

The Reflection Of Early Childhood Social Values In The Storybook Where The Wild Things Are By Maurice Sendak

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Abstract. This study explores the reflection of early childhood social values in Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. The story, though simple in structure, encapsulates complex psychological and moral dimensions that mirror the developmental experiences of children. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, analyzing the text and illustrations through the lens of child development theories and moral education. The findings reveal that the story conveys three essential social values: emotional self regulation, empathy, and moral responsibility. Through the character of Max, Sendak portrays a symbolic journey of emotional growth from anger and rebellion to understanding and reconciliation. The imaginative world of the Wild Things becomes a medium through which the child processes inner conflicts and learns that love and belonging are more meaningful than power or independence. The story also reflects the significance of family affection and forgiveness as the foundation for emotional stability and moral awareness. In conclusion, *Where the Wild Things Are* serves not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a valuable educational resource for nurturing empathy, emotional intelligence, and social values in early childhood.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Social Values, Early Childhood, Moral Development, *Where the Wild Things Are*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature serves as one of the most powerful mediums through which young readers internalize moral, emotional, and social values. During the early years of development, stories function not only as entertainment but also as tools for social learning, helping children understand interpersonal relationships, empathy, and acceptable social behavior (Nikolajeva, 2014). Storybooks introduce complex ideas in simplified forms, allowing children to interpret social roles, emotions, and moral consequences through symbolic characters and imaginative narratives (Bettelheim, 1976). As a result, children's books become integral in transmitting cultural and social norms that shape the foundation of an individual's ethical understanding and identity formation (Hunt, 2001).

Among the most influential works in modern children's literature is *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak. This story, often regarded as a masterpiece of psychological and emotional depth in picture books, portrays the emotional journey of Max a mischievous young boy who escapes into a fantasy world inhabited by wild creatures after being punished by his mother. In this imaginary land, Max becomes the king of the Wild Things, only to realize that freedom and authority do not replace the warmth, love, and security of home (Sendak, 1963). The narrative reflects a profound exploration of early childhood emotions, behavioral control, and moral growth, making it a fertile ground for the study of social values in early childhood development (Lurie, 1990).

Social values such as empathy, respect, self-control, and responsibility begin to develop rapidly in early childhood, often shaped by both family interaction and cultural exposure through media, including literature (Berk, 2018). In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak subtly integrates these values through Max's transformation from defiance and anger to emotional maturity and reconciliation. This process mirrors the psychosocial stage of "initiative versus guilt," as identified by Erikson (1950), where children learn to balance autonomy with social responsibility. The story's depiction of fantasy and reality also illustrates how children use imagination as a means to

understand and regulate emotions (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, the narrative operates not merely as a tale of adventure but as an allegory of emotional growth and moral learning.

Scholars have long emphasized the symbolic nature of children's narratives as mirrors of socialization processes (Zipes, 2002). Sendak's work is particularly significant because it challenges the idealized portrayal of childhood innocence prevalent in earlier children's literature. Instead, it presents a more authentic representation of children's inner emotional struggles, frustration, and the longing for acceptance (Nodelman, 2008). Through both its text and illustrations, the book captures the tension between independence and dependence two essential dimensions of early childhood social development. Furthermore, Sendak's depiction of Max's journey from chaos to calmness reflects the child's capacity to internalize moral lessons and emotional understanding through self exploration (Cullingford, 1998).

