PICTURES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Comparing and Contrasting the “Intangible Meanings” in “Cooper Bear at the Fair” and “The Little Mermaid”

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Abstract

Amidst the perplexing hodgepodge of children’s literature books that gives parents headache in choosing just the right ones that can bring them closer to their children, picture books arrive as “a helping hand” by providing children with not only a visual experience but also the glue to parent-child relationship for an enjoyable, quality reading time together. A good picture book is said to have the potential to carry their readers to perceive “the more intangible and invisible ideas and concepts”. Intrigued by the statement that picture books can “speak louder than words”, the writer was interested to further investigate how two picture books - “Cooper Bear at the Fair” and “The Little Mermaid” - do this, each in its own unique ways. Out of many “intangible and invisible ideas and concepts” presented by the pictures in both books, the writer found three as the bases of her comparative analysis of these two picture books. It was concluded that both books have successfully use relevant, powerful pictures each in its unique way to promote the positive values of parent-child relationship, present different concepts of love, and help children to deal with their fears. These were how these two books proved that not only actions, but pictures could also speak louder than words.

Key words: children’s literature, picture books, intangible concepts, contrasting.
For educated parents, the task of passing on their love for books to their children can sometimes be quite challenging. With the overwhelming existence of various social problems, numerous cases of broken parent-child relationships and decreasing family values nowadays, introducing books to children and making these books lovable become more than just simple tasks. Not only are parents exposed to a wide array of children’s books, but they also have become personally compelled to carefully choose, from the stunning number of choices of children’s books available, the very books that will bring them closer to their children. This is where picture books for children arrive as “a helping hand” for parents. Besides providing children with a visual experience - a definition of picture books proposed by the American Library Association for the Caldecott Award in Literature - picture books should also be the glue to parent-child relationships by providing parents with the opportunity for an enjoyable, quality reading time together with their children.

A picture book is a fusion of words and pictures. Excellent picture books seamlessly meld both elements together, creating a rich and rewarding reading experience. The illustrations in picture books are used not only to emphasize or compliment the story, but are also often as or even more powerful than the text itself. This is the distinguishing feature that secures picture books a special place within the field of children’s literature (Matulka, 2005, Qtd. in Citraningtyas’ lectures in Children’s Literature, 2006).

So potent is the power of pictures in picture books, that it is said that picture books can carry their readers beyond "the plain and the literal sense" to perceive "the more intangible and invisible ideas and concepts". With this notion in mind, we can expect that the pictures in these books can, "speak louder than words". At the same time, these pictures can also carry the author’s ideas, concepts, intentions, and even agendas in such a discreet way that even the readers sometimes do not notice them immediately. This has sparked my interest to further investigate the ways picture books guide their readers to perceive "the more intangible and invisible ideas and concepts". In this paper, I will compare and contrast how the pictures in two different picture books - "Cooper Bear at the Fair" by Janet Allison Brown and "The Little Mermaid" - present, each in its own unique ways, their "intangible and invisible ideas and concepts" to their readers.

"Cooper Bear at the Fair" was written by Janet Allison Brown and published in 2002 by S. Webb & Son Ltd. This sturdy, four-page picture book for young children aged 0-3 years old is the kind of picture book that apparently has a strong belief that "pictures speak louder than words". This can be immediately seen by how the back cover of this book mentions firstly the name of the illustrator, Samantha Chaffey, and then follows with the name of the story writer, Janet Allison Brown. This antrophomorphistic (human-behaving animal) story is about a young bear named Cooper who was visiting a fun fair with his father and got lost because he did not listen to his father’s advice to stay close.
Suddenly remembering his father’s advice to stay where he was, Cooper climbed onto a bench and held his hat up in the air. Finally, Cooper’s father was able to find him and “for the rest of the day Cooper held tightly onto Daddy’s hand!” (p. 4)

“The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen has an exceptional place in the world’s traditional literature. This fairy tale tells the story of a little mermaid princess who fell in love with a human prince and was even willing to trade her beautiful voice to a wicked sea witch for a pair of human legs. The little mermaid would become a full human being and earn a human soul only if the prince loved her back and was willing to marry her. The story ends sadly when the prince finally married another princess and left the little mermaid to be melted into foam. A picture book version of this fairy tale, which was published by Ladybird Books Ltd. in 1993 was retold by Audrey Daly and illustrated by Brian Price Thomas.

