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Visual literacy extended through graphic codes in illustrations

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Abstract

Picture books have an important place in the lives of all children. Huck (1987) believes that illustrations in picture books can enlarge children's experiences, stretch their imaginations, and enhance their living. The illustrations of picture books can extend the text and sometimes can tell the story without the text. Kingman (1978) relates, "that children do not always recognize the beauty of these books, but early impressions do exert influence on the development of permanent tastes for children growing up. People do not forget what they experience in their early years. When people are older, they learn to look and forget, but at a young age they still pour over the illustrations of picture books gathering treasures that they store in the pockets of their mind" (p. 14).

Visual Literacy Extended Through

Graphic Codes in Illustrations

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Mary M. Mescher

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Picture books have an important place in the lives of all children. Huck (1987) believes that illustrations in picture books can enlarge children's experiences, stretch their imaginations, and enhance their living. The illustrations of picture books can extend the text and sometimes can tell the story without the text.

Kingman (1978) relates, "that children do not always recognize the beauty of these books, but early impressions do exert influence on the development of permanent tastes for children growing up. People do not forget what they experience in their early years. When people are older, they learn to look and forget, but at a young age they still pour over the illustrations of picture books gathering treasures that they store in the pockets of their mind" (p. 14).

By attending to the visual, or graphic codes, used by illustrators, children can attain a deeper meaning of many concepts and constructs and become aware of how images are used. Thus children's visual literacy as well as verbal literacy is extended.

Visual codes created through position, perspective, frame, line, color and value come together to form a unique synthesis that pleases the senses and provides aesthetic experiences for the viewer. Schulevitz (1985) relates that "A process that examines this communicative power of illustrations and relates the understandings of verbal meaning to visual messages is

required if one is to ask the right questions about the role and value of illustration in children's learning and life situations" (p. 79).

In exploring the works of several noted contemporary illustrators, the writer became aware of their use of visual codes to extend the meaning of picture books. One illustrator, Stephen Gammell, incorporates visual codes into black and white as well as colored pencil drawings and watercolors. Few artists have achieved the degree of sophistication in collaborating through visual codes with the text as this illustrator. Gammell seems to be a master at what appears to the viewer as spontaneous invention, emotional intensity, and a natural use of visual language through illustration.

For this paper, the writer has analyzed Stephen Gammell's use of graphic codes in illustrations. The challenge to this writer is to relate that each of the books reviewed in the study maintains the fresh and alive spirit that Gammell is noted for, in spite of what Gammell believes to be his own mechanical and human limitations in illustrating (Commire, 1988).

GRAPHIC CODES IN ILLUSTRATIONS

Outstanding picture books combine careful planning and spontaneity. If illustrators understand the elements of a story, their illustrations will extend the story and also will come alive in their own right. Illustrators need to enter the world

they are creating to ensure the clarity and believability of the story in the visual and verbal messages. The results of this process must appear as a circular pattern that conveys meaning in the art and the text.

Heinich (1985) relates that "the primary function of a visual as a communication device is to serve as a more concrete referent to meaning than the spoken or written word" (p. 65). He maintains that the illustrator's work is to give this meaning to each text illustrated and to inconspicuously increase the visual literacy of the viewer by increased enjoyment and comprehension.

The specific graphic codes of position, perspective, frame, line, value, and color can be vehicles for meaning and also can act in concert to extend the meaning of a text. They interact with each other and the text.

The definitions of graphic codes developed by Moebius (1986) are used as a base in this paper.

Code of Position

The position of the subject on a page constitutes one code. It often matters whether the main character is depicted high or low on the page, in the center, or on the left or right side. Height may be an indication of an ecstatic position or fantasy, a mark of social power, or a positive self-image. Being low on the page depicts low spirits, unfavorable social status, or disadvantageous situations. Characters are strengthened or are

weakened depending on whether they are centered, are placed in the margins, or are small in size. Characters shown on the left are likely to be more secure but confined, and those on the right are likely to be moving into a position of risk or adventure.

Code of Perspective

Perspective allows the presence or absence of horizons, vanishing points, and facades. Where there has previously been a horizon, the sudden absence of one is likely to mean trouble, danger, fantasy, or a surrealistic image that elicits an unreal world. The play of horizon can be complicated if there is a vanishing point, or if above the horizon there is sheer open space. Either use of space will place the character in a state of suspense. A character located within a two-dimensional facade is likely to be less open-minded than one pictured in a three-dimensional facade.

The illustrator decides how the point of view, or perspective, of the scene depicted will be seen by the viewer. Much like the angle of a camera, the shot of the scene is directed in a manner so as to convey meaning. By using different angles, a subject can appear weak, strong, or exaggerated. "The viewer follows the presence or absence of horizon or horizontals, vanishing points, and contrasts between facades and depths" (Moebius, 1986, p. 149). Space which can be considered deep, shallow, or flat is the decision of the artist and will either

invite or push the viewer away by either aerial or linear perspective. Color, value, shape sizes, placements, and overlapping contribute to the foreground, middle ground, and background.

