

## Playing with the Eye and Mind: A Postmodern Reading of *Wolves* (2005) by Emily Gravett

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### Abstract

Postmodernism was a broad movement of the 20th century that influenced the fields of philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism. It was characterised by an attitude of scepticism, irony, and rejection of grand narratives and ideologies connected with modernism. It was primarily known for its rebellious approach and willingness to test boundaries. As a reaction to the modernist movement, postmodernism opposed the epistemic certainty and stability of meaning upheld by the era of modernity and sought to celebrate fragmentation in art and culture.

This shift was the result of an increased self-consciousness in art and writing, an exploration of the limits and possibilities in art and of the past which informs it. This shift in literature and art eventually led to fluxes within the domain of children's picture books. Beautifully illustrated, the picture books, are books in which words and illustrations jointly work together to contribute to the text's meaning. With the shift, a new genre called postmodern books emerged which was non-linear, self-referential with cynical or sarcastic tone. There are characterised by ambiguities, shifting viewpoints and meta fictive elements.

Emily Gravett is a British author and illustrator. Her major works include *Wolves* (2005), *Orange Pear Apple Bear* (2006), *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* (2007) and *Monkey and Me* (2007). *Wolves* (2005) is Gravett's debut book. It is a witty and engaging book that narrates the tale of an innocent, gullible rabbit who enters the West Bucks Public Library, and takes up a book on wolves. Gravett has skilfully played with existing texts, narrative structures, visual elements, and a variety of

meta fictive devices to place the readers in a participatory role in the creation of the narrative. Her use of the postmodern elements renders *Wolves* as both visually engaging and intellectually stimulating.

The following paper aims to read Emily Gravett's book *Wolves* from a postmodern point of view, contemplating on Gravett's use of postmodern elements like metalepsis, mise- en- abyme, intertextuality, textual and verbal interruptions, smooth intermingling of narrative time and story time and intrusive characters.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, picture books, metafiction, metalepsis, intertextuality, Emily Gravett

### **Introduction**

Postmodernism is a socio-cultural and literary movement that was prominent during the 20th century. It also refers to a shift in perspective that has manifested itself in various fields including philosophy, arts, architecture, and so on. It challenged the stability of meaning and redefined boundaries. The 1950s witnessed an increased self-consciousness in art and writing and an urge to explore the limits and possibilities in art thus spurring the postmodern movement. According to McHale, postmodern fiction was “above all illusion-breaking art; it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and fictional worlds” (221). Postmodernism focussed on rejection of the unity, homogeneity, and totality; and also highlighted aspects such as ambiguity and incertitude. It was characterised by “ontological plurality or instability” (McHale 15) and celebrated fragmentation.

Picture books were not elusive to this new shift in perception and in no time, postmodernism found its way through this emerging domain. A book uses imagery and minimalistic terminology and strives to convey meaning through words and pictures. With postmodernism, picture books evolved to become more radical. The new picture books were fragmented in structure and multimodal in approach. These picture books were known for their open nature and also for their pictorial and verbal

ambiguity. They did not follow a linear pattern and were self-referential with a cynical or sarcastic tone, requiring the reader to make sense of meaning of the book. Gaps or ambiguities were included and the story was full of playful jokes, puns, or irony. These picture books incorporated shifting viewpoints and multiple narratives and even included jokes in the illustrations.

Postmodern picture books broke and blurred all boundaries, especially the border between diegetic levels. Meta-fictional elements, non-linear plots, self-referential writing and illustrations, narrators that directly address the reader, polyphonic narrators, numerous intertextual references, blending of genres, and indeterminate plot, characters, and settings were the characteristics of the new picture books. With their experimental and radical nature, these books emerged to be postmodern in spirit and treatment. They questioned and sought to problematize the ideological, social, and cultural conventions depicted in the traditional picture books.

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Emily Gravett is an English author and illustrator of children's picture books. She is also a bookbinder and an artist. Her experimental approach and evocative style won her great praise and fame. Her major works include *Wolves* (2005), *Orange Pear Apple Bear* (2006), *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* (2007), and *Monkey and Me* (2007). She was awarded the Kate Greenway Medal twice, for her books *Wolves* (2005) and *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* (2007) and also received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor award for her illustrations in *Wolves*.

