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Dual Audience Literature: The Child's Gaze in *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean

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In an epigraph, which opens the essay *The Poet*, Emerson resorts to a child's gaze to look at the world, prefiguring the essential qualities of the poet, who, with the wild freshness of a child, sees deeply into the true nature of things. The child's point of view has progressively become central in children's literature, as authors first tried to understand it, and, since the second half of the 19th century, to express it. Early children's literature, prior to the 19th century, was intended for children and the people who educated them as well. The pictures included in the books were meant to capture the child's attention, and were chosen for their allegorical or pedagogical content. During the 17th century, Locke's theories of childhood innocence[1] contributed to the development of the concept of childhood, and the first books specifically dedicated to children appeared in the mid-18th century. The period between 1850 and the early 20th century is known as the golden age of children's books, a time when the discovery of lithography and color printing, together with the mechanization of the printing process allowed the massive development of a whole category of literature addressing a young audience.

Parallel to children's literature, a dual audience literature continued to exist. Perhaps inherited from the tradition of tales and fables, which were originally written for adults but were read to children as well, dual audience literature addresses both children and adults. In the 20th century, children's literature developed considerably and became more diversified—including different genres and formats, like picture books, activity books, nursery rhymes or novels. In the 1930s, Puffin Picture Books in the United Kingdom and Les Albums du Père Castor in France produced affordable educational picture books for children, with high-quality artwork. The increasing number of graphic designers who started to create picture books in the 1950s brought a unified approach to concept, image and typography. The page was conceived as a multimodal visual space where images conveyed meaning as much as words. As a consequence, the pedagogical tradition inherited from early children's literature started to give way to a new approach to the picture book. Another major shift in children's literature occurred in the 1960s, when Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* shattered the conception of the child as an innocent creature who had to be protected. Thus, the function of children's literature changed as it started to focus on children's imagination, emotions and reactions to the world surrounding them. At the end of the 20th century, the

[1] See in particular John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

necessity to explain the reality and the complexity of the world to children led authors to develop serious adult issues in children's books like discrimination, war or man's inhumanity to man.

As children's literature came to encompass a wider range of themes and formats, dual audience literature seemed to recede to an indeterminate area. Artistic and literary movements—such as postmodernism—and the development of other arts, like cinema or comics, progressively entered children's fiction, introducing new narrative voices and new processes of focalization. This raised the question of the boundary between children's and adult's literature.

In order to discuss the specific issue of the child's voice and the child's perspective in dual audience literature, we will first define this concept according to Barbara Wall, Maria Nikolajeva and Carol Scott. We will then study what the child's voice and more specially the child's gaze reveal, and how they are expressed in the textual and visual narration in *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean.

Dual audience literature

Nikolajeva questions the notion of children's literature, arguing that "an ever growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature [...]" ("Exit" 221). In particular, she challenges the idea of simplicity that was traditionally associated with children's books, showing that contemporary works written for children can also display features such as metafiction, polyphony, intersubjectivity, genre eclecticism, and the disintegration of traditional narrative structures. In another essay, she mentions three aspects of a book that can help determine its category: form, institutional transmission and reception, and content ("Children, Adult, Human?" 64). The appearance of a book, its format, its cover, as well as the pictures it includes, can make it easy to identify as a book for children. Notwithstanding picture books, whose particular formats and abundance of pictures mark them as a special medium in children's literature, children's novels have a cover primarily directed at young readers—often including a child character preferably drawn or digitally designed. They are usually shorter, written in larger print, and include a variable number of pictures. The development of children's literature has triggered the creation of dedicated publishing houses. Though the placement of a book in a library may be partly determined by its publisher, content remains the most determining feature.