Code of Frame

The code of the frame enables the reader to identify with the world inside and outside the story. A frame provides a limited glimpse into a world. An illustration without frame constitutes the total experience of the view from within. A character framed in a circular enclosure is likely to be more secure than one framed in a rectangular frame. Rectangular shapes can be associated with problems or an encounter with the disadvantages of discipline or civilized life.

Code of Line and Capillarity

Line can suggest serenity and peace or chaos and disharmony, depending on the quality of the line. Thin, spare lines may suggest mobility and speed, while thick, blurred or puffy lines can indicate paralysis or a comfortable status. Jagged lines and those that run at sharp or odd angles to each other usually accompany troubled emotions or an endangered life. Capillarity refers to the presence or absence of squiggles or bundles; an abundance of such often marks vitality or a lack of energy, rendering the scene crowded, nervous, or busy. Horizontal lines suggest peace, stability, and rest, whereas vertical lines imply

strength and draw the eye upward. Sometimes verticals can be barriers to continuity since the normal reading pattern is horizontal. Diagonal lines suggest action, movement, and dynamism, but crossed diagonals especially odd angles indicate troubled, high emotions and give a sense of conflict. Curved lines give a feeling of motion. A contrast of any sort that is different from the surroundings will tend to emphasize and stand out. The contrast or variation may be in terms of a size, shape, color or orientation. Even the size of a line will impact the meaning of the text: A heavy line can suggest power or anger. A thin line can imply quiet, simplicity, mobility, or speed. Feathery lines can suggest a dream-like or surrealistic context. Lines can lead the eye left to right or in a circular fashion. Lines can be jagged and angular to draw attention from one point to another and create movement and tension.

Code of Value

The light and dark of an illustration is a powerful tool used by illustrators in elusive ways while relying on the audience's preconceived ideas about night and day and black and white. This element is concerned with an artist's interest or disinterest in natural or artificial sources of illumination and in the contrast of gradation associated with the value of color and color forms for implied contour, texture, and depth. A source of illumination

can be used to highlight, backlight, or disintegrate form (Lacy, 1986, p. 40).

Code of Color

Apart from the traditional associations of certain colors with certain moods or feelings and apart from the association of bright colors with exhilaration and discovery and dark colors with disappointment, confusion, mystery, and sorrow, colors can serve as elements of a story's plot. Also, the choice of color depends on the theme and the tone of the book.

ANALYSIS OF STEPHEN GAMMELL'S USE OF GRAPHIC CODES

Code of Position

Gammell uses the code of position to depict the exuberant feelings experienced by Little Wolf in Olaf Baker's Where the Buffaloes Begin (1981). In Figure 1 Little Wolf is placed high on the page to represent the joy and triumph he feels after he has steered the buffaloes to stampede the members of a raiding party and as a result has saved his people.

Figure 1.

In <u>A Furl of Fairy Wind</u> (1977), by Mollie Hunter, Gammell

uses a close-up of the subject, a technique rarely found in

illustrations, in order to draw the viewer into what the

characters were seeing in the story. The viewer becomes involved

with the character (Figure 2) through the facial expressions

therefore sensing the emotion of the fairy.

Figure 2.

Gammell illustrates that the balance of a page whether full

or empty adds to the tension of the text and builds toward or away

from the central sequence as depicted in the double page spread

in Jean Fritz's Stonewall (1979) in Figure 3. In this

illustration, the placement of the fallen figure shot in battle

lying toward the bottom right of the page serves to exaggerate

his fate, for an image placed in such a position is likely to be

involved in a situation of risk or adventure. The small size of

the figure relates his weakness. A character, small and placed toward the bottom of the page, is generally understood to have fewer advantages than the figures shown high on the page. In this illustration, the losers in this battle are the characters at the bottom right. This position on the page helps to emphasize isolation, loneliness, hopelessness, and despair.

Figure 3.

Gammell shows movement by depicting the characters moving toward the left in an illustration for Nathaniel Benchley's <u>Demo and the Dolphin</u> (1981) in Figure 4. This positioning of character is unusual, because illustrations are viewed as words are read from left to right. In this illustration, the characters are on a return journey as indicated by the imaginary line moving from right to left to indicate the action of the plot. The character, Demo, is small and is placed high on the right margin of the page, showing that he is in a situation of risk and adventure.

Figure 4.

