book have been made using the most modern electronic scanning methods from entirely new transparencies of Beatrix Potter's original watercolors. They enable Beatrix Potter's skill as an artist to be appreciated as never before, not even during her own lifetime. (Montgomery 88)

It is worth noting that using the copyright page in this way can be described as postmodernist ((Maybin 324) as will be pointed out later.

It is, thus, clear that Potter has a profound influence on children's literature. Potter's influence on some English literary figures has been attested by countless numbers of critics, novelists and writers for children alike. William Moebius assumes that, "our taste for picturebooks was formed by the work of Beatrix Potter" (Maybin 311). In their turn, Graham Greene and Christopher Isherwood assert that Potter's work, "continues to be highly valued by academic critics and retains an important place in the canon of children's literature in English" (Montgomery 81). The role Beatrix Potter played in shaping modern literary sensibility is acknowledged by G. Greene:

Of course there was Beatrix Potter. I have never lost my admiration for her books and I have often reread her, ... [I] was convinced that childhood reading (referring both to children's writers such as Potter and books read in childhood) is profoundly influential. (Maybin 105)

Beatrix Potter's multimodal experience as shown in her anthropomorphic *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is worth exploring. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is the first of twenty three books in the Potter series for children. Potter's experience as a writer, it should be noted,

should be considered side by side with the writer's experience as both an artist and a naturalist (Montgomery 96). Margret Mackey subtly describes Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* as a "textual work of art" (*Children's* 224). This part of the research will consider six of the most important aspects of multimodality as represented in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. These are: Design, images, size, typography, space and colour.

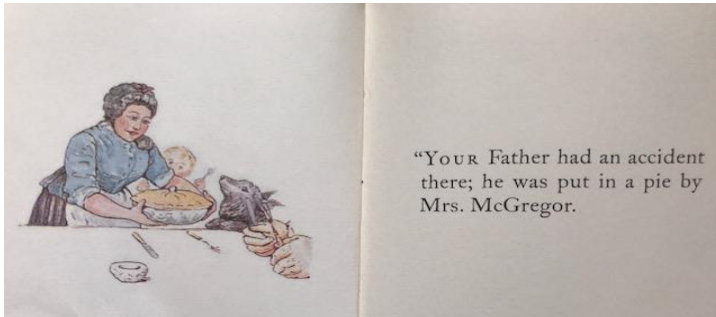
### Design

Designs of children's literature books are, undoubtedly, considered to be among the main aspects of multimodality. Design, it is to be noted, can be looked at as an umbrella term in the sense that countless details of a work can be amassed under this term. Design, thus, includes all details a work may unfold, including these of the "cover, endpapers, title-page pattern" (Maybin 312) in addition to many other details. William Moebius asserts that, "no approach to the picturebook can overlook the importance of ... design as a part of the reader's experience" (Maybin 312). Design-as-communication is, thus, a key concept to authors/illustrators of children's picturebooks.

Designs of children's books differ greatly depending on how the author/illustrator wants his/her book to appear. Nineteenth-century authors and illustrators of children's literature, for instance, mostly preferred to have illustration, "set spaciouly on the page" (Maybin 305); this was the practice in almost all illustrated books of the time. Importantly, many authors/illustrators deliberately surprise, stun and shock their readers through newly devised designs. Through their varying of book designs and the conventions of book publishing, authors/illustrators can be said to be playing with the conventional norms of books designs.

Potter's twenty three books for children still stand out among the most distinguished of children's books on the grounds of their design. Many of the designing details that lie behind the success of

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* can reveal the meticulous finesse and art of B. Potter.



The book adopts “a double-page spread” design (*Children’s* 208) as shown above. In their turn, gutters can be considered as part of the overall design of a book. The term “gutters” refers to the blank space facing two pages of a book or between adjacent columns of type or stamps in a sheet. The large gutters in the book help child-readers concentrate more on the pictures and the text.

