Towards an Analysis of the Utilisation of Metafictive Strategies in Postmodern Picturebooks

Abstract:

This paper notes the ways in which conventional texts often construct limited reading positions and/or points of view. It argues that through the use of postmodern picturebooks and an understanding of metafictive strategies (as one aspect of a more complex methodological approach to the analysis of postmodern picturebooks) students are provided with tools through which to interrogate narrative conventions that are often otherwise naturalised through familiarity.

Key Words: postmodern picturebooks; metafictive strategies; polyphony; point of view; subject positions; visual texts; Australian Curriculum: English

Introduction

Historically, the broad field of children's literature has been seen as a vehicle through which its readers are enculturated into the society in which they live. In order to interrogate the implicit ideologies incorporated (whether consciously or unconsciously) in children's and young adult texts selected for use in libraries and classrooms, it is essential teachers and teacher-librarians are aware of exactly what 'messages' these texts promote. In doing so, it is perhaps more important to examine *how* the text is written rather than *wha*t the text is about as the constructedness of narrative often has become naturalised, or taken for granted, as a result of the conventions and devices of narrative being internalised through cultural immersion (Derrien, 2005).

The Australian Curriculum: English's literature strand (v8.1) provides ample opportunities for teachers and students to engage with texts in this manner. Aspects of the Rationale and Key Ideas sections indicate that students are required to engage critically with literature

through the close analysis of literary works and the key ideas and values on which they are based. More specifically, a number of Year 8 Content Descriptors point to the need to "explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints … may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups" (ACELT 1626) and "how texts position readers in relation to those groups" (ACELT 1628). Another Year 8 descriptor advocates the comparison of "ways language and images are used to … influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts" (ACELT 1621) while Content descriptors for Years 9 & 10 also offer similar opportunities. Postmodern picturebooks offer an ideal medium through which to examine the ways in which a range of narrative strategies not only resist promotion of dominant discourses through the construction of a single point of view but also lay bare their processes of construction through both words and pictures.

Postmodern texts are complex networks of diverse narrative elements that make them suitable visual texts for use in secondary English classrooms. They do not readily lend themselves to a disciplined and streamlined analysis, needing to be approached through multiple and flexible means. In previously undertaking the textual analysis of a range of postmodern picturebooks a tripartite methodology was developed to suit the particular characteristics of the focus texts. The methodology drew on (i) postclassical narratology, particularly as applied to children's literature, (ii) semiotics, as applied to both verbal and visual texts, including Kress & van Leeuven's framework for reading visual images and (iii) metafiction, for the ways in which it subverts conventional narrative strategies. Due to the required brevity of this paper the focus of the discussion is on the ways in which metafictive strategies are utilised within postmodern picturebooks in order to offer a number of subject positions from which the text can be read and/or provide a range of points of view.

Key Concepts

Postmodern picturebooks are complex and evolving texts that utilise dual modes of the visual and verbal dynamic to create multifaceted (but not necessarily multimodal) texts that are playful and have a tendency towards resistance if not subversion of both narrative conventions and ideological assumptions of (predominantly Western) society. They employ a pastiche of styles and generally defy categorisation. They are playful, parodic, and ironic; they resist closure and offer multiple points of view through both the written and illustrative texts. Postmodern picturebooks blur boundaries between high and popular culture, promote the position of the marginalised, create uncertainty, and generally provide a space for resistance. They achieve all, or much of this, by utilising postmodern literary strategies, including metafictive strategies, such as parody, intertextuality, metalepsis, and polyphony (multi-voiced). Further, postmodern picturebooks playfully exploit the interanimation between the visual and verbal codes of the picturebook genre to draw attention to the constructed nature of narrative and the naturalised values and attitudes embedded within these narratives.

In conventional children's literature for instance subject positions made available to children are, according to Stephens (1992), often restricted and restrictive and most often reinforce the ideologies of dominant cultural discourses. Because of familiarity with these discourses, readers may be unconsciously interpellated by the ideological stance of the text particularly through point of view. Point of view is presented primarily through the voice of the narrator(s) and/or the focaliser(s). In the case of picturebooks, narrative point of view is also extended through the illustrative text. Belsey (2002) maintains that classic realism is structured in such a way as to organise the disparate voices and languages of a story into a *hierarchy of voices* with one voice being dominant. This hierarchy works to establish the 'truth' of the story, often privileging a single discourse, while all other discourses remain subordinate.

