

Exploring Multimodal Ensembles: An Example

Mr. Piggott lived with his two sons, Simon and Patrick, in a nice house with a nice garden, and a nice car in the nice garage. Inside the house was his wife.

—from *Piggybook*, Browne (1986)

To make the various perspectives and theories presented here more approachable and practical, and to demonstrate how a multimodal text may be analyzed, I offer an exploration of the written text, visual images, design elements, and multimodal composition of the contemporary picturebook *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne (1986). This exploration will serve as an example of how to analyze a multimodal ensemble using the strategies and resources detailed throughout previous chapters. Browne's book provides numerous opportunities for analyzing visual images, textual structures, and design elements across perceptual, structural, and ideological perspectives (Serafini, 2010b). Each of these analytical perspectives will be considered separately; however, in practice the distinctions across these perspectives blur and blend together in any actual reading experience. This chapter has been adapted from an analysis contained in Serafini (2010b).

Piggybook is the story of a mother, father, and two sons that focuses on gender roles and expectations, and how members of this family behave and believe they should be treated. When the father and two boys disregard the mother and the work she does around their house, the mother abruptly leaves home without warning. Subsequently, the house falls into disarray due to neglect and lack of domestic skills on the part of the male members of the family. In the visual images provided by Browne, the men turn into pigs both literally and symbolically as they fail to maintain domestic routines. The mother's ultimate return demands a revision of family roles and dynamics and increased respect for household chores and the mother.

PIGGYBOOK FROM A PERCEPTUAL ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

① Since *Piggybook* is not paginated, the book will be described as a series of *openings*, meaning a two-page display in the story sequence. The focus of the perceptual analytical perspective is to identify and label various visual, design, and textual elements; create an inventory of what is depicted; and use this inventory for further analysis and interpretation. An inventory of visual, textual, design, and multi-modal elements is the first step in the interpretive process.

Approaching the front cover of *Piggybook*, one is struck by the unusual title of the book and the image of what seems to be a traditional family posing for a portrait (see Figure 7.1). The border surrounding the portrait is broken by the heads of the two boys sticking out the top of the image. The shape of the book is a vertical or portrait orientation, which connects to the portrait-style image displayed on the cover. The colors of the image are bright, especially the color of the red jackets the boys are wearing, making them stand out in the image. A woman, whom one might assume is the mother, is carrying two boys and an older male, whom one might assume is the father, on her back in piggyback fashion. The two boys and the man are smiling, while the woman is not. The border of the cover image is green and black, and the color of the book is a light pink.

Intro. to
symbolism
perhaps...

The second opening of the book presents the two boys and their father calling for their breakfast from a rectangular wooden dining table (see Figure 7.2). The father is hidden behind a newspaper, while the boys' mouths are opened wide as they call to their mom for their breakfast. The circle of their open mouths is repeated in the round dishes and cups of the table, and in numerous images contained in the newspaper the father is holding. The father and the two boys are asking the mother to hurry up so they won't be late for their important job and school, respectively.

The third opening of the book presents four sepia-toned images, arranged in four symmetrical quadrants, of a faceless mother doing the dishes, vacuuming, making the beds, and leaving for work. The mother is presented in monochrome in comparison to the brightly colored clothes worn by her sons and husband on other pages of the book. Readers do not see her face as she goes about her work. Three of the images are set inside the house, with the fourth outside on a sidewalk. In the fourth image, a small pig face is presented as graffiti on the brick wall behind the mother. She is dressed in a coat, standing next to a flagpole, as she looks in her purse for something.

The next spread is the eighth opening of the book. On the left side or verso, readers are presented with a mantel and fireplace with a copy of the painting *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough above the fireplace surround. The female character is missing from the painting, with a white outline left in her absence. Pigs are depicted in the mosaic tiles in the fireplace surround, fireplace tools, baseboard, and a vase and photograph on the mantel. The right side, or recto, of the

opening, reveals a hooflike hand in a suit jacket holding an unsigned, handwritten note against a pig-patterned wallpaper stating, "You are pigs" (see Figure 7.3).