### Images

To what extent, it should be asked, are illustrations important in children’s literature? Since its early beginnings, children’s literature has made use of word-image duality. In Lewis Carroll’s book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice ponders, “what is the use of a book ... without pictures?” (1-2). In an insightful comment, Goodman highlights the importance for which Potter is considered, “Beatrix Potter’s reputation for the quality of both her writing and watercolour illustrations remain as strong today as ever” (Montgomery 81). Dubbed differently by critics, text-picture, word-image, verbi-visual, visual-linguistic connections and interrelations have witnessed an increasing and unprecedented interest since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. To start with, the word-image association in Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is believed to be one of the primary reasons of the success the work has gained since it was first published in 1897. Sharon Goodman asserts that “text and

pictures complement each other so perfectly in Beatrix Potter's works" (Maybin 307). The book started as picture letters that Potter herself sent to the child of her friend Annie Cart in 1893. Potter later asked for her letters back to publish her first tale. Some images from the book can show how Potter successfully employed images as means of communication.



On the left-hand page to the image above, the words of Mrs. Rabbit appear as she is giving instructions to her bunnies. She warns them of going into Mr. McGregor's garden. The words are simple and straightforward, "don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden" (8). Rich in visual clues as it is, the wordless picture above is indispensable to meaning. It can tell us that one out of the four bunnies, namely Peter, is different from all his siblings in a number of ways. Indeed, this picture can provide us with many "clues" as W. Moebius terms them (Maybin 317), such clues or codes are essential to the readers' understanding of the story. In addition to exposing many of the differences between one rabbit and all his siblings in the picture, the picture foreshadows forthcoming troubles to be caused by that different rabbit. Unlike his siblings who look at their mother and listen attentively to her instructions, Peter turns his back on her, indifferent to whatever she is saying. In addition, the colour of his jacket is different from theirs; his is blue while theirs are red. We are told that he lost a jacket once before. His wide-opened eye suggests that he is

impatiently spurred by an idea. The profile provided of Peter on this page is important in that it suggests that there is a side in Peter's character, i. e. the troublesome one that is yet to be discovered. Furthermore, the collar does not appear on Peter's jacket in this picture and this even adds to the idea of Peter's being different from all in others the picture. That Peter's jacket is collarless, as represented in this image, suggests the idea that Peter can go unbound and unbridled. Peter's readiness to violate rules and instructions is, thus, inferred. He is, thus, expected to incur serious problems upon himself.

Different as he is, Peter is expected to act differently. His rashness, and hence irresponsibility, is easy to detect as he is like heedlessly stepping out of the page. As W. Moebius explains, "the best picturebooks can and do portray the intangible and invisible ideas and concepts such as love, responsibility, a truth beyond the individual ideas that escape easy definition in pictures or words" (Maybin 314). To follow Peter and know what he is going to do, readers are encouraged to turn the page since "we anticipate the next while looking at the one before" (Maybin 311). One of the best comments applicable here is Bader's in which the critic comments on picturebooks asserting that, "as an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, on the drama of the turning of the page" (*Children's* 211). It is worth noting that it is the picture, not the words anyhow, that can tell us about all such differences and instigate the readers' suspense and curiosity. It can, thus, be remarked that images, "are not the simple, childish, unchallenging things they are often taken to be" (*Children's* 212) and that a picture can foreshadow many ideas and actions. Indeed, much can be inferred and elicited from the images. The illustrator Beatrix Potter, thus, "utilize[s] images as a narrative device" (*Children's* 211).

It is clear, thus, that images and the text work together to

create a communicative meaning. This can better be understood if compared with the picture on page 13 in which Peter's mother seems to be tightly buttoning Peter's jacket just around Peter's neck.



The picture implies Peter's mother's wish to assert her dominance and control over Peter. It should also be noted that Peter in this picture, as it is the case in many others, is in the foreground while his siblings are in the background. In this position, Peter, of course, looks bigger, and is, therefore, more important than his siblings. W. Moebius suggests that "large size...may be a figure of an overblown ego" (Maybin 317). This can entail the question of gender with Peter thinking of himself as being the more important on the grounds of being the only male in the family, after the death of his father. Gender issues should not be overlooked. Foregrounding Peter in this picture, as in many others, has somehow, been taken against Potter since some critics interpreted this as showing him as a hero rather than merely a protagonist.