Much of this authority of a children's text is exerted through the utilisation of a third person (often omniscient) narrator with the voice of an adult (or an adult voice that purports to be that of a child), while the action of the plot is focalised through one or more characters with a child's voice (Nikolajeva, 2003). However, postmodern picturebooks work to dismantle this hierarchy by providing a range of subject positions and/or possible points of view through the utilisation of a number of metafictive strategies including polyphony, metalepsis and other narrative disruptions.

Towards a Methodology

Metafiction refers to self-reflexive fiction which intentionally draws attention to its status as fiction and, in so doing, poses questions about the relationship between fiction and the reality it purports to represent (Waugh, 1984, p. 2). Waugh argues that metafiction's primary purpose is to examine the *process* of narrative. It is through these processes that texts select, organise, narrate, and represent the events and characters of the storyworld. Such processes include the use of particular narrative conventions (such as the orientation-complication-resolution structure of stories) as well as the utilisation of various strategies (intertextuality, parody, and so on) and devices (metaphor, metonym). Metafictive strategies foreground the ways in which meaning is constructed, highlight texts' own processes of production and reception, and disrupt the codes and conventions of realist fiction. Metafictive strategies function by problematising, rather than destroying, the concept of reality.

Postmodern picturebooks not only seek to tell a story but draw readers' attention to the processes through which the fiction has been created. Thus, the utilisation of the strategies of metafiction has proven to be an ideal medium through which postmodern picturebooks have been able to draw attention to the discourses of narrative including points of view offered. Through their dual systems of signification, picturebooks lend themselves to the construction

of dialogic narratives through multi-stranded and/or polyphonic stories. The idea of a dialogic text extends from the work of Bakhtin (1981) who saw the novel as inherently dialogic because it incorporates a broad range of human voices, some of which may be authorised while others seek to undermine or subvert this authority. Postmodern picturebooks consciously exploit this potentiality to create multiple narratives that contain a number of (usually) interconnected strands which use shifts in temporal or spatial relationships to differentiate between these strands (McCallum 1996, p. 406).

These multiple narratives invite readers to view the text from a range of positions and align them with a number of often competing discourses rather than privilege one particular discourse at the expense of all others associated with the more readerly texts of conventional narratives. Authors and illustrators of picturebooks exploit Bakhtin's theory of polyphony by creating texts in which events are told from several different viewpoints, whether they be from a narrator or a focaliser or both. This strategy facilitates the representation of a variety of social and cultural discourses through which perceptual, attitudinal, and ideological viewpoints are expressed (McCallum 1996, p. 406) and by which readers are offered a range of positions from which to view the narrative. For instance, Anthony Browne's polyphonic picturebook, *Voices in the Park* contains four separate focalisers through whom events are recorded and, consequently, through which readers are constantly shifting between a range of possible subject positions. This recognition of the dialogic characteristic of language is not metafictive in itself however, by deliberately exploiting its characteristics to draw readers' attention to the dialogic nature of 'voice', it becomes self-consciously metafictive.

Stories (literally) from the Field

The following extract of textual analysis (see Allan, 2012 for a more detailed analysis of a range of postmodern picturebooks), using the concepts and methods discussed above, begins

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with an early, conventional picturebook by Anthony Browne, *A Walk in the Park* (1977), to see how a hierarchy of voices and a restrictive subject position are established. This text provides a contrast to a later, more polyphonic picturebook, *Voices in the Park* (1988) by Browne, that offers multiple points of view and thus makes available a range of subject positions from which to read the text.