As opposed to the form and the institutionalized transmission of a book, which may be considered as superficial features, its content reveals characteristics deeply rooted in the narrative and choices closely linked to the reader. The reader here refers to the notion developed by Wayne Booth as the counterpart of the implied author. This "postulated reader" is the author's image of the reader that appears in the text through specific indexical signs. Wolfgang Iser coined the term of "implied reader" to designate a hypothetical reader assumed by the author to possess the knowledge necessary to understand the text. The portions of text left unexplained create places of indeterminacy that imply a reader, and require him or her to fill in the blanks. Iser developed his notion of implied reader with regard to adult literature, but the concept can apply to children's literature as well. Because they have to be short and concise, children's books often require their readers to fill in the blanks.

Nikolajeva remarks that traditional children's fiction addresses either the child or the child and the adult. But she points out, like Wall, that it "either pretends to be addressing the child audience and ignoring the adult co-reader, or addresses the adult at the child's expense" ("Children, Adult, Human?" 64). She then adopts Wall's definition of dual audience, which implies that the child and the adult are addressed on different levels but on equal terms. The different levels mean that the child and the adult are likely to have a different reading and understanding of the text. Indeed, children tend to understand language much more literally than adults. According to Wall and Nikolajeva, the child and the adult are addressed on equal terms when no priority to a "correct interpretation" is given to either of them.

Scott, reflecting on the changes in norms and expectations in children's literature, remarks the evolution of the themes and the literary features deemed appropriate for a young audience. According to her, "[the] codes that determine the field are constantly in flux as peripheral codes move over to the boundary of the semiosphere toward its center, displacing earlier codes and forcing a new definition of the genre as it responds to the cultural context at large" ("Dual Audience in Picturebooks" 100). For the purpose of this paper, we will retain Wall's definition of dual audience literature, Nikolajeva's criteria for identifying children's novels and Scott's remark about the evolution in children's literature. To sum it up, dual audience books:

- address the child and the adult on different levels but on equal terms,
- can be identified as books for children by their form, their institutional transmission and reception, and their content,
- display a range of themes and literary features in constant evolution, following the cultural changes in society.

Dual audience literature often features child protagonists though this is not always the case as we can see in fairy tales, for example. The presence of a child protagonist offers the possibility of using his or her voice or perspective, providing a refreshing alternative to the traditional third person omniscient narrator. However, as Nikolajeva accurately points out, children's literature is mostly written by adults, and "the ideas about growing, procreation and death that we meet in children's fiction reflect adults' views, which may or may not correspond to the real status of children and childhood in any given society" ("Children, Adult, Human?" 74). In our society, children are clearly identified as under-aged persons, because of their size, their dependency on adults, their impossibility to be autonomous in a society whose rules, codes and communication frames they are just learning, and because of their social status. Dual audience literature, as we have defined it, may offer the possibility to challenge the different status of children and adults by giving the under-aged the opportunity to interpret the world of the story in their own way. In books written by adults, how can the voice or the gaze of the child stand out?

The graphic novel selected for this study, *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch,* written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean, particularly challenges the idea of categorization, and displays a striking use of the resources of text and image to develop narrative voice and focalization.

The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch: a dual audience novel?

The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch is told by a first person adult narrator trying to remember a critical moment of his childhood when events occurred, that he did not completely understand. At first sight, this graphic novel, with its black gutter, its small print, and its predominantly dark colors, does not look like a book for children. It was first published in 1995 by DC Comics, which is famous for its anthology series of superheroes in a variety of genres such as science fiction or horror fantasy. Its publications include naturalistic and darker themes better suited to teenagers or adults than to children. The blurb of the 2006 edition is written by the *Comics Journal,* a publication featuring news and critical essays on comics and graphic novels: "Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's marvelous evocation of death and loss… A complex art not often seen in mainstream comics. Mr. Punch is just cause for celebration." This complex art is usually found more in graphic novels than in mainstream comics. Indeed, according to the online Encyclopedia Britannica "[…] graphic novel is usually taken to mean a long comic narrative for a mature audience, published in hardback or paperback and sold in bookstores, with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork" (Murray).