*Wolves* (2005) was her debut work and it was recognised as the year's best-illustrated children's book. *Wolves* is a witty and engaging book with superb artwork. It narrates the tale of an innocent, gullible rabbit who enters the West Bucks Public Library and takes up a book on wolves. However, the rabbit soon becomes part of the book it is reading as the two parts of the book fuse when it is found out that rabbits are on the menu for wolves. Gravett illustrates the story comprehensively and amusingly with the illustrations offering an immersive experience. The following paper mainly aims to attempt a postmodern reading of Emily Gravett's *Wolves* by highlighting the postmodern elements employed by the author.

## Literature Review

Children's texts that display postmodern characteristics very often interrogate socially received standards of behaviour, and dominant cultural ideologies. Children's writers and illustrators are very much a part of the cultural and intellectual milieu that postmodernism has engendered so it is hardly surprising that traces of postmodern influences would be evident in their work. Picture books have been influenced by postmodernism, both stylistically and ideologically.

The postmodern picture book is a complex and evolving genre which utilises the visual and verbal dynamics to create a multifaceted text that is playful and has a tendency towards resistance if not subversion of both narrative conventions and aspects of society. Postmodern picture books 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 verbal and visual texts.

*Wolves* (2005) by Emily Gravett is an immensely witty and engaging postmodern picture book. It offers its readers multiple storylines and an alternative ending that truly plays with the eyes and minds of the readers. The verbal and visual worlds captured in the picture book is extremely experimental and innovative in their style, approach, and appeal.

Gravett's picture book is characterised by the use of several postmodern elements such as metalepsis, *mise-en-abyme*, intertextuality, textual and verbal interruptions, narrative embedding, metafictional elements, intrusive characters, experimental layout and the smooth intermingling of narrative time and story time. Gravett employs the use of meta-fictive devices to playfully depict the various verbal and visual worlds in *Wolves*. These enable interactions between the readers and the narrative. Moreover, the violation of ontological boundaries in *Wolves* reveals their meta-fiction nature by drawing "attention to conventions by breaking them" (David Lewis 145).

Metalepsis is a postmodern feature found in *Wolves*. Metaleptic processes in picture books unravel how the "boundaries between narrative levels" are breached (Malina 1). By transgressing the

ontological boundaries of the diegetic, the narratives can be made complex. Through metalepsis, “diegetic levels get entangled and boundaries played with” (Herman 135). It helps to increase the complexity of a narrative by obscuring or collapsing the boundaries between reality and fiction, by blurring the “sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, [and] the world of which one tells” (Genette 236). Metalepsis is cleverly implemented in picture books, in myriad ways, because of their multimodal nature.

The metaleptic transgressions in *Wolves* are the result of the different narrative levels constructed by the visual and verbal text. Metalepsis is also felt in the visual and verbal direct addresses incorporated in *Wolves*. Gravett openly addresses her readers as readers to reassure them that “no rabbits were eaten during the making of the picture book” (Gravett 15). Even as Rabbit reads that wolf eats small creatures like “rabbits”, he looks closely and directly at the readers. This creates a relationship between the readers and the Rabbit, with the readers starting to identify themselves with the Rabbit. The verbal address of the author and the visual address by Rabbit transgress the diegetic levels, drawing the reader’s attention to the fictional nature of the book.

The use of metalepsis in *Wolves* is also felt in the contextual use of specific discourses. The discourse of the author’s note to the readers is similar to a disclaimer given in movies. The alternative ending line “They became the best of friends, and lived happily ever after” is similar to the ending line of fairy tales. This suggests a shift of diegetic level or narrative frame in the book. Added to this, *Wolves* also ends “with a metaleptic self-destruction by brute force” (Nöth 190). The picture book ends in a non-conformist manner. The sight of the doormat littered with postcards makes one feel that the wolf has attacked Rabbit. The ontological levels are once again transgressed at the end of the picture book, with the readers manually entering into Rabbit’s narrative world by opening his letters and postcards.