The significance of analyzing *Where the Wild Things Are* lies in its multifaceted contribution to early childhood education, psychology, and literary studies. The book not only provides a narrative framework for discussing moral and emotional regulation but also represents how visual storytelling can support value education. The combination of text and imagery enables young readers to experience empathy, identify emotional cues, and understand the social consequences of behavior (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Therefore, this study seeks to explore how early childhood social values are reflected in Sendak's story, with a focus on the representation of emotional expression, moral reflection, and the process of reconciliation. By doing so, the research aims to demonstrate that *Where the Wild Things Are* functions as both a literary and psychological text one that continues to teach timeless lessons about love, discipline, and belonging.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, which was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of literary meaning and interpretation within a specific text (Creswell, 2014). The focus of this research is to uncover how early childhood social values are represented through the narrative and visual elements of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. The qualitative approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the story's emotional, moral, and symbolic dimensions without the limitations of numerical measurement. In this way, the study emphasizes understanding and interpretation, aligning with the nature of literary and educational analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The primary data source of this research is Maurice Sendak's original picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, published in 1963 by Harper & Row. The story was analyzed in its original English version to maintain the authenticity of the language and imagery employed by the author. Both textual and visual elements were examined in an integrated manner because, in picture books, the meaning often arises from the dynamic relationship between words and illustrations (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). Secondary data sources such as academic books, journal articles, and previous studies on children's literature, moral education, and developmental psychology were also used to support the analysis (Hunt, 2001; Nodelman, 2008; Berk, 2018). These references provided a theoretical foundation for interpreting how Sendak's story reflects and communicates early childhood social values.

Data collection was carried out through documentary analysis, a technique that involves identifying and interpreting information from written and visual materials relevant to the research focus (Bowen, 2009). The researcher conducted multiple readings of the book to identify recurring motifs, expressions, and images that signify key social values such as empathy, self-control, and responsibility. Both textual and visual details were treated as equally significant data, since the illustrations in Sendak's work play a central role in conveying emotional and psychological depth. To ensure interpretive validity, the analysis was grounded in established frameworks from child development and educational psychology, particularly Erikson's psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1950) and Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978).

The analysis process followed the principles of qualitative content analysis, which involves

systematically interpreting meaning from textual and visual materials (Mayring, 2014). After an initial stage of familiarization with the data, patterns and themes were identified based on recurring symbols and narrative developments. These themes were then interpreted through theoretical lenses related to early childhood moral and social development, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how Sendak's narrative mirrors children's emotional and behavioral growth. The interpretive process was recursive, moving back and forth between the text and theory to ensure consistency and depth of analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, comparing literary interpretations with concepts from psychology and education (Patton, 2015). This helped reduce subjectivity and ensured that conclusions were supported by multiple perspectives. The researcher also engaged in reflexive reading, being aware of personal assumptions and striving to maintain analytical objectivity throughout the process. Although this study did not involve human participants, ethical considerations were upheld by acknowledging all sources accurately, adhering to academic honesty, and respecting intellectual property through proper citation following the endnote style (APA, 2020).

Through this qualitative, interpretive approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how *Where the Wild Things Are* encapsulates essential social values in early childhood. By integrating literary, psychological, and educational perspectives, the research method ensures that the analysis remains holistic, credible, and contextually relevant to the study of children's literature and value formation.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak reveals that the story reflects several essential social values relevant to early childhood development. Through the character of Max, the narrative portrays a process of emotional growth and moral learning that aligns with children's experiences in understanding behavior, relationships, and responsibility. The findings of this study are presented in three major themes as follows.

1. Emotional Expression and Self-Regulation

The first significant finding of this study concerns the portrayal of emotional expression and self-regulation. The story begins with Max's disobedience and anger, which leads to conflict with his mother and his subsequent isolation in his room. This situation mirrors the real-life emotional challenges faced by young children who are learning to balance impulse with control (Berk, 2018). Max's imaginative escape to the land of the Wild Things symbolizes his attempt to process complex emotions such as frustration, anger, and loneliness. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept that play and imagination function as tools for emotional development, allowing children to express feelings that they cannot yet verbalize.

As Max becomes the "King of the Wild Things," he experiences the freedom and dominance he initially desired. However, this power does not bring him lasting happiness. Instead, he feels lonely and begins to miss the warmth and stability of home. This turning point signifies Max's growing ability to self-regulate his emotions and recognize that freedom without love leads to emptiness. Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development helps explain this transition: Max moves from the stage of initiative and guilt to an awareness of the consequences of his actions, learning to reconcile autonomy with social connection.