Code of Perspective

Gammell's illustrations in Cynthia Rylant's <u>When the Relatives Came</u> (1985) in Figure 5, collaborate with the text to create humor and to portray the dynamics created by the many relationships among the many family members at the family reunion. The illustration in Figure 5 exaggerates the over-crowded bed of sleeping relatives by showing them from a bird's-eye view. The many relationships found among the relatives at the reunion are depicted within a limited amount of space. Not only is the space seen in an unusual perspective, but so are the people. The positions and angles of the characters would be nearly impossible to achieve in real life.
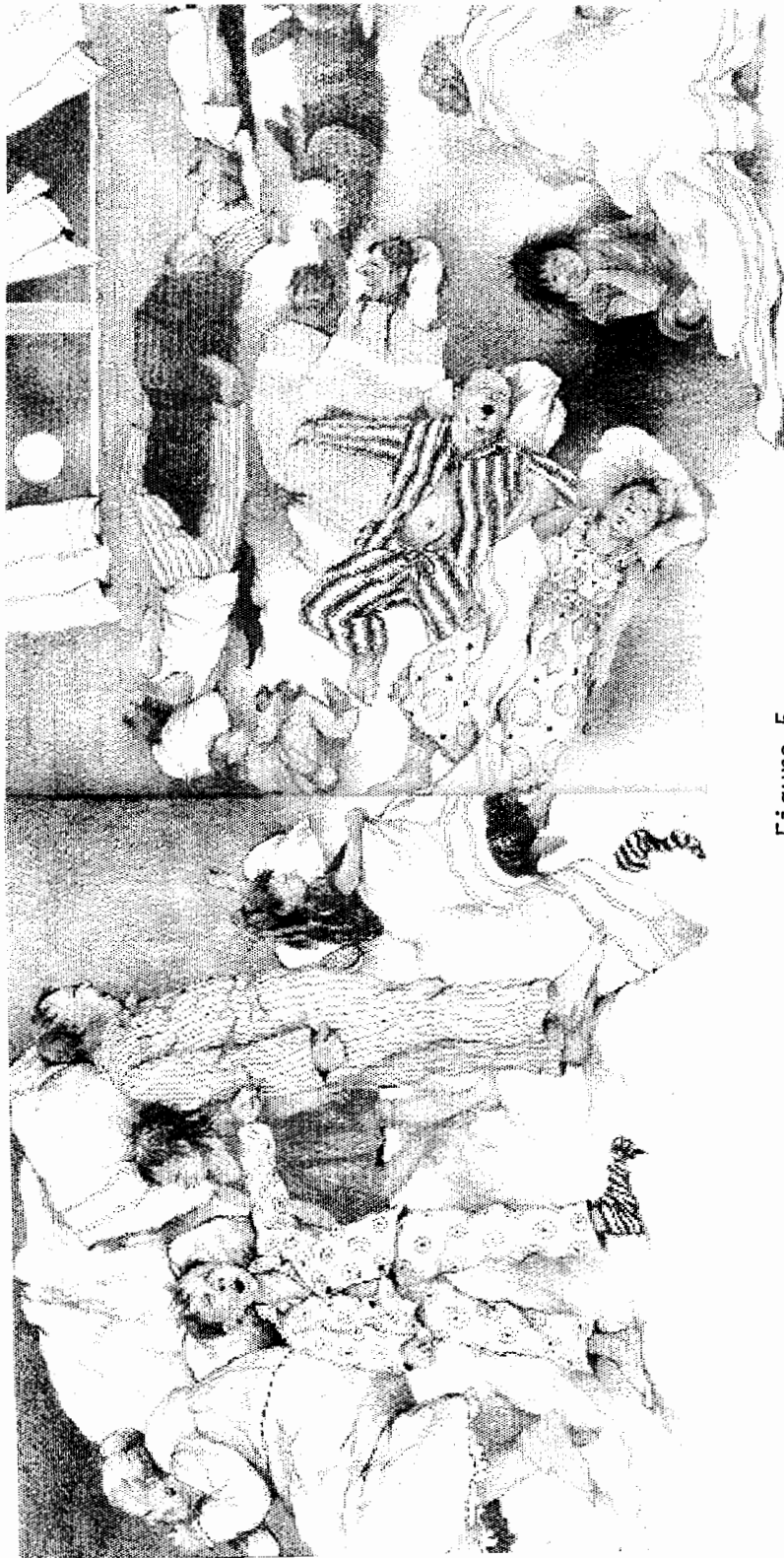
Figure 5.

The highly distorted perspective presented in the bird's-eye
view of Gammell's illustration for George Ella Lyons' A Regular
Rolling Noah (1986) in Figure 6 draws the viewer into the scene
somewhat unobtrusively. The scene is presented as though the
viewer is peering down on the sleeping figure of the boy and the
livestock from a high vantage point. The figures are also
distorted to exaggerate the dreaminess of the night scene. The
flatness of this linear perspective gives a feeling of simplicity
and almost backwardness, which supports the characterization in
the story. The boy, Noah, is seen sleeping in this illustration.

Figure 6.

In Blackbird Singing (1980), by Eve Bunting, Mr. Eberhauser
(Figure 7) is seen in the illustration from a worm's-eye view
(looking upward), giving him much visual weight and attention.
The viewer cannot help but wonder what Eberhauser is looking at in
the sky. The crowded page depicts the subject's isolation, as he
appears to be oblivious to his surroundings with his focus on
matters apart from this setting.

Figure 7.