Out of many possible “intangible concepts and ideas” presented by the pictures in both books, I have found three that can serve as the bases of my analysis of these two picture books. The first and most conspicuous one is the strong theme of parent-child (or grandmother-granddaughter, in the case of "The Little Mermaid") relationships. Both picture books present illustrations of intimate parent-child relationships through physical contact. In the front cover of “Cooper Bear at the Fair”, readers can immediately see this through how Cooper is warmly embraced in his father’s arms (see Appendix, Picture 1). The smiling, happy faces of these two cute bears give the readers a glimpse of the warmth of the story’s theme. This happy father-son image continues as soon as the readers open the first page and is presented with a picture of Cooper and his father riding on a rollercoaster together (see Appendix, Picture 2). Although the father seemed to look a little scared being on a rollercoaster wagon, Cooper was pictured as looking back at his father - smiling. A critical reader will be able to interpret this “intangible concept” as an expression of a safe feeling to be in the arms of a loving father. In the picture, Cooper seemed to feel safe and was even able to smile because he completely believed that once his Daddy was right behind him, nothing in the world could do him any harm.

Meanwhile, in “The Little Mermaid”, although the characters are not bears, the intimacy between the little mermaid and her grandmother is nevertheless very apparent too. The story opens with an image of the smiling little mermaid sitting close to her grandmother and listening attentively to her stories of "the world above the sea" with her right hand peacefully rested on her grandmother’s lap (see Appendix, Picture 3). Although not clearly seen, the readers can also infer from this picture that the grandmother’s right hand is actually on the little mermaid’s back. Indeed, the text on this picture’s page does mention the following: “The princesses were too young to visit the world above the sea, but the youngest one never tired of hearing her grandmother
talk of it (p. 1).” However, the picture speaks even more powerfully by showing physical contact between these two characters to illustrate the intimacy in their relationship.

Another picture to support this point is on page 11 of this book, where the little mermaid’s grandmother is portrayed as pointing her finger up towards the world above the sea to explain the human world to her inquisitive granddaughter (see Appendix, Picture 4). Again, the picture shows that the hand of the grandmother mermaid is holding her granddaughter’s hand. The words on the page say, “The little mermaid talked with her grandmother about the world of humans.” A critical reader will probably question, “Why would she talk about it with her grandmother and not her sisters?” as of course, ‘hanging out’ with siblings is usually considered as having more fun than with an old grandmother. Instead, the illustrator of this picture book wants to emphasize that this “intangible concept” of grandmother-granddaughter relationship is built on nothing but mutual love and trust. The little mermaid obviously trusts her grandmother because her grandmother is a lot older than her and thus more experienced with the world above the sea. But somehow, their relationship goes beyond trust. Just like how little Cooper feels safe in his father’s embrace, the little mermaid apparently finds comfort when her grandmother gently holds her hand or pats her back. In this way, the illustrators of both books seem to have the same mission to promote (and hopefully restore) the “invisible and intangible concept” of intimate parent-child relationship which is built on mutual love and trust expressed in physical contact - an idea that is beginning to weaken in today’s families, considering the numerous reports of child abuse, household violence, and juvenile crimes in the news.

The second concept is somewhat related to the first one, but in a slightly different sense. Comparing these two picture books, it is obvious that the target audiences are different. “Cooper Bear at the Fair”, as mentioned previously, is intended for infants aged 0-3 years old. On the other hand, “The Little Mermaid” is probably intended for school-aged children of 7 and up. Thus, the concept of love is treated quite differently in these two picture books. “Cooper Bear at the Fair” portrays the love between a father and his son, while “The Little Mermaid” offers a more “adult” concept of romantic love - a love between a man and a woman.

In “Cooper Bear at the Fair”, the writer intends to show the filial love between Cooper and his father by presenting pictures that illustrate the intimacy between the two bears. This concept has thus been deemed necessary to be taught to young children because (ideally) they have to live together with their parents until they are mature enough to leave their parents’ house. Until then, they must learn to trust and love their parents. Furthermore, their parents also have the obligation to protect and care for them. In return, children have the obligation to listen to their parents’ advice and abide by them. This picture book intends to help parents teach this concept to their children,
but at the same time, also to help parents understand their children’s basic needs of parental affection and a sense of security.

On the other hand, "The Little Mermaid", which is intended for older children, seems to prepare them for their upcoming puberty. Normal children will experience an attraction to their opposite sex within the age range targeted by this picture book. "The Little Mermaid" thus introduces these children to a new concept of love besides the filial love existing between the little mermaid and her grandmother. The little mermaid’s love for the prince was the one thing - besides the words of the grandmother mermaid - that drove her to realize her dream of becoming a human being and earning a human soul (see Appendix, Picture 5). This new concept of love is so powerful that the little mermaid was even willing to sacrifice her life. This is not to be encouraged, of course. But still, we can see that although both picture books put forward a similar theme of love, each has its own unique way of emphasizing different kinds of love.