However, the label next to the blurb of the same 2006 edition indicates *Bloomsbury Children's Books*, which means that the book is now considered to address a younger audience as well. This shift from adult literature to dual audience literature can be regarded as a consequence of the evolution of the themes and literary features in books for children evoked by Scott. Indeed, the experience of difficult issues such as domestic violence, a parent's depression or the illness and death of a dearly loved person, are now recurrent in books addressing children.

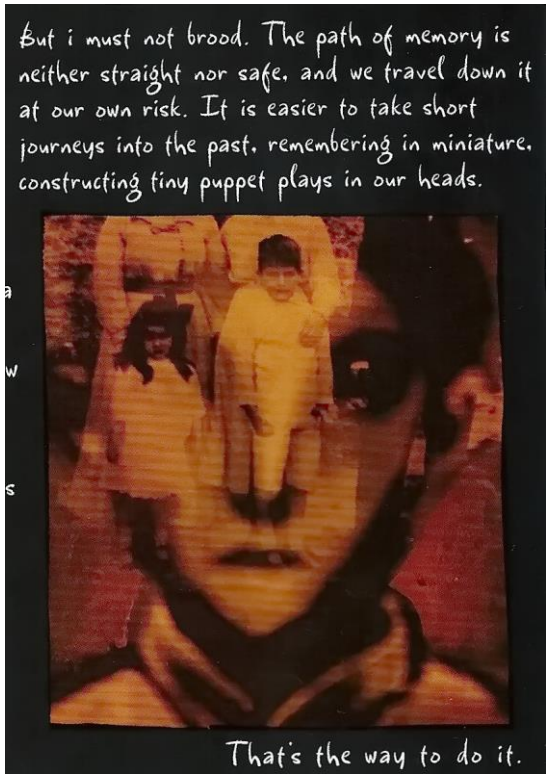
Another point in favor of a young audience lies with the *Punch and Judy* show, which provides the backbone of the story. The narrator saw it several times as a child, and he uses it to flash back to his childhood, just before his sister was born, when he had to stay with his paternal grandfather, who became mentally ill soon after. The *Punch and Judy* show was considered to address an adult audience when it was first recorded in England by the diarist Samuel Pepys[2] in 1662, but, by the end of the Victorian era, it had become very popular with children, and it now attracts a family audience. The character of Mr. Punch, inherited from the *commedia dell'arte*, is extremely violent, and hits or disposes of everyone who opposes or annoys him, including his wailing baby. However, the fixed expression of the wood-carved puppets, that makes them appear like funny caricatures, and their grotesque and excessive behaviors, introduce the distance necessary to young spectators. Perhaps similarly to the *Punch and Judy* show, *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* seems to have changed audiences over the years, to enter dual audience literature. How is the dual audience addressed in this graphic novel, where the text by Gaiman creates an adult narrator, while McKean's images offer a child's perspective? How does the child's perspective work with this adult narration?

The minor voice and the major gaze in *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch*

The main character of *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* has the appearance of a child and the voice of an adult. The adult narrator's voice can be heard in the numerous captions—black boxes with white printed text—present throughout the book, and provides the frame which organizes all the memories, guiding the child through the struggles of childhood: "The path of memory is neither straight nor safe, and we travel down it at our own risk. It's easier to take short journeys into the past, remembering in miniature, constructing tiny puppet plays in our heads" (Gaiman and McKean). Here the adult narrator explains the structure of the narration, based on analepses to his childhood, all of them

[2] For more information, see "That's the Way to Do it! A History of Punch and Judy."