The rigidity of lines as well as horizon lines or lack of
horizon lines will change the mood and frame of reference of the
scene. In Stephen Gammell's illustration for Git Along Old

Scudder (1983) in Figure 8, the character, Scudder, lying down with one leg braced rigidly against the side of the shack defies gravity, eliciting an element of fantasy and also humor.
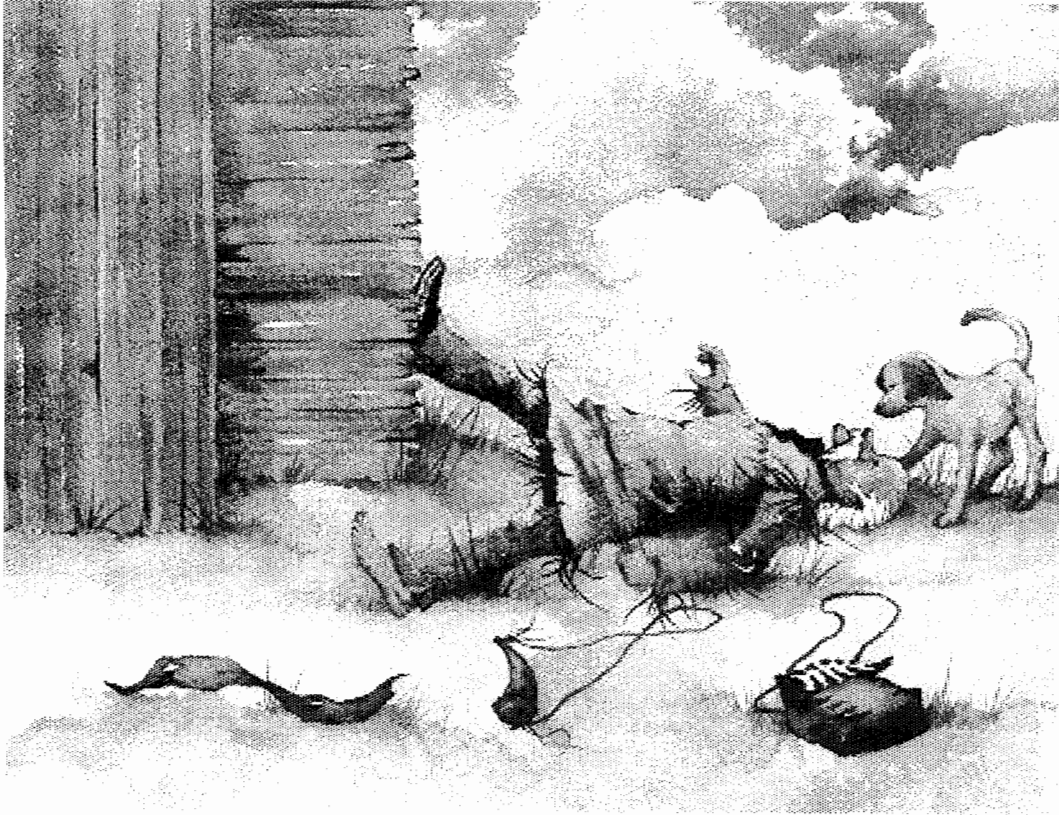

Figure 8.

Code of Frame

Bleeds are a type of non-framing in which the shape of the illustration extends beyond the trimmed edge of the page. As seen earlier in the Furl of Fairy Wind (Hunter) in Figure 2, the shape of the image determines the frame that will surround it and also increases in size with the mounting tension of a story. This illustration parallels the text. The character's hair appears to

flow beyond the page paralleling the text which reads, "Long hair of palest gold flowed down her back, and it was from her that the light came" (p. 20). The bleed element in this illustration suggests an expansion far beyond the page creating a dream-like, bigger than life feeling.

The containment of the character through the frame in Helen Reeder Cross' biography The Real Tom Thumb (1980) limits the viewer's glimpse of the world of Tom Thumb. The frame visually depicts the biographical nature of the work by presenting the scene from someone else's perspective, limiting the glimpse into his/her world. It gives the appearance of a photograph through the close proximity of the subject which emphasizes the small stature of Thumb (Figure 9). The frame is both rectangular and circular, signifying a mixed feeling of contentment. The arched top of the rectangular frame sometimes emphasizes encounters with a disadvantageous life or adventure, both of which can be seen in Tom Thumb's life.

Figure 9.

Frame can reveal information concerning the characters and

the story setting, as created by the colorful rainbow over the

grandfather in Karen Ackerman's The Song and Dance Man (1988) in Figure 10. In this scene, the magical rainbow representing the colorful life that the grandfather once experienced on the vaudeville stage fuses the man's present with his past. The rainbow also provides a stage for the actor as he relives his past.

Figure 10.

Airmail to the Moon, by Tom Birdseye (1989), provides another example of frame. In this illustration (Figure 11), the viewer

sees the conflict in Oreo's situation, not only relayed through her
angry gesture, but also by the frame which contains the overwrought
girl's emotional state. The wrath generated by the alleged loss
of her tooth is symbolized by objects (teeth, a beehive, a can of
gotcha, an apple with a worm, and a bull) within the frame. The
numerous thin pencil strokes also relate the strong feelings of
Oreo.

Figure 11.

Code of Line

The use of line is essential to the meaning as in the illustration from one of the poems, collected by Myra Cohn Livingston, in Thanksgiving Poems (1985). In this poem certain images and the festivities of this day are emphasized by colored lines such as arrows pointing to particular characters and lines for framing combined with the use of black and white. In order to emphasize the chaotic nature of the day, Gammell has used a variety of lines that are thin and thick and jagged and smooth with sharp angles. There is an abundance of capillarity-like squiggles to signal the energy in this poem as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12.