A Walk in the Park relates the details of two families, the middle-class Symthes (Mother, son Charles and pedigree dog Victoria) and the working-class Smiths (Father, daughter Smudge and mongrel Albert) on a visit to the park. The events of this outing are told through a third person, omniscient narrator offering a single position from which to view the characters: "While the dogs played, Smudge and Charles edged nearer and nearer to each other. Mr. Smith and Mrs. Symthe looked the other way." Similarly, the illustrative text offers a fixed, middle viewpoint on each of the pages which basically confirms the single point of view offered by the written text. Doonan (1999) notes that Browne's illustrative style in relation to the characters in *A Walk in the Park* is dispassionate, particularly as the characters are most often shown in profile with little visible emotion on their faces. Such restricted access to the characters works to increase reliance on the narrator in constructing a point of view. This picturebook offers a fairly limited perspective with little scope for construction of significance beyond that offered by the implied author through the third person narrator. The codes and conventions of story-telling, particularly point of view, usually remain implicit and, therefore, relatively invisible in works of realist fiction.

As its similar title suggest, *Voices in the Park* chronicles the same day spent in the park by the same two families first encountered in *A Walk in the Park*. *Voices in the Park* provides multiple points of view from which the text can be viewed. There are four, first-person narrators (polyphony) that create shifting points of view with each narrator performing the role of principal focalising character of their particular segment. These focalised accounts

work in conjunction with, and sometimes against, the points of view offered by the illustrations. The polyphony of different focalisers or 'voices', each narrating the events from their point of view, disrupts a single narrative voice or 'truth'. Each focaliser presents her/his own, first person point of view, that addresses an implicit 'you', and gives the text its title *Voices in the Park*. Readers, too, are required to participate as there is not one monologic discourse running through the text, but multiple, seemingly valid voices or discourses. The most pervasive strategy for effecting the illusion of realism, according to Stephens (1992), is the use of first-person narration where the narrator and principal focaliser are the same. Readers are positioned to share this view and thus may undergo textual subjection. However, the multiple first-person narrators in *Voices in the Park* avoid any 'textual subjection' as readers actively shift between narrators and thus the illusion of 'realism' is openly shattered.

The illustrative text also supports multiple voices. The layout is divided into four separate sections each presented in a different font and sequentially entitled "First Voice", "Second Voice" and so on. The four voices are differentiated, not only by age, gender, and class but also by changing seasons. The different seasons associated with each character not only imply aspects of each character but also contribute to the construction of a postmodern chronotope in which time and place are not in accordance. While Belsey (2002) warns that polyphony does not necessarily guarantee recognition of the plurality of voices, the postmodern picturebook usually makes this polyphony explicit, thereby drawing attention to the strategy rather than concealing its use. The distinctly separate sections in *Voices in the Park* used for each voice along with the use of characteristic fonts and changing use of colour, make obvious the text's polyphonic approach. The iterations serve to confirm aspects of the afternoon in the park, but also highlight inconsistencies between the individual stories, while its parodic undermining of parental and class values and attitudes functions interrogatively. According to Kristeva (1969), the use of polyphony in fiction, deflects the

critical focus from the author to the production of the text. While realist texts may also contain a number of voices, it is usually the authorial, narrating voice, (Belsey's privileged voice) that guides interpretation of the other voices out of which the story is woven. Conversely, texts influenced by postmodernism such as *Voices in the Park* enable active reader participation in the construction of the significance of the text from a range of voices. By giving characters an opportunity to tell their own version of events, access is provided to their motivations ("It's so boring") and their emotions ("I felt really, really happy"), something not available to readers of *A Walk in the Park*. This dialogic interrelatedness or interplay of different voices and perspectives allows the points of view provided to be considered – one against the other thus lessening the possibility of readers' subjection to a dominant viewpoint.

Conclusion

Metafictional strategies such as polyphony foreground the ways in which meaning is constructed, highlight the texts' own processes of production and reception, and disrupt the codes and conventions of realist fiction. Postmodern picturebooks often make obvious these narrative processes and in doing so raise awareness of the narrative strategies of conventional texts that have become naturalised through familiarity and, at the same time, interrogate dominant discourses of conventional children's literature. Attention to *how* narratives are constructed is as important as what the story is about in order to provide students with opportunities to consider alternative points of view from those offered by many conventional picturebooks.

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