In the eleventh opening, the sons and father have completed their metamorphosis into human figures with piglike heads. The wallpaper, furniture covers, cans of food, and newspaper all resemble or contain pig faces. The painting of the *Laughing Cavalier* by Frans Hals has been transformed into a pig-headed cavalier. The male characters are shown rooting around for scraps, crouched on all fours roaming the floor. The text explains that one evening, as they were scrounging for something to eat behind the chairs in the living room, the mother returned. In the verso of the opening, the mother's shadow is projected casting a blue shadow on the wall, framed by the doorway in which she stands.

This inventory of the objects contained in the picturebook *Piggybook* is used as the foundation for the analysis and interpretations to come. The classification of the paintings included in some of the images required research beyond the covers of the text, while the rest of the descriptions focused on literal presentations and depictions of the visual elements of the picturebook.

PIGGYBOOK FROM A STRUCTURAL ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Approaching the cover of *Piggybook* from a structural perspective, it may be more effective for teachers to address each metafunction individually—ideational, interpersonal, and compositional (Halliday, 1978). For example, addressing the ideational metafunction, one would consider the way that characters are represented and the interactions among them. On the cover, the mother is carrying the father and two boys. The arms of the father and two boys encircle one another, while the mother's arms support the father and boys by their legs.

(2)
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From the perspective of the interpersonal metafunction, the characters are positioned in a middle range of social distance, not too close and not too far from the viewer. It is like a full body portrait, where the viewer is positioned at eye level. The characters are all looking directly at the viewer, in a frontal orientation, demanding that the viewer interact with them. The modality of the artwork is realistic, yet not as realistic as a photograph.

Considering the compositional metafunction, a green and black border frames the characters included in the portrait. However, the boys' heads are breaking the border, suggesting a more intimate connection between characters and the viewer. The characters are positioned in the center of the image, increasing their importance or salience. They are also moving from left to right, suggesting a move from where they have traditionally been to where they are heading in the future.

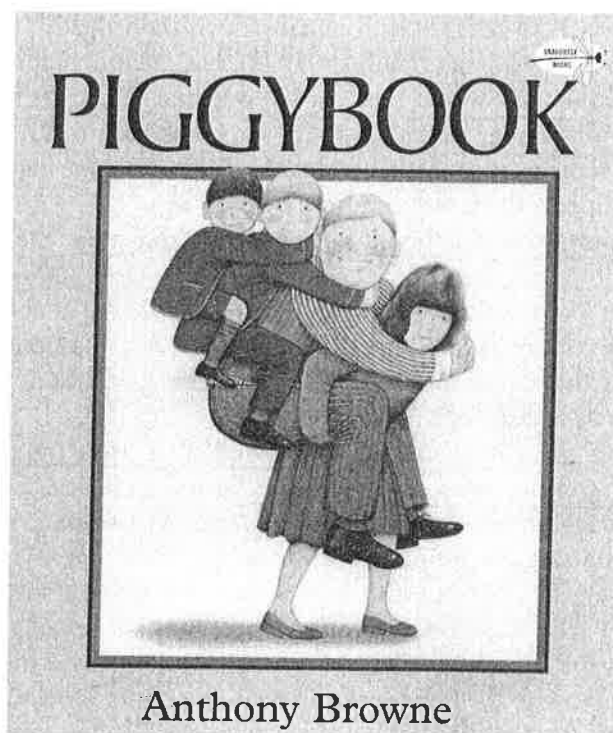
Looking at the second opening, the boys are positioned on the left and right sides of the image, with the father positioned in the center attracting more attention even though he is hidden behind the newspaper. The boys' faces are looking

up and off page suggesting they are talking to the mother in another part of the house. The viewer is brought in closer to the participants in this image. White space frames the entire image with no background provided.

In the third opening, the mother's face is drawn from the side and from behind. We are not given access to her face, suggesting she is less important, or an anonymous member of the family. The sepia-toned images suggest a traditional orientation, a connection to an earlier part of the 20th century when women had less social standing. The mother is clothed in monotone and depicted from a greater distance than the father and boys in the previous image.