The third concept that is invisibly and intangibly put in both picture books is facing one's fear and coming out as a winner. As we know, fear of something is a kind of psychological problem that takes time to deal with, especially when it comes to traumas, phobias, and paranoia. Fear has indeed become a chronic sickness for some people, even children. Thanks to the storywriters and illustrators of these two picture books, parents can now have the opportunity to openly talk about the intangible concept of fear with their children. Although the main characters in these two picture books face different kinds of fears, they nevertheless succeed in conquering this intimidating feeling and come out as winners over their own fears.

Little Cooper in "Cooper Bear at the Fair" had his encounter with fear when he realized that he was lost; he could not find his father anywhere at the fair (see Appendix, Picture 6). The text on the page where Cooper was illustrated as being lost goes: "Cooper was frightened. He had butterflies in his tummy and he felt sick. At first he ran around in circles shouting, "Daddy!"" In the picture on this page, it can be seen that Cooper was all alone; there were no other bears around him. His face clearly expressed that he was afraid and worried, and at the same time, Cooper's hand was on his tummy to support the idea that he had "butterflies in his tummy". Getting lost can indeed be a frustrating experience for children. I recall that I often cried when I was lost at a shopping mall as a little girl. Cooper was apparently braver than I was when he remembered what his father said, "If you get lost, stay where you are and I'll find you." This statement of "I’ll find you", if uttered by parents, becomes more powerful than just simple advice. It becomes a reassurance that brings comfort to the lost child and gives him/her a clearer head to figure out what to do to find his/her parents. It helps the child to, again, learn to put his/her trust in the parents (and thus him/herself) that s/he will be finally found. Therefore, they should not be afraid when they get lost, as long as they
remember their parents’ advice. In this story, Cooper is a good example for children to learn to listen to their parents’ advice, to retain the advice, and to be able to recall it in times of fear. Cooper’s father even praised him for being a good bear and staying where he was. Cooper had proven himself to be capable of conquering his own fear of getting lost. Training children to come to terms with their fears needs a lot of time and effort to practice, of course, but in the end, it can shape a strong character of willing to face fears instead of running away from them.

The little mermaid’s fear was quite different in the sense that her fear has a physical figure. Before she could go above the waters to win the prince’s love, she had to meet someone she feared - the wicked sea witch. “The journey was terrifying, and several times she nearly turned back. But thoughts of the prince gave her courage, and at last she came to the witch’s house (p. 13).” The little mermaid was face-to-face with one of her fears (see Appendix, Picture 7), but at last she was even brave enough to sell her voice to the witch. Although she failed to win the prince’s love in the end, she was nevertheless successful in conquering her fear of having to negotiate with such a wicked sea witch. Just like Cooper remembered his father’s advice and took action, the little mermaid also remembered what her grandmother said about earning a human soul and took action by visiting the witch. Together with the thoughts of the prince, her grandmother’s advice also gave her the strength and courage to finally realize her desire of earning a soul.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that both picture books are outstanding ones that can carry their readers beyond “the plain and the literal sense” towards “the more intangible and invisible concepts and ideas”. Although published with a nine-year time difference, both books are still able to use relevant, powerful pictures; each in its unique way to promote intimacy in the parent-child relationship, present different concepts of love, and help children to deal with their fears. Reading these two picture books will absolutely be a wonderful time together for both parents and children. Above all, both “Cooper Bear at the Fair” and “The Little Mermaid” as picture books for children, have successfully proven that not only actions, but pictures can also - in fact - speak louder than words.

Works Cited


Appendix

Pictures from “Cooper Bear at the Fair” and “The Little Mermaid”
(Arranged according to the mentioning order in the paper)

Picture 1
The front cover of the picture book “Cooper Bear at the Fair”
Little Cooper is cuddled by his father.

Picture 2
The first page of the picture book “Cooper Bear at the Fair”
Cooper Bear is riding on a rollercoaster at the fair with his father.
The smile on Cooper’s face seems to say, “I know I’m safe because you’re right behind me, Daddy.”
Picture 3
The little mermaid passionately and attentively listens to her grandmother. Her hand rested peacefully on her grandmother's lap, while her grandmother's hand is on her back. A comforting scene to look at. ("The Little Mermaid", page 2)

Picture 4
Grandmother mermaid affectionately holds her granddaughter's hand while pointing up towards the world of humans. "Is there anyway I could get a soul?" asks the inquisitive little mermaid. ("The Little Mermaid", page 11)
Picture 5
The beautiful but mute little mermaid dances with her new pair of human legs.
("The Little Mermaid", page 15)

Picture 6
Poor Cooper Bear gets lost in the fair.
("Cooper Bear at the Fair", page 3)

Picture 7
The little mermaid is confronted with one of her fears: the wicked sea witch.
"So you want legs?" hissed the witch. "You must give me your voice in return."
("The Little Mermaid", page 13)
"Good bear for staying where you were!"

The front cover of "The Little Mermaid"