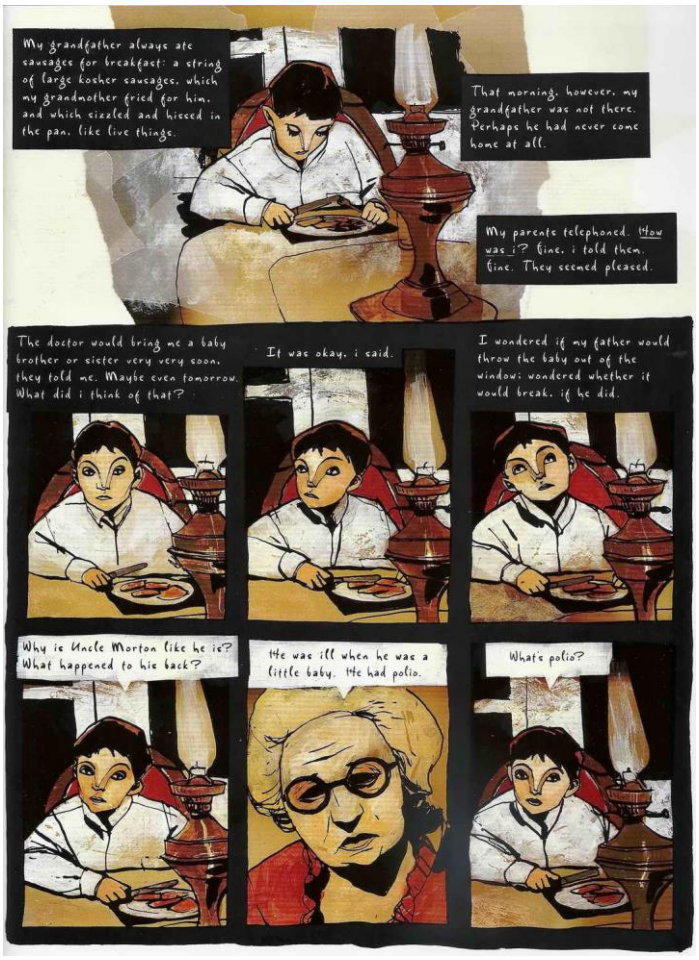
linked to the *Punch and Judy* show he so often saw as a child. In this excerpt, his voice presents an adult's perspective to adult readers. However, this voice is associated with the gaze of the child, as can be seen in the picture under the caption showing the child's face with an old sepia photograph of two children, perhaps the boy and his younger sister, superimposed on it. Under the picture, another caption reading "That's the way to do it" echoes the favorite expression of Mr. Punch, linking the adult narrative voice to the child. Thus, the picture appears as a bridge between the adult's voice and a young audience, although the picture itself does not particularly address children. Indeed, the blurred and partly hidden child's face, heavily marked by the black surfaces of the neck, the eye and the hair, is better adapted to teenage readers.



Picture n°1 "That's the way to do it"
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
Text copyright © Neil Gaiman 2006
Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

Although the child can be seen on most pages of the novel, he speaks very few words. Mostly silent, he rarely starts a conversation with adults. He answers them, and sometimes questions them, as he does with his grandmother, when he asks why his uncle Morton is a cripple. The speech bubbles, white with black print, show that he only speaks to ask questions: "Why is Uncle Morton like he is? What happened to his back?"; and later, "What is polio?" Contrasting with this direct and innocent voice, the captions report, in indirect

speech, a conversation that the child had with his parents on the telephone, and which triggers a strange comparison in him: “I wondered if my father would throw the baby out of the window; wondered whether it would break, if he did.” The boy’s parents are expecting a baby very soon, and he likens the situation to that of Mr. Punch, who, in the show, throws his baby out of the window. Here, the child is focalized internally by the adult narrator, whose voice echoes the boy’s inner thought.