The illustrations in the book reinforce this emotional evolution. In the early pages, Max's image is small and surrounded by white space, representing isolation and defiance. As the story progresses and the "wild rumpus" begins, the pictures expand to fill the entire page, symbolizing the intensity of Max's emotions. Toward the end, as Max decides to return home, the illustrations gradually shrink again, indicating calmness and emotional resolution. This visual rhythm mirrors the child's internal journey toward self-regulation (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

Through this process, Sendak teaches young readers that expressing emotions is natural, but

learning to manage them is a sign of maturity. The story validates children's feelings of anger and rebellion while also guiding them toward understanding that love and forgiveness are more fulfilling than power or control.

2. The Value of Empathy and Social Connection

The second finding highlights the story's reflection of empathy and the importance of forming positive social relationships. Although Max initially isolates himself due to anger, his interactions with the Wild Things become a metaphor for his rediscovery of social connection. The Wild Things, despite their monstrous appearance, represent the different emotional aspects of Max's own personality: wild, fearful, affectionate, and loyal. By engaging with them, Max learns to understand and accept both his emotions and those of others, demonstrating the development of empathy (Nodelman, 2008).

Sendak portrays empathy not through explicit moral preaching, but through emotional experience. When Max commands the Wild Things to begin the "wild rumpus," they joyfully obey, suggesting the importance of leadership built on acceptance rather than domination. Yet, when Max later feels homesick and decides to leave, the Wild Things express sadness, begging him not to go. This emotional exchange illustrates the reciprocal nature of empathy and attachment. Max learns that relationships involve mutual care and understanding, not control (Lickona, 1991).

The homecoming scene further reinforces the significance of social connection. Max returns to find his supper waiting for him, "and it was still hot," symbolizing unconditional love and forgiveness from his mother. This moment encapsulates the essence of empathy and reconciliation within family life, where care persists despite conflict. In developmental terms, this represents the child's realization that relationships are grounded in love and trust, even after moments of misbehavior (Bowlby, 1988).

Sendak's combination of minimal text and expressive illustrations intensifies the emotional resonance of this theme. The large eyes and soft expressions of the Wild Things reflect vulnerability and affection rather than fear, helping children understand that empathy often emerges from recognizing emotions in others. Thus, the story serves as both a psychological and emotional mirror for children learning to navigate their relationships with parents, peers, and authority figures.

3. Moral Growth and Responsibility

The third major finding concerns the portrayal of moral development and the value of personal responsibility. Max's transformation throughout the story from defiance and mischief to understanding and reconciliation illustrates the process of moral learning that aligns with the early stages of moral reasoning identified by Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1981). In the beginning, Max acts impulsively, guided by self-centered desires, a behavior typical of pre-conventional moral reasoning where rules are perceived as external constraints rather than internalized values (Berk, 2018).

However, his experience in the fantasy world leads him to reflect on the consequences of his actions. As the "king," Max initially enforces his will upon the Wild Things but soon realizes that leadership requires care and responsibility. This realization parallels Kohlberg's stage of conventional moral reasoning, where children begin to consider social expectations and relationships. Max's decision to return home, therefore, is not simply a desire for comfort but a moral choice reflecting his understanding of love, respect, and the importance of making amends.

Sendak's narrative structure underscores this moral evolution. The story begins and ends with Max's room, symbolizing the cyclical nature of moral learning: conflict, reflection, and resolution. The supper left waiting for him signifies forgiveness, a moral act that reaffirms family as the core context for value formation. As Lurie (1990) and Hunt (2001) note, Sendak's depiction of childhood challenges conventional portrayals of innocence by acknowledging that children learn morality through real emotional struggles rather than abstract lessons. Through this moral journey, *Where the Wild Things Are* demonstrates that moral growth in children arises from experiences of conflict, empathy, and reflection. Max's story thus becomes a symbolic process of moral education, where the child learns that love and responsibility are stronger than anger and authority.