The graphic code of capillarity, as seen in the illustration

shown in Figure 13, is used by Gammell in abundance to indicate

the nervous energy in Old Henry, by John Blos (1987). As the

story progresses, the bundles of lines increase gradually or

suddenly disappear depending on the action of the plot and lead

the viewer to the main character, Henry. Through the use of line

and color, the illustrations appear to explode with expression and

symbolic codes. The tension resulting from Henry's slovenly lifestyle is emphasized by the lines shown in the grass, the clothing, and the objects on the table and on Henry's canvas. The lop-sidedness of the picture and the figure facing the left side of the page denotes the confusion and chaos in Henry's life.

Still the hollyhocks wilted, unwatered, unkept;
the gatepost stayed crooked, the walk stayed unswept.
And things went on as they'd begun,
and he angered his neighbors, one by one.

Figure 13.

In Once Upon McDonald's Farm Gammell (1981) uses line in an almost cartoon-like manner. The spareness in the lines represents

the simplicity of this man's life. The movement of McDonald is enhanced by the lack of solidarity in the line and shading as shown in Figure 14.
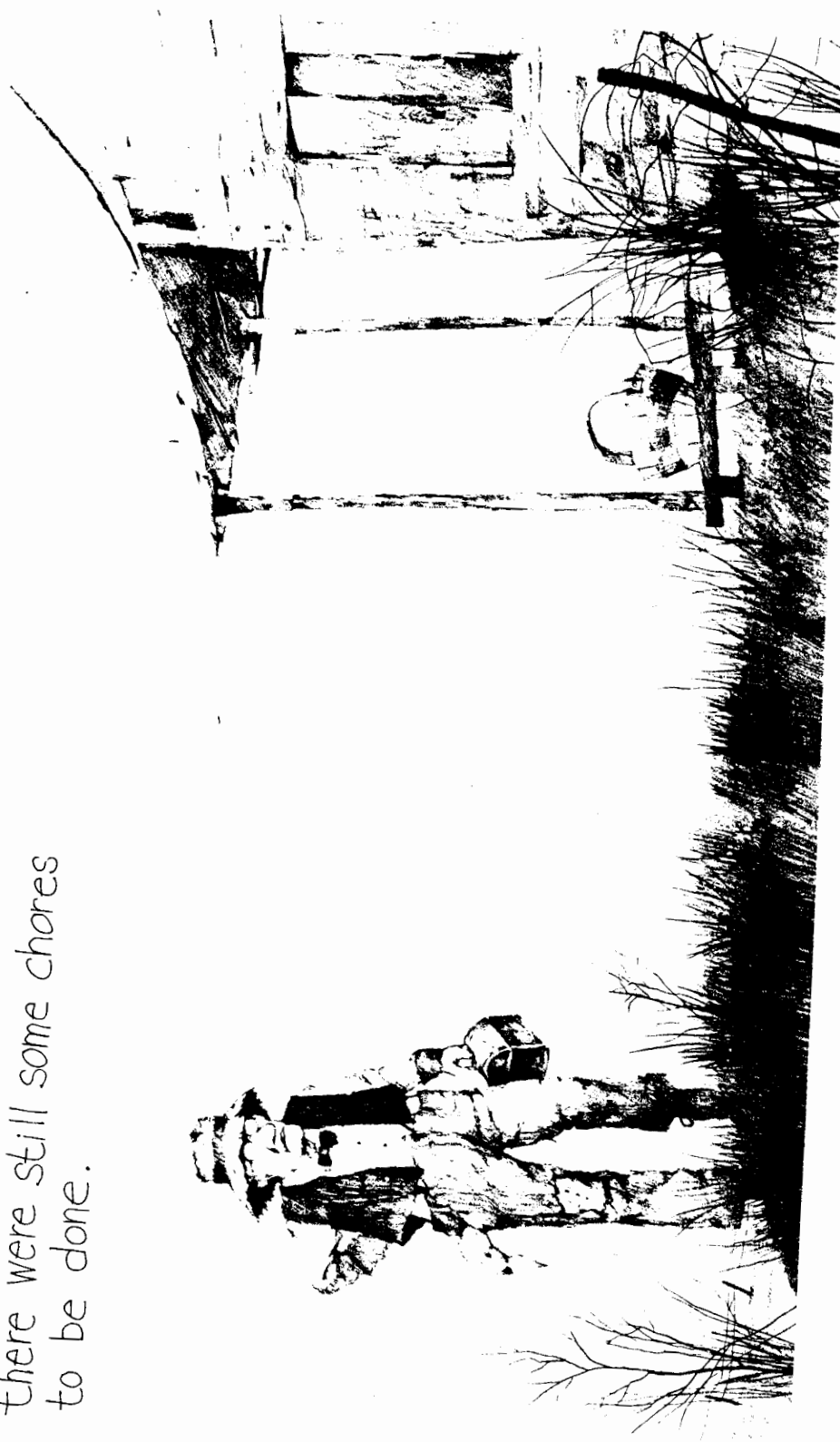
there were still some chores
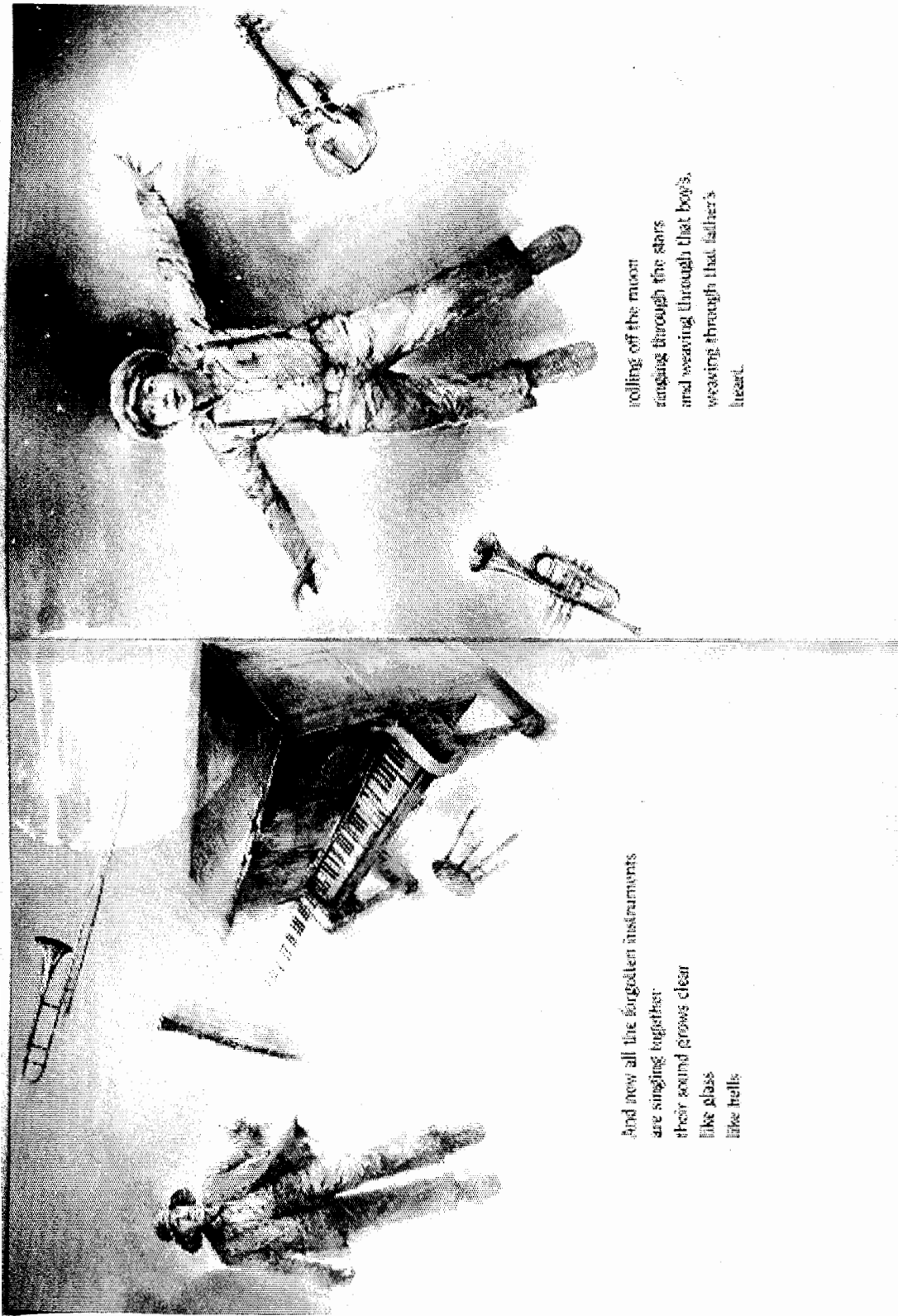to be done.