Picture n°2 “What is polio?”
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
Text copyright © Neil Gaiman 2006
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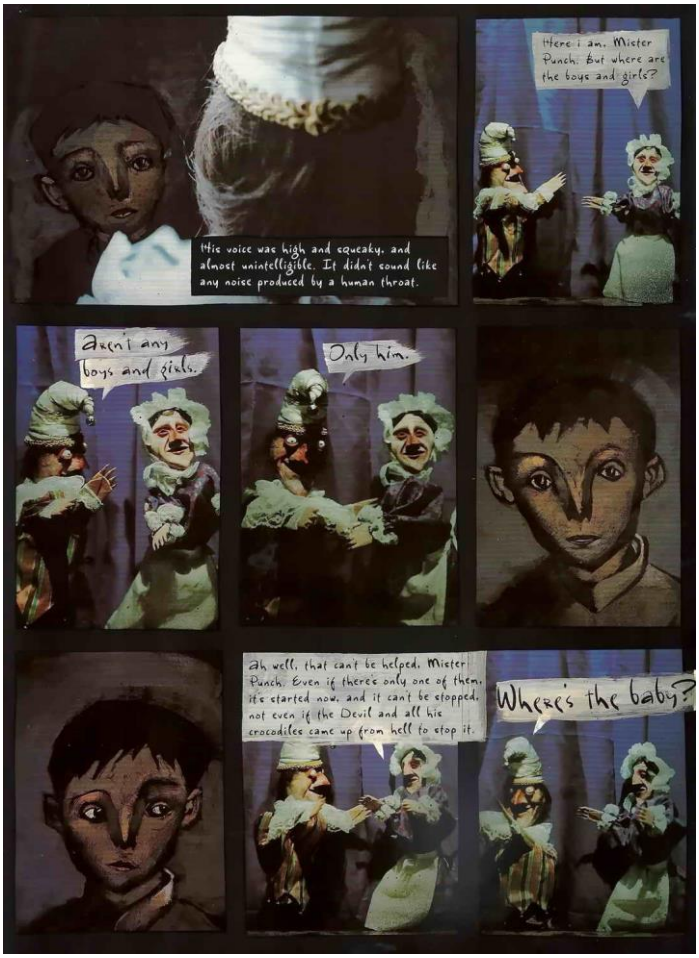
As this example shows, the voice of the child remains scarce in the novel, expressed in a few speech bubbles or through the adult narrator’s voice, as the boy’s inner thought. Does this mean that the child retains a minor position in the novel?

The gaze of the child: a major focalization device

In contrast to the child's elusive voice, his gaze is omnipresent in the novel. As a graphic novel, *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* can develop the narrative categories of voice and mode—in our particular case, focalization—in either text or image. In this book, the narrator's voice is heard in the text, and the focalization is mainly shown by the pictures. As we have seen in the preceding examples, the boy is partly focalized by the adult narrator. However, his feelings and thoughts are mainly expressed by the illustrations. The boy is focalized internally by his own gaze through a selection of scenes and an organization of panels often used in cinema: point-of-view-editing. This process consists of three shots or pictures, the first one showing who is seeing, the second what he is seeing, and the third how he reacts. Point-of-view-editing is used throughout the book, with varying numbers of pictures for each step, in a back and forth process centered on the child's gaze. When the boy first discovers the *Punch and Judy* booth on the beach, his face appears for the first time in the pictures.



Picture n°3 "Where is the baby?"
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
Text copyright © Neil Gaiman 2006

Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

On this page, McKean uses point-of-view-editing, alternating pictures of the child's face with pictures of the show. The first panel shows both who is looking (the boy) and what he is looking at (Mr. Punch) in rear view, a process that invites the reader inside the scene, and makes things easier to understand for a young audience, too. The three pictures of the boy's face in close-up shots, positioned at the top, in the middle and at the bottom of the frame counterbalance the more numerous pictures of the show, establishing the child as the spectator and the focalizer of the story. From then on, the child's gaze becomes major, and all the events and characters of the novel are seen through his eyes, except for the last scenes of the *Punch and Judy* show that he sees as an adult. The back and forth process between the boy's face and the show allows young readers to understand the *mise en abyme*. The ambiguity of the audience appears in the Punch and Judy puppets themselves. With their bright scene costumes they seem to address a young audience but Mr. Punch's bulging eyes, his red nose in the shape of a beak, and his ever smiling mouth give him a disturbing face. The contrast between the *Punch and Judy* puppets, whose fixed expressions are captured by photographs, and the child, always represented in painting, enhances the changes in his expression. Positioned in the middle of the panel, the child's eyes are central in the sequence. The shift in direction of his gaze—looking up and left in the first panel, straight ahead in the second, and sideways in the third—highlights the child's feelings, from expectation, to surprise, then embarrassment. The boy is thus focalized internally by his own gaze, and his perspective is asserted as major. In this sequence, the adult narrative voice is virtually absent. Most of the time, the boy remains silent, a puppet in the hands of the adult characters, as in this sequence when his grandfather meets him at the mermaid's tiny lake, in the arcade that he is vainly trying to turn into a commercial success. His gaze reveals his perspective and his feelings, bridging the gaps left by the adult narrative voice.

Picture n°4 “Shall I throw you in the water?”
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
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Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

The first panel displays the child’s perspective as he looks up to his grandfather from a frog’s eye angle. The second picture reveals the puppet-ness of the boy, lifted by the old man. The connection between the first two panels is easily made through the green background, and the figure of the grandfather picking up his grandson. The narrative voice links the grandfather’s threatening joke (“Shall I throw you in, eh? Shall I throw you in the water?”) to the next panel where the caption mentions “I shook my head.” Then the adult narrative voice elliptically goes on from “Adults are threatening creatures” to “Shall I throw you in the water?”, letting the reader imagine the link between the two sentences. At this point, the pictures take over the narration, revealing the child’s distress and terror as he remembers the situation. The third panel, showing strings attached to the boy’s head, announces the picture below, where the child has become a wire puppet, referring to the string puppets of the first *Punch and Judy* shows. His face, made of a photograph cut along the nose, shows how unsettled he is by his grandfather’s odd joke. The last panel—twice as big as the others and

sticking out of the frame—discloses the child's uppermost fear: that of being dropped. Eight-year-old children are still learning the frames—in the sense of Erving Goffman's "schemata of interpretation" (21)—which allow people to organize experience and to guide action in society. An adult's attitude that does not fit the expected frame, such as the grandfather's, typically puzzles or frightens a child. On these three panels, the child's gaze, looking straight at the reader or up toward the adult hand which has just opened to drop him, directs the reader's gaze toward the next panel, and finally the next page, leading the narration, and filling in the blanks left by the narrator's voice. This process limits the gaps in the narration, making it easier to follow for a young audience. However, the complex collages of the child's photographed face on a body made of wire and operated by strings may puzzle children, who may not be able to grasp the underlying symbolism linking text and image.

In a large part of the book, the adult narrator's voice works together with the child's gaze. When the boy looks for his grandfather in the deserted arcade, and finally discovers him arguing with two other men and a woman, the boy's gaze reveals the whole scene.

Picture n°5 "Standing in the light [...] and a woman I didn't"
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch

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Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

On this page, the very detailed point-of-view-editing process—with three pictures zooming out from the boy's back, and two zooming in on his face looking from under the curtain—produces a slow motion effect that heightens the reader's curiosity. It also explains the child's perspective in a way accessible to a young audience. At the same time, the boy's eyes, positioned in the two central panels, dominate the page and the incoming scene. The last panel, with the back of the boy's head in a close-up shot, reveals what he is seeing. The shadows he is looking at are as blurred as the characters described in the enigmatic caption: "Standing in the light were three men I recognized, and a woman that I didn't." Since the narrator does not name the men, their identity remains unknown to the reader, just as their faces in the picture remain obscured. Here the child's gaze blends with the narrative voice.