The findings of this study reveal that *Where the Wild Things Are* functions not merely as a story of childhood imagination but as a profound reflection of the developmental processes that shape early social and moral understanding. Maurice Sendak's narrative captures the psychological reality of childhood with remarkable subtlety, illustrating how emotional conflict, empathy, and moral awareness evolve through experiences of imagination and reconciliation. The story embodies a dynamic interplay between fantasy and reality, through which the reader witnesses Max's transformation from impulsive defiance to emotional and moral maturity.

The journey of Max represents a symbolic process of emotional regulation and psychological growth that aligns closely with developmental theories proposed by Erikson (1950) and Vygotsky (1978). According to Erikson, early childhood is characterized by the psychosocial conflict of initiative versus guilt, during which children begin to assert their independence while learning to regulate their impulses within social boundaries. Max's anger and rebellion at the beginning of the story signify this tension between autonomy and authority. His escape into the world of the Wild Things can be interpreted as a coping mechanism, allowing him to explore freedom and control without the restrictions of parental guidance. In this imaginary space, Max externalizes his emotions, giving form to his inner turmoil through the monstrous yet sympathetic figures of the Wild Things. These creatures, as symbolic extensions of Max's own psyche, provide him with the emotional distance necessary to process his anger safely and creatively.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further illuminates this process by emphasizing the role of imagination and symbolic play in cognitive and emotional development. Through fantasy, children can reenact social experiences and test their understanding of emotions, rules, and relationships. Max's rule over the Wild Things serves as a metaphor for this developmental experimentation: he learns what it means to lead, to be obeyed, and ultimately, to care for others. Yet, as his feelings of loneliness and longing grow, he begins to understand that relationships grounded in affection are more fulfilling than those based on authority. This realization demonstrates an important developmental milestone: the ability to empathize and recognize the emotional needs of oneself and others. In this sense, Sendak's narrative mirrors the child's gradual transition from egocentric emotion to social awareness, a process central to emotional intelligence and early moral education (Berk, 2018).

Empathy, as a social value, emerges naturally through Max's interactions with the Wild Things and his eventual decision to return home. The creatures' tearful farewell expresses the mutual attachment and affection that have formed between them, illustrating that emotional connection is both powerful and reciprocal. This moment also reflects what Lickona (1991) identifies as the foundation of character education: the ability to feel compassion for others and to act upon that compassion. By returning home, Max not only acknowledges his own emotional needs but also demonstrates an empathetic awareness of his mother's love and concern. The story thus communicates to children that relationships, despite moments of conflict, are grounded in forgiveness and enduring affection. Sendak's portrayal of the maternal bond in the closing scene where Max's supper awaits him "still hot" serves as a silent affirmation of unconditional love and forgiveness, values essential for moral and emotional development in early childhood (Bowlby, 1988).

From a literary perspective, Sendak's integration of text and image reinforces the psychological complexity of Max's emotional journey. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) argue, picture books operate through the interaction between verbal and visual codes, enabling multiple layers of meaning. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, the gradual expansion and contraction of illustration space visually represent Max's emotional rhythm: confinement gives way to chaos, and chaos returns to calm. This visual structure parallels the child's psychological oscillation between emotional outburst and self-control. Moreover, the limited text and expressive illustrations invite readers, particularly children, to interpret emotions through images, thus fostering visual literacy and emotional sensitivity. In this way, the book functions as a dialogic space where readers can project, recognize, and regulate their own feelings. The moral dimension of the story becomes evident as Max undergoes a transformation from selfish impulse to moral awareness. Initially, his behavior reflects what Piaget (1932) describes as "heteronomous morality," where rules are perceived as external impositions rather than internalized ethical principles. However, through his imaginative journey,

Max begins to understand the consequences of his actions and internalizes a sense of responsibility and empathy. This shift corresponds with Kohlberg's (1981) "conventional stage" of moral reasoning, where moral choices are guided by relationships, expectations, and care for others. By choosing to return home and accept the consequences of his earlier defiance, Max demonstrates an emerging sense of moral agency a recognition that love, respect, and belonging outweigh the desire for dominance or isolation.