Figure 14.

Code of Value

Stephen Gammell is a master in using the code of value, or shading, to create meaning, preferring black and white. In More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark, by Alvin Schwartz (1984), Gammell conveys his interpretation through black and white and gradation. The subtle smokiness created by the pencil medium denotes the ghost-like image in Figure 15. Gammell also uses the white space and less detail to enhance the mood of the scene. This effect is created by the absence of color and use of pencil in the drawing. The density of shading implies various levels of energy. The contrast between light and dark is emotionally powerful, but an intellectually elusive element relying on the audience's preconceived concepts about night and day.

Figure 15.

Another example of Gammell's use of the code of value is seen
in The Old Banjo, by David Haseley (1983), in Figure 16. The
stark reality of poverty in the Depression is conveyed through
the use of black and white in the illustrations. Gammell's

surrealistic style enhances the dreamlike quality of the boy's imagination (Harms and Lettow, unpublished). The illustration portrays the freedom of the imagination and a response to life that is suggestive of a childlike wonder. The horizons in the illustration gradually disappear as the fantasy elements are drawn into the story. By the use of light, the action of the story and the emotions of the character are illuminated. Often black and white is used to recall the past. Each illustration in this work seems a fleeting memory, collaborating with the text: "And now all the forgotten instruments are singing together. Their sound grows clear like glass, like bells rolling off the moon, ringing through the stars, and weaving through that boy's heart, weaving through the father's heart" (unpaged).

Figure 16.