*Wolves*, on the whole, succeed in creating different spatiotemporal worlds, with the readers sharing the same time as the characters. This can be referred to as a metaleptic pop. It can be described



as “a radical transgression of the narrative hierarchies between the levels of author and reader, narrator, and fictional characters when the text world suddenly invades the actual world of the reader” (Rubik 172). Even the characters serve as “agents or carriers of metalepsis, disturbers of the ontological hierarchy of levels” (McHale 121). Rabbit’s inability to step across to different diegetic results in his consumption by another character. The metaleptic disruptions to the primary diegesis in the picture book result in the introduction of a new story that divides the cognitive activity of the reader. In the picture book, the metaleptic pops enhance the “realistic illusion of [the] story world representations” (Fludernik 383). *Mise en abyme* is another postmodern device found in *Wolves*. It foregrounds “the ontological dimension of recursive structures” and disrupts “the logic of narrative hierarchy” (McHale 124-125). Nikolajeva and Scott describe it as “a framing device in which a visual or verbal text is embedded within another text as its miniature replica” (226). In *Wolves*, *mise en abyme* can be found in both the visual and the verbal text. Even within the picture book, there are minute nested representations of the primary diegetic. The book that Rabbit is reading is in fact, a miniature replica of the hardcover version of the picture book. The double-page spreads in Rabbit’s book are miniature replicas of the pages in the picture book. The use of this framing device creates a book within a book effect. Even at the narrative level, *mise-en-abyme* is evident. Along with the Rabbit, who is reading a version of ‘*Wolves*’, the readers are also reading the pages in *Wolves*. *Wolves* contain “narrative act within narrative act, narrative situation within narrative situation... the mirroring within a story of the storytelling relationship itself: narrator-narration-narratee” (Ryan 33).

Another aspect of the narrative is Gravett’s parodic appropriation of herself as an author. According to Ryan, “The boundary between the story world and the outside world is subverted in *Wolves* for both readers and Rabbit” (33). The readers are sharing the same spatiotemporal world with the Rabbit, “the world of the reader and the world of the book collapse into each other” (Ryan 44). Rabbit is in fact, both “the protagonist and the reader of his story at the same time” (Nöth 180) and the narrating time coincides with the narrated time. This suggests a disruption of textual time and

space relationships. As a character in a book, Rabbit is sharing the same time and space as the readers and this transgression of boundary creates a “convergence of two diegetic spaces” (Chen 399). Therefore, in *Wolves*, “the represented worlds existing on different diegetic levels” penetrate one another, and intertextuality becomes “flesh-and-blood intertextuality” (Chen 396).

Moreover, as the readers read the words and images, they are ontologically speaking, oscillating between the verbal and visual worlds. This is the effect caused by the use of the postmodern technique called *trompe l'oeil*. The use of this technique creates an interesting illusion of three-dimensionality or reality. Looking into the various illustrations in the picture book, one notices that Rabbit is depicted with shadows, which creates a visual deception of reality by making the readers overlook the fact that Rabbit is unreal. Shadows are also used for depicting Wolves predating on Rabbit. This creates an illusion that the Wolf is real and it is preying upon the Rabbit. Even the paper pieces within the picture book also have shadows. Thus, Gravett uses the technique of *trompe l'oeil* to make the readers believe that the world of Rabbit is ‘real’.

Gravett employs intertextuality in *Wolves* by alluding to the traditional story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and she does so through the clever use of visual images in the story. Even without considering the verbal cues, the readers can establish visual connections between the story of *Wolves* and the traditional tale. Gravett gives the reader agency and choice in the creation process, but also encourages them to recognize the difference between fact and fiction. The cover image depicts a white rabbit holding a big red book with the word ‘Wolves’ written on it in black bold letters. Like the red hood that stands out in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* the red book cover stands out against the pale backdrop and white rabbit. Gravett uses other subtle visual similarities to link the two stories without using any familiar verbal cues. For example, Rabbit does not sit down to read but walks across the pages of the reader's book holding the red book in front of him. There are rabbit footprints behind him in one scene which indicates movement. Rabbit walking through the story is symbolically similar to that of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Rabbit is as clueless about the wolf's pursuit as the girl in the story. Gravett draws the wolves in a way that makes them look threatening and dangerous. They are drawn with dark lines and pointed features; their eyes are narrow, and their teeth are bared in many of the images. In one scene the opened book is positioned in the middle of the rabbit's tracks giving the impression that the wolf is following Rabbit. Gravett plays with the traditional tale by linking subtle details of the storyline with visual aspects of her book. More specifically, Gravett creates a visual parallel between the memorable scene between the girl and the wolf disguised as the grandmother. Gravett plays with the reader's existing knowledge of the story, aligning the traditional tale and this postmodern version through the image of the giant wolf waiting to devour Rabbit.