Sendak's narrative thus provides a unique model of moral education through literature. Rather than prescribing behavior through didactic instruction, the story invites reflection and identification. As Nodelman (2008) observes, Sendak's works challenge the notion of childhood innocence by acknowledging that children experience anger, loneliness, and guilt, yet also possess the capacity for empathy and moral insight. This authenticity makes the story psychologically realistic and pedagogically valuable, as it encourages children to confront rather than suppress complex emotions. In this way, *Where the Wild Things Are* aligns with the principles of moral education proposed by Lickona (1991), which emphasize the integration of emotion, cognition, and action in the development of character.

Furthermore, the story's universal themes resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries, reinforcing its enduring significance in early childhood education. The narrative's simplicity conceals profound psychological truths: that moral understanding arises not from external authority but from internal reflection, and that empathy grows through imaginative engagement with others. As Hunt (2001) notes, great children's literature succeeds when it allows young readers to explore moral complexity within a safe imaginative framework. Sendak's work achieves precisely this by giving children a mirror to their emotional world and guiding them toward a mature comprehension of love and responsibility.

Ultimately, *Where the Wild Things Are* exemplifies how children's literature can serve as both an aesthetic and educational medium for social learning. The story bridges psychological reality and artistic expression, offering a narrative that reflects the essential stages of early childhood socialization emotional expression, empathy, and moral responsibility. Through Max's journey, Sendak illustrates that personal growth is not achieved through suppression of emotion but through its understanding and transformation. The imaginative adventure thus becomes a metaphor for inner reconciliation: the wildness within each child can coexist with tenderness, love, and belonging. This synthesis of fantasy and moral insight ensures that the book continues to serve as a timeless resource for educators, parents, and scholars who seek to understand the role of literature in shaping the moral imagination of children.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Where the Wild Things Are* reveals that Maurice Sendak's story is far more than a simple tale of childhood adventure. It is a profound reflection of the emotional, social, and moral development that defines early childhood. Through the imaginative journey of Max, the narrative portrays a process of growth that begins with rebellion and ends in understanding, showing how children learn to balance independence with responsibility, freedom with affection, and anger with empathy.

The story illustrates that imagination is not a means of escape but a path toward emotional awareness. Max's encounter with the Wild Things allows him to express suppressed feelings of anger and frustration, to test authority, and ultimately to recognize his need for love and belonging. This transformation reflects a universal pattern of childhood growth in which emotional expression leads to self-regulation and moral reflection. Sendak's narrative captures the essence of that inner journey the child's discovery that love, empathy, and forgiveness are more powerful than control or defiance.

In its portrayal of family relationships, the story also emphasizes the enduring strength of affection and forgiveness. The warm meal waiting for Max upon his return home represents unconditional love and acceptance, reminding both children and adults that mistakes and disobedience are integral

parts of growing up. Such love provides the emotional foundation on which social values like kindness, empathy, and responsibility can flourish.

As a work of literature, *Where the Wild Things Are* unites art and psychology in a unique and meaningful way. Its combination of visual and verbal storytelling allows young readers to experience complex emotions within a safe imaginative framework. The story invites reflection rather than instruction, guiding children to understand moral values through emotional experience rather than through rules or punishment.

Ultimately, the book stands as a timeless contribution to both children's literature and early education. It teaches that personal growth begins not with perfection but with the courage to face one's emotions and to find reconciliation through love. By showing that even "wild" feelings can lead to understanding and compassion, Sendak's story continues to nurture the moral imagination of readers across generations, affirming that every child's inner world however untamed holds the potential for empathy, maturity, and peace.

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