Picture n°6 "Once across the face"
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
Text copyright © Neil Gaiman 2006
Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

Shortly after, in the same sequence, the boy's face is seen looking from under the curtain while the shadows of the characters are super-imposed on it. This allows the reader to see the woman laughing then being beaten, together with the child's disturbed, then indignant and finally scared expression. The series of three panels progressively zooming on the boy's face, and culminating with two close-up shots on the following page, emphasizes his distress and amazement as he recognizes the woman. On these five panels over two pages, the child's gaze reveals his feelings, thus adding new narrative material to the adult's voice, which mostly describes the fight. It also shows that the boy is starting to understand the adult world and stepping toward majority. In this graphic novel, the child's gaze pictures his inner voice. A tension emerges between the violence of the adult world, heard through the narrator's voice, and the distress and innocence of the child, shown through his silent gaze.

Picture n°7 "As she ran past me [...] I recognized her"
The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch
Text copyright © Neil Gaiman 2006
Illustrations copyright © Dave McKean 2006. Printed with permission from the author.

The boy's final understanding of the situation is shown exclusively through the pictures. The narrator's voice enigmatically states "As she ran past me, blood dripping from the side of her face like red paint, panting and sobbing and clutching her swollen stomach, I recognized her," without mentioning the woman's name. At the same time, the baby of the *Punch and Judy* show appears on the edge of the wall behind which the boy stands. Four successive panels show the baby being pushed down the wall by a hand, which looks both like Mr. Punch's and the boy's. The progression of the act extends over five panels, producing an effect of slow motion that emphasizes the horror. It culminates in the last panel, detached from the frame, making its black gutter stand out, like a condolence card. Here again, the child directs the reader's gaze on the page, with his gaze in the first three panels, and then with his arm. Some time before, the boy had had a nightmare in which Mr. Punch's girlfriend's dress was cut and a hand came out of it. On this page, the child's gaze reveals another step toward majority as he builds a parallel between Mr. Punch's girlfriend and the woman who has just been beaten. Like Mr. Punch's baby, the woman's baby in her womb may have been killed. Emerging from the child's gaze, his inner voice joins that of the narrator in another step toward a better understanding of the adult world.

This long scene is the apex of this comical tragedy or tragic comedy, as it implicitly reveals the affair between the boy's grandfather and the mermaid of the arcade, after which the grandfather became insane. While the adult narrator's voice states the facts as the boy saw them, it merely hints at the relationship between the characters. In this scene, only an adult or a teenage reader will be able to fill in the blanks. In the story, the child's naïve gaze parallels the violence of the adult world and the *Punch and Judy* puppet show, through an intradiegetic process that was decided by the adult narrator at the beginning of the novel. As the narration unfurls, the puppet show becomes the child's reference for violence and develops as a metaphor of life as the boy knows it in the novel. But whereas in the story, the boy seems to be able to understand the metaphor, he remains a fictional character created by Gaiman and McKean, and must be distinguished from a real child such as a young reader—a young reader is not very likely to grasp the metaphor, and may retain a fragmented understanding of the story as a result.

Conclusion

The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch combines the textual voice of a first person adult narrator with the perspective of a child developed through images. Its dark colors, its black gutter, its small print, and its serious theme address an adult audience. But the frequent references to the *Punch and Judy* puppet show seem to address children. Embedded in the narrator's childhood memories, they contribute to filling in the blanks left

by his elliptical voice, and provide a child's perspective. However, understanding the parallel between the puppet show and the reality of the story requires a teenage or an adult audience. The voice of the child, hardly noticeable as it is limited to just a few bubbles, remains definitely minor. In contrast, the child's gaze is omnipresent in the novel, focalizing all the events and the characters evoked by the adult narrator's voice. The boy himself is focalized internally through the use of cinematographic processes like point-of-view-editing, zooming or even the super-impression of two scenes.

Silently, the child's gaze echoes his inner voice, revealing his feelings, and blending with the adult narrator's voice to build the metaphor between the *Punch and Judy* puppet show and the reality of the story until the adult narrator is finally able to leave his childhood behind.

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