It is important to note that in all the pictures, except for the ones on pages 53, 65 and 66, Peter is closer to us readers than any other characters appearing in the pictures. Such proximity and close-up portrayal of Peter serve different functions in different images and situations. To illustrate the point, let's consider the following picture:



This picture shows Peter coming face to face with Mr. McGregor in Mr. McGregor's own garden, the place where Peter's own father lost his life. It is important that we, as readers, are put face to face with Mr. McGregor, like Peter himself. "We often share Peter's line of sight, his point of view becomes ours" (*Children's* 227). Like Peter himself, readers of the story find themselves face to face with Mr. MacGregor. Peter's father, "was put in a pie by Mrs. MacGregor" (11), as Peter's mother tells him. Readers are, thus, involved and share the same experience. "[W]e thus participate in his predicament...we identify with him against the authority represented by Mr. McGregor", despite Peter's remarkable rebelliousness, disobedience and "unwillingness to submit to authority" (*Children's* 227). In addition, the small figure of Peter in this picture is meant to expose Peter's being overwhelmed by the shock and dwarfed by fear.

This picture, like many others, asserts Peter's likeness to a human being. In so doing, the author/illustrator gets us more and more involved in the experience. Peter's closeness to the terrain of human beings is subtly suggested through a number of ways. One such way is giving this little rabbit the name of a human being. Another is through the fact that he is wearing a jacket and a pair of shoes. Furthermore, the fact that Peter keeps his human-like, upright posture makes readers think of him as more of a little child than an animal, and readers are, thus, encouraged to share the experience and sympathise with him. Innovative visual techniques can, thus, "create a text that 'speaks' to

the reader in ways that resemble voice modulation, pitch and emphasis, all of which contribute to reader interpretation" (*Children's* 243).

The next picture, subtly enough, shows us Peter, panicked as he is, running towards us. In one way or another, we are expected to stretch out a hand.



Horror-struck, Peter runs at his fastest speed and Mr. Macgregor, in his turn, does not hesitate to chase Peter. The following two pictures show how Peter gave himself up for lost when he could not find the gate to get out.



In the first of the two pictures above, the locked door shows that Peter



got locked in Mr. MacGregor's garden, and a way out seems almost impossible.

The Lowered ears of Peter in the second image suggest bafflement and disappointment. Noticeably, while both the bolt and the key appear on the door in the first picture, only the key appears in the second. The key symbolises a solution to the dilemma and, hence, a way out of the garden. Furthermore, the fact that he is closer to the key in this second picture implies that he is nearer to the solution even though he himself does not realise that. In its turn, the mouse in the picture can well remind us of the mouse in Aesop's fable 'The Lion and the Mouse' in which the lion was finally rescued, even though the old mouse did not really help Peter.

The following is one of the subtlest and most important images in the book. With Peter Rabbit, we experience hope and fear. Peter, at last, gets a glimpse of the gate at the other end of the garden. Halfway, however, Mr. MacGregor is seen working on his farm.



So, to reach his goal, Peter has to get over that difficulty and accept a risk that can cost him his life. We are made to see through Peter's own eyes and, henceforth, are invited to share Peter his predicament, his

fears and hopes. Importantly, we are, thus, made to sympathise with Peter (the animal) against the brutality of Mr. MacGregor (the human). Space is an important consideration here. The spaciousness of the garden does not give any sense of freedom. On the contrary it has turned into a labyrinth-like prison out of which Peter is seeking a way. When Peter finally has a narrow escape, readers feel like being rescued themselves.