Gammell's impressionistic style is highly developed as seen
in Cynthia Rylant's Waiting to Waltz (1984). The darkness of the
girl in Figure 17 conveys the darkness in the girl's past.

Figure 17.

The haunting style used in Figure 17 is also effectively used
in Gammell's work in A Net to Catch in the Wind, by Margaret
Greaves (1979), in Figure 18. The illustration communicates
feelings for which there are no words and displays the characters'
feelings as they are once again reunited in the story: "The King
caught and held her, and all the months of sorrow fell away" (p.33).

Figure 18.

Code of Color

Gammell uses tones and shades of color to express feelings, not to imitate reality. The emotional expression in his impressionistic watercolors is his main concern, as is evidenced in Wake-Up, Bear It's Christmas, written and illustrated by Gammell (1981), in Figures 19 and 20. He successfully conveys the warmth and festiveness of Christmas by his choice of colors. The bright reds, blues, greens and splashes of white evoke the emotions of the youthfulness and innocence associated with this holiday.

Figure 19.

Figure 20.

Integration of Codes in Illustration

Illustrators sometimes integrate more than one code into their visual interpretation. The dynamics of this integration invite keen observation from viewers. For example, Gammell in the final scene of A Regular Rolling Noah (Figure 21), by George Ella Lyons (1986), integrates line, color, and position, thus the train appears to almost bounce off the track. The bright color and rapid brushstrokes of the watercolor add to the momentous final journey and leaves the story on a happy hopeful note as the train

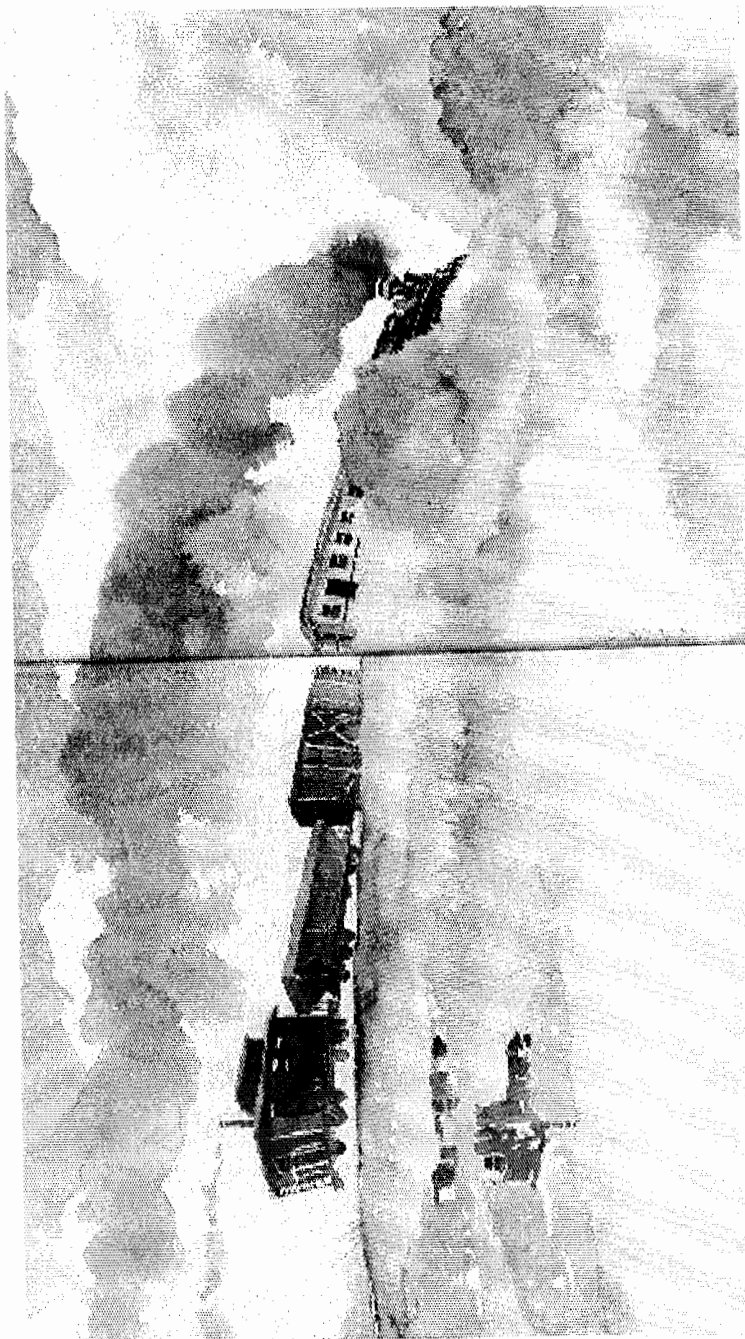moves to the upper right of the page and off the rails of the

tracks.

Figure 21.