The female character in the painting by Thomas Gainsborough entitled *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* on the verso (left side) of the eighth opening is missing. The male character, Mr. Andrews, is presented with a pig head, and is staring wide-eyed at the viewer suggesting he is surprised by his wife's disappearance. The wallpaper and fireplace surround contain images of pigs and pig faces suggesting a metamorphosis is taking place. On the recto (right side) a pig hoof in a suit coat holding a note that reads, "You are pigs" is depicted. The pig faces that adorn the wallpaper are staring at the viewer with a circle shape to the mouth suggesting surprise or alarm.

Figure 7.1. *Piggybook* Cover



In the eleventh opening, the male figures, having completed their metamorphosis into pigs, are positioned on the floor on all fours drawn from behind with their rears pointing at the viewer. The mother enters the room and is framed by the doorway in which she stands. The reader sees her shadow from behind as she enters the room. The viewer sees what she sees. The shadow she casts across the door is Madonna-like, suggesting her return to save her family. The pig faces on the wall and in the wallpaper have down-turned mouths, suggesting concern and disappointment.

Each of the interpretations drawn from a structural analysis moves from the literal naming of the perceptual perspective to a consideration of the meaning potentials considered by the reader-viewer. The visual images serve as representations containing socially recognized conventions and schema for the viewer to draw upon when interpreting the meaning of the images and design of the book (Albers, 2007). There is no single, direct connection between the visual images and their meaning potential. The reader-viewer generates meanings based on her or his previous experiences, culture, and knowledge of social and image conventions. ★

define this purpose
How might this be used to model how to interpret/analyze non-picture books?

PIGGYBOOK FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

It should first be noted that *Piggybook* is a commercial product intended for use by children, parents, and teachers in school settings and the home for pleasure reading. Browne brings to his picturebook his experiences, perspectives, and intentions in his production of the book. The publisher, for example Knopf, selects particular manuscripts to produce, and distributes their products through various commercial channels. In addition to the book itself, the context of the production of the images and text, its distribution, and how and where it is read or received are important considerations. For example, knowing the book was published in 1986 provides a social context for its reception. Reading the book in school because it has been assigned would be different from reading it at the library because some students came across it on their own. (3)

Approaching *Piggybook* from an ideological analytical perspective, the image on the front cover suggests that a feminist perspective might be useful as an analytical frame. Questions such as, "Why is the mother carrying a grown man and two boys?"; "Is the image some playful reference to the title?"; and "What relationships in the family are working here?" can all be useful for interrogating the status and perceptions of the family members.

In the second opening, the mother is not shown in the image. Is one to assume that she is too busy cooking to eat? The traditional roles of domestic housewife and working father need to be contested and brought forth for discussion.

Figure 7.2. Piggybook

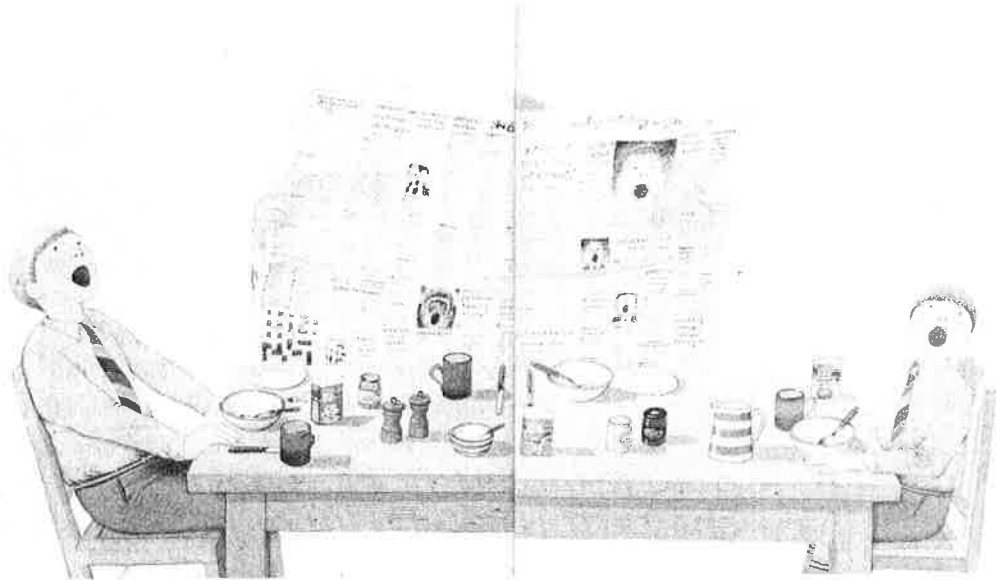
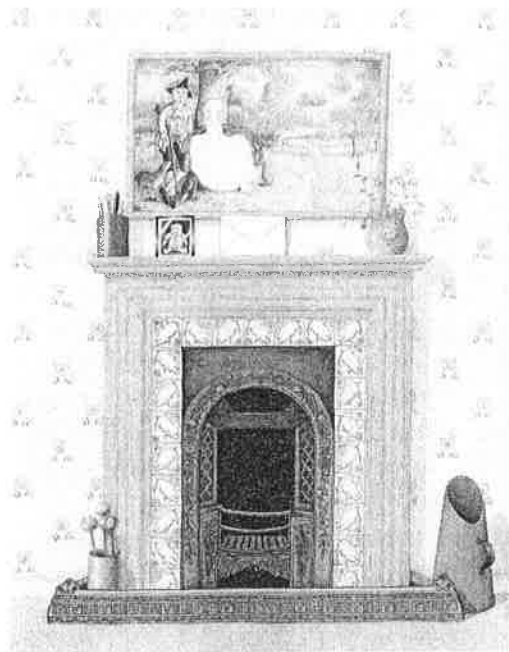