Gravett plays with the story by adding a realistic twist at the end. Gravett gives the reader agency in the story's creation through the knowledge they already possess from the original story. The playful allusion to the existing tale is complemented by a playful use of the space on the pages of the book. The technique of story within a story draws attention to the constructiveness of the text and it also creates layered narratives that interact with one another. The specialty of *Wolves* is that the “readers are reading *Wolves*, and Rabbit is also reading a version of *Wolves*, but readers are reading about Rabbit reading this version of the book” (Pantaleo 19). Gravett thus wonderfully plays with intertextuality in *Wolves*, through the visual images. In *Wolves*, Gravett also plays with visual elements and the notion of connectivity. Gravett playfully presents visual elements within her narrative. She uses a variety of postmodern techniques and multimodal elements to present the various layers of the narrative and the experiences of the characters.

The notion of connectivity accounts for "connections in unexpected places" (Dresang 48). By connecting the visual elements, Gravett plays with the visual elements, physical manipulations, and manner of reading, leaving the reader to delve deeper into the layers of the narrative. *Wolves* thus establishes a striking connection between written words, visual images and elements, book design, characters, readers and author's voice. In *Wolves*, the readers are actively encouraged to explore the



narrative, enjoy the journey along with the characters and interpret storylines from the verbal and visual images. *Wolves* incites a level of analysis from the reader.

Gravett allows the reader agency in some of the creation process but also asks them to notice how fiction works, and how it may be manipulated. Readers are free to make choices on how they read the picture book. The choices they make eventually, help them to unravel the meanings buried within the verbal and visual narrative. The readers also physically manipulate and interact with the elements in the picture book. So, we can say that *Wolves* is a text in its nature and approach. In *Wolves*, Gravett also plays with the narrative structures by providing minimal verbal cues and layered narratives presented from multiple perspectives. These texts eventually encourage the reader to play along with the characters. The readers do so by filling in the narrative gaps and aiding in the creation of the story.

In *Wolves*, Gravett displays the visual cues and images in such a manner that makes the readers focus on delineating the meaning of the text. The primary narrative of *Wolves* is presented through verbal and visual text. While the visual images extend and add humour to the already straightforward verbal narrative of the picture book. The visual images also contain information not included in the verbal narrative to intensify the reading experience and to make the readers actively involved in the process of interpreting the text. Maria Nikolajeva notes that “the counterpoint of words and image... presupposes playfulness since images can show something that not merely adds a dimension to the narrative, but offers a possibility to interpret the story differently from what is expressed by the words only” (56).

Another feature of *Wolves* is the layout of the pages. Nikolajeva argues that “In postmodern picture books, the verbal text is integrated into the overall layout, some time to the degree that at least part of it appears within the image – intraexonic texts – in form of speech or thought balloons, parallel narratives used as commentary on the primary story, or as additional comic detail” (62). Gravett uses visual images to fill in the verbal gaps created within the narrative. The sentences are either

incomplete or extended to the next page. The visual story also includes secondary visual elements such as postcards, newspapers, and even stamps that are also multi-modal and connected to the primary verbal text.

Another layer of secondary visual elements can also be found on the inside covers of the front and back of the book. Maria Nikolajeva explains that “Peritexts such as cover, endpapers, title page, and double spread layout can contribute substantially to the overall meaning of the narrative, as can the size and format of the book, and other purely external qualities” (58-59). Gravett incorporates additional narrative elements in the peritext to include information relevant to the main narrative. In *Wolves*, the postcards, advertisement sheets, and cut outs intensify the main narrative. Maria Nikolajeva notes that “In postmodern picture books, playfulness is often expressed through their materiality” (57).

Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario appreciates the materiality of Gravett's books. She notes that in *Wolves*, Gravett makes “full use of the page spreads, covers, and dust jackets to narrate, and often employ a variety of dimensional print effects including pop-ups, embossing, and inserts” (Do Rozario 151). The reader can physically feel the edges of the postcards take them out and read them. When explored thoroughly the visual elements and manipulations of the book establish playful connections between the primary verbal and visual narrative. She plays with the eyes and minds of the readers by consciously hiding various elements.

Gravett even connects the physical book to the events in the story. In *Wolves*, the physical picture book becomes an active visual element. She cleverly binds the primary visual and verbal narrative to the visual elements within the book. The postcards that fold out of the book add to the narrative of the picture book. The printed facts about wolves occupy a small portion of the picture book to enable the readers to find them amidst the visual images that occupy the maximum space on the pages. It is beautifully included in the form of smaller methods of delivery, like stamps, and layered onto one another.

In *Wolves*, the use of a “pastiche of illustration styles” is also well evident. (Pantaleo 32). Gravett not only draws the images in the book but uses various artistic methods to make them stand out. The wolf’s attack on the rabbit is depicted by capturing the realistic image of a stained and ripped red library book, at the end. She then uses torn scraps of paper, to create the alternative ending. The final image of the rabbit and the wolf eating the sandwich is created from a collage of torn paper that appears to be leftovers from the library book. The wolf is made from torn images of his previous self-image in the picture book. He has no teeth and does not have the same pointed features as the drawn wolf in the book. Rabbit is also made of torn images of his earlier depicted self. His body is whole but the head and ears are torn and detached. The sandwich is made from white scraps of paper and the jam is the torn red cover from the rabbit's book.

Therefore, *Wolves* can be described as a mutinous fiction because of how it subverts narrative structures and boundaries. The reader’s attention is drawn to the embedded narratives through the use of several postmodern techniques like textual and visual interruptions of the primary diegesis, and other diegetic levels; intrusive characters, and narrators who verbally and visually address the readers as readers. Other features include shifting registers; intermingling of story time and narrating time; the use of *trompe l’oeil* and mise-en-abyme. *Wolves* is structured in a story within a story, narrative within a narrative, and narration within a narration, format with the narrative frames/diegetic levels overlapping with one another.

In short, in *Wolves* we get to see the use of postmodern elements like metalepsis, *mise-en-abyme*, intertextuality, textual and verbal interruptions, metafictional elements, narrative embedding, intrusive characters, smooth intermingling of narrative time and story time. Gravett also plays with visual elements, the notion of connectivity, and narrative structures in the picture book. They offer the child reader an opportunity to explore the gaps and absences in the text. Through the clever and witty employment of postmodern techniques and devices, Gravett encourages her readers to delve

deeper into the story world she has depicted. *Wolves*, in fact, make the readers actively discover and explore the text rather than remain passive consumers of the text.

## Conclusion

Picture books are the first books with which a child interacts. The complex nature and approach of the postmodern it make them appealing to readers of all ages. An increased self-consciousness in art and writing and an exploration of the limits and possibilities in art and of the past marks the inception of postmodernism. The most significant among such narratives were the works that employed the witty and clever use of postmodern elements. The very ingredients of postmodern picture books are multiple visual and verbal narratives and perspectives, nonlinear stories, unresolved endings, and unconventional spatial arrangement of text. They are also self-conscious and self-referential, offering a plurality of meaning by playfully inviting the reader or viewer as a co-constructor of meaning.

Emily Gravett's picture book *Wolves* plays with our eyes and minds and is truly postmodern in its style and approach. The very employment of postmodern elements makes the narrative semantically rich and intense. Added to this, it also empowers the readers to actively participate in the process of meaning construction so that they do not remain passive consumers of the text. It draws our attention to the constructed nature of a story and gives the characters and readers more agency in its creation. Gravett, through the witty use of postmodern elements, has not only made her work playful but also intellectually stimulating.

*Wolves* contain postmodern elements like metalepsis, mise-en- abyme, intertextuality, textual and verbal interruptions, smooth intermingling of narrative time and story time and intrusive characters. It is the clever use of these features that have imparted the narratives a unique status among picture books. Added to this, the picture book is also anti- didactic in their approach and subvert the ideology of traditional picture books. Truly, Gravett has caused a huge revolution within the domain

of children's fiction through her innovative approach and has exposed the immense possibilities that lay in the genre of picture books.

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