Gammell creates meaning through the arrangement of color,
line, shape, and texture in When the Relatives Came, by Cynthia
Rylant (1985), in Figure 22. The use of shocking colors and rapid
brushstrokes emphasizes the hectic confusion and colorfulness of
the characters' personalities in the story. The medium of the
colored pencil combined with the capillarity extends the happiness
of the reunion. The emotions of the characters experiencing the
reunion are represented through color, line, and placement of
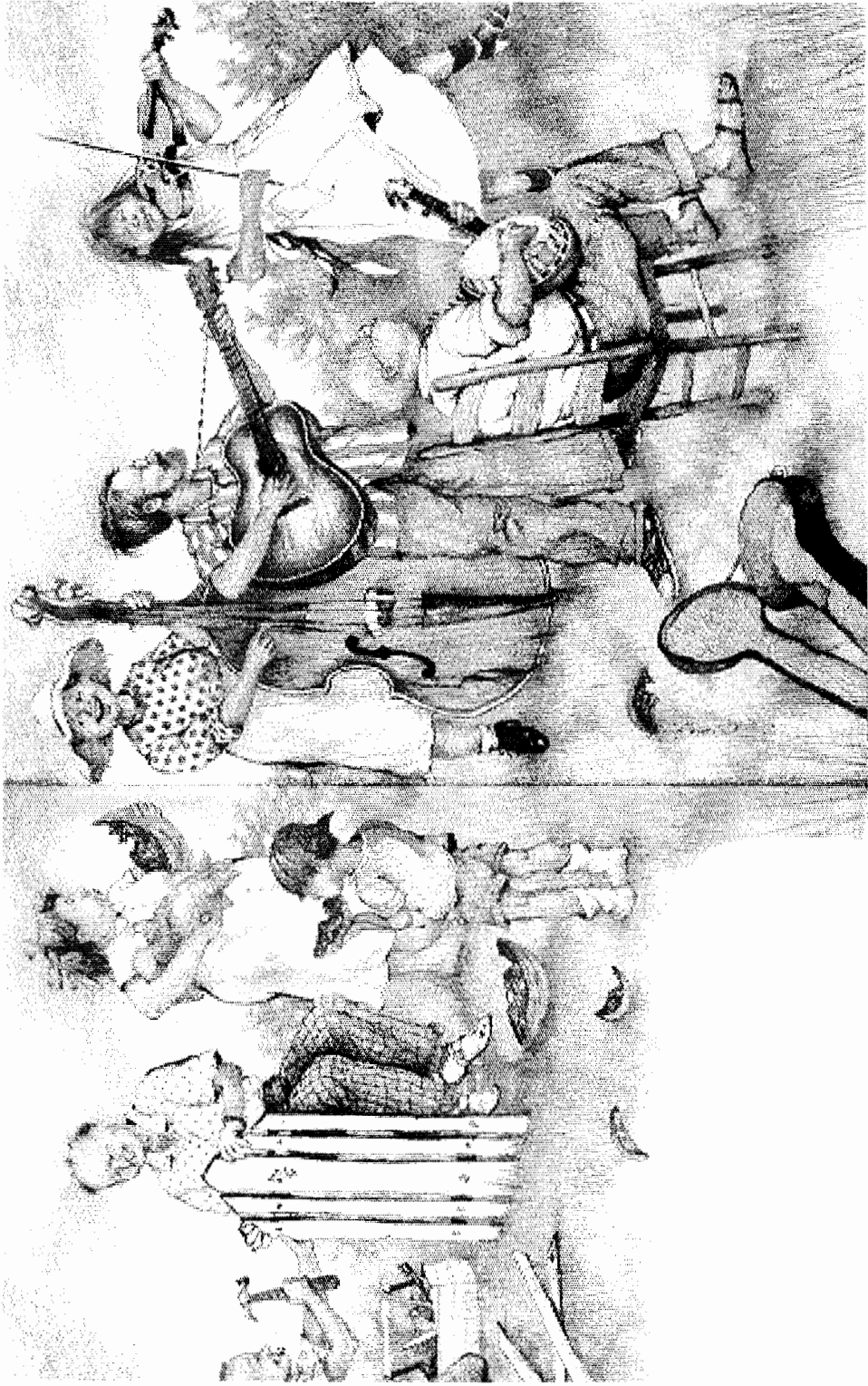objects on the page.

Figure 22.

Color, line and pattern create a rhythm that enhances the
text of Airmail to the Moon, by Tom Birdseye (1989). In the
illustration (see Figure 23), bright colors and sketchy lines
strengthen the emotion of the text, showing Oreo in her highly
agitated state over losing her tooth that has recently fallen out
of her mouth. No framing can contain her emotions, and they
explode all over the page in color and line and break the border.

"Somebody stole my tooth," I sobbed, crying harder
than ever, "and when I catch'em I'm gonna open up a can
of gotcha and send 'em airmail to the moon."
And I stuck my hands down deep in my pockets, trying
to look like I meant it.

Figure 23.

SUMMARY

Stephen Gammell is a master craftsperson in the execution of illustration in children's literature. He takes a poetic approach to text interpretation and enjoys applying the various qualities of expressionistic, impressionism, and surrealism styles in his work. Gammell's style flows from the work; the work does not flow from the style. His command and knowledge of graphic code in illustrating, whether consciously or intuitively, extends the feeling and message of every text. Again and again he has contributed to the greatest of some of the finest picture books. For the reader and viewer, Gammell's use of graphic code enhances the opportunity to extend verbal and visual literacy.

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