Figure 7.3. Piggybook



The family is portrayed as a traditional “nuclear” family, yet this type of family dynamic makes up less and less of the total population of most countries. Why is this family dynamic being portrayed as “normal”?

The images in the newspaper are reminiscent of the iconic, expressionist painting by Edvard Munch known as *The Scream*. The characters’ mouths also seem related to young birds’ mouths opening wide to be fed by their mothers. From a traditional family dynamic, the male characters sit at the table waiting to be served by the female character. Why is this relationship being contested?

In the eighth opening, the male character in the painting by Thomas Gainsborough has a look of surprise on his piglike face. The hooflike hand portrayed on the recto suggests the men have turned to pigs. This is a visual metaphor or direct reference to them being “male chauvinist pigs.” The fact that the mother has left home, abandoning her family and leaving them to fend for themselves, with the male characters soon slide into domestic disarray, speaks to the roles that they were required to fill by societal norms. The neatness of the house at this point due to the mother’s work habits and domestic routines will soon be a thing of the past as the men try to take care of themselves. Why are men portrayed as “domestically challenged” when in reality many are fully capable of taking care of a house, cooking, and cleaning for themselves and their families? This stereotypical portrayal of gender roles and norms should be interrogated and connected to the lives of the reader.

In one of the most revealing scenes in the book, the eleventh opening shows the mother returning to find her husband and children rooting around on the floor looking for scraps to eat. She is portrayed as a blue, Madonna-like shadow, framed by the doorway in which she stands. The father and two boys are positioned below her, squatting on all fours looking for food. The house is completely in shambles, representing the male characters’ transformation from human to animal, in both of their physical features as well as their actions and speech. Is there a connection between the outline of the mother and numerous Renaissance images of the Virgin Mary? What connections can be generated from this similarity? Has she returned to save her family? Or has she been lurking outside the home to simply watch her husband and sons learn to appreciate what she does for them?

The roles traditionally associated with men and women are brought to light in this book. However, they are neither contested nor completely explained. The men find it useful to help out with various domestic chores, but only because they are forced into doing so by the mother’s abandonment. The images of the mother change power positions with the father, at times being placed below, and then above him in various openings. At the end of the story, the wife goes out and fixes the car, a traditionally male role. From an ideological perspective, gender expectations, norms, and family roles needs to be an important aspect of any discussions of this picturebook.

What does this discussion look like at different grade levels?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis provided here is designed to help teachers and students understand how my perceptual, structural, and ideological analytical perspectives can be applied to a particular multimodal ensemble. My intention is to show the types of interpretations that are possible when teachers and students adopt a variety of perspectives. Helping students consider an array of perspectives enhances their comprehension abilities and allows them to analyze texts, images, and design elements in more sophisticated and nuanced ways.