### Size

Size is one of the distinguishing multimodal features of Potter's books for children; it has added importantly to the popularity of her books. Potter wrote twenty three books for children. These are usually referred to as Potter's "little books" (Montgomery 81). The size of these books, 10x14 centimetres, proved to be one of the important aspects of the book. Such a size was a surprise to readers of the time. The novelty of the size of the book aroused and increased the interest of children and adults alike. It is important to remark that, "special bookshelves were marketed for the *Peter Rabbit* stories" (Montgomery 94). Potter was adamant that her story should be, "easily manipulable by little hands, and was keenly interested in all aspects of its production" (Montgomery 83-4).

### Typography

Like other authors of children's literature, Potter gave typography a special interest. Typography, an important feature of multimodality, refers to the visual design of language through the selection of font, size, line and spacing. Indeed, children's writers differ greatly in the ways they type their works. This shows that every single detail in the book should be scrutinized, "every aspect of a picture book, from endpaper to endpaper, and each design element in between, can be seen as significant" (Maybin 298). Stockl "acknowledge[s] the crucial function of typography and text design

and how typography contributes to textual meaning in numerous ways” (multimodalityglossary). Some writers vary the fonts and use different colours in their typing of the text. Some, for example, choose “different typefaces for different voices” (*Children’s* 247). This, however, can well prove distracting to young readers. Potter sticks to one font and one size throughout the work.

### Space

One of the most important considerations in children’s literature books, space is carefully manipulated by authors and illustrators alike. Space refers to the actual spaces left deliberately blank on the sides of the pages, like margins. It also refers to actual, physical space as well as the spaces easily bridged between the real and the imaginary worlds as it usually happens in children’s picturebooks. It can be remarked that young people conversant with computer games know that information in children’s picturebooks will be organized “spacially rather than in chains” (*Children’s* 242). The critic Bette Goldstone assumes that space is five-dimensional in children’s books, with the fourth dimension being the space between the physical book and the reading audience in which characters can speak directly to the audience, and the fifth being that “spatial area lying beneath the physical page... The page surface now has an atmospheric quality; it is translucent and mobile” (Maybin 322). Goldstone uses the term “spatial arena” to refer to, “worlds hidden beyond the physical page” (Maybin 325).

Space has been paid special attention in children’s books, especially as manipulated by postmodernist writers. In the postmodern approach, the reader is encouraged to, “play with the story, add to it and alter it” (Maybin 324). In post-modernist children’s literature, children’s books are looked at as “multi-authored narratives” in which children are no more passive recipients, but active participants (Maybin 364). This simply means that new-generation readers are not expected to search for meaning by reading from top left to bottom

right with the printed text treated as the primary source of information, they know how to move around the page, assembling information including subplots and clues that may only be activated later in the text (*Children's* 242). Employing space to serve certain purposes and to influentially communicate certain messages as done by some authors can be referred to as paratext. Put simply, paratext refers to the “space around the story proper, and includes things as tables of contents, copyright information, publishing details, prefaces, endpapers and other parts of the overall design (*Children's* 236). These are parts which are usually overlooked in books, but are employed by some postmodernist writers as “part of the story” (*Children's* 236). Paratexts can, thus, be used to play with texts, with readers and their traditional ways of reading.

### **Colour**

Authors and illustrators of children's books realise the importance of colours in children's books and they should, therefore, be fully aware of how to employ this profoundly impressive mode. “When we view an image” says B. Goldstone, “we are attracted to colors...” (Maybin 326). Goodman asserts that Beatrix Potter's reputation for watercolor illustrations remains as strong today as ever (Montgomery 81). Potter insisted on illustrating her books in watercolour paintings despite the fact that most of the illustrations in children's books at her time were black-and-white ones (Maybin 309).

Certain colours are traditionally associated with certain moods and feelings. Likewise, different degrees of the same colour (light or dark) can have different indications. Colour is, indeed, one of the secrets and reasons why Potter's work is greatly admired as an illustrator. One of the main differences between Peter and his siblings can be told simply through different colours, his jacket is blue while theirs are red. Significantly, the “blue jacket” has, indeed, become metonymic of Peter Rabbit in children's literature discourse (Maybin 313). The colour blue, it is to be remarked, is traditionally associated

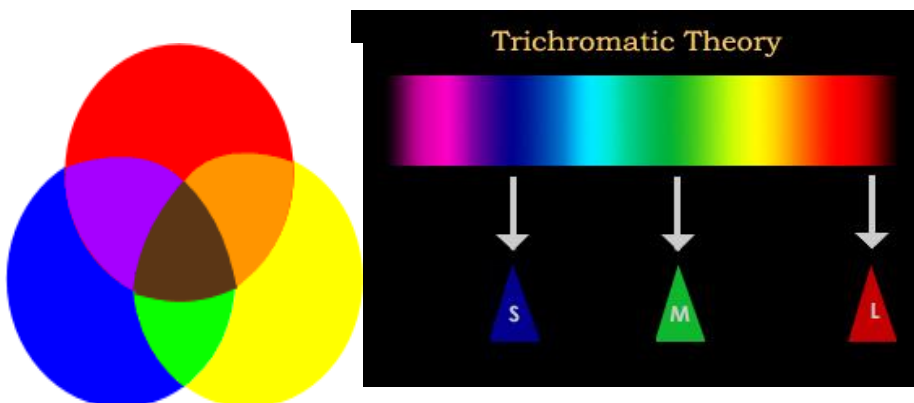
with disobedience (Maybin 319).

Connoisseur as an illustrator, Potter made the best use of colours. The note Mackey makes about the “three-color printing” can better be understood in the light of what Naguib explains about the trichromatic colour theory. Naguib explains that any number of colours can be made by mixing the three colours red, green and blue (236-7). This has its scientific justification, i. e. there are three receptors in the retina that are responsible for the reception of colour. One receptor is sensitive to the colour green, another to the colour blue and a third to the colour red. The photoreceptors in our retina, called cones, are responsible for our colour vision. There are three types of cones, each with a different *iodopsin* (a photosensitive pigment). These *iodopsins* respond to a range of wavelengths, as follows:

*Erythrolable*: maximum absorption at 565 nm (red)

*Chlorolable*: maximum absorption at 535 (green)

*Cyanolable*: maximum absorption at 440 nm (blue)



## Conclusion

Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* looms as one of the greatest works of children's literature mainly due to Potter's outstanding employing of multimodal elements. Six of the most important aspects of multimodality have been discussed, i. e. design, images, size, typography, space and colour. Many critics have doubtfully asked if Potter's work could have really stood the test of time, as it did, with such unwavering reputation had the work been written just as a text without the other modalities employed. The integration of the different modes adopted by the author have, undoubtedly, kept Potter's work among the foremost of the twentieth-century illustrated books.

One of the most important conclusions this research came to is that different modes, i. e. of design, images, size, etc., can integrate to produce meaning. Non-textual representations, especially pictorial ones, have become an essential component of children's literature. Such means of multimodalities are believed to provide alternative ways of making meaning; they intertwine, integrate and cohere to create meaning. Multimodality, thus, provides readers with concepts and terms essential for a deeper understanding of children's literature.

Through multimodality, literature can create bridges of communication and associations with other domains and disciplines. Picturebooks, with their word-image synergy, are visually and intellectually challenging. Illustration-as-communication, rather than illustration-as-art, is a key concept of the multimodal discourse. Multimodality, thus, challenges readers' traditional, linear way of reading texts from top left to bottom right. In so doing, multimodality encourages rereading children's literature books, especially picturebooks, with a more comprehensive perception of the elements that comprise such mosaic-like books. In their turn, readers are no more such passive recipients of meaning as they are entitled to elicit and extract meaning for themselves. Significantly, child-readers

nowadays realise that pictures in a children's book can be as significant as the typed text; and that sometimes pictures can even prove much more important than the text itself. Reading images can, thus, "helps us understand why, and in what way, meaning can be produced by us as readers (*Children's* 234).

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