

Upside-down, Backwards, and Inside Out: Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man*

Stephanie Thompson

Christopher Newport University
Virginia Zeta Chapter

Vol. 6(1), 2021

Title: Upside-down, Backwards, and Inside Out: Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man*

DOI: 10.21081/ax0283

ISSN: 2381-800X

Keywords: postmodernism, fairy tale, peritext, illustration, stylization, aesthetic

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Author contact information is available from tlindblom@alphachihonor.org or kvosevich@alphachihonor.org

Aletheia—The Alpha Chi Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship

- This publication is an online, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary undergraduate journal, whose mission is to promote high quality research and scholarship among undergraduates by showcasing exemplary work.
- Submissions can be in any basic or applied field of study, including the physical and life sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, education, engineering, and the arts.
- Publication in *Aletheia* will recognize students who excel academically and foster mentor/mentee relationships between faculty and students.
- In keeping with the strong tradition of student involvement in all levels of Alpha Chi, the journal will also provide a forum for students to become actively involved in the writing, peer review, and publication process.
- More information can be found at www.alphachihonor.org/aletheia. Questions to the editors may be directed to tlindblom@alphachihonor.org or kvosevich@alphachihonor.org.

Alpha Chi National College Honor Society invites to membership juniors, seniors, and graduate students from all disciplines in the top ten percent of their classes. Active on nearly 300 campuses nationwide, chapters induct approximately 10,000 students annually. Since the Society's founding in 1922, Alpha Chi members have dedicated themselves to "making scholarship effective for good." Alpha Chi is a member in good standing of the Association of College Honor Societies, the only national accrediting body for collegiate honor societies. A college seeking a chapter must grant baccalaureate degrees, be regionally accredited, and be a not for profit institution.

Article Title: Upside-down, Backwards, and Inside Out: Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man*

DOI: 10.21081/ax0283

ISSN: 2381-800X

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Upside-down, Backwards, and Inside Out: Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man*

Stephanie Thompson

Christopher Newport University
Virginia Zeta Chapter

Abstract

This paper analyzes the unconventional style and design choices of *The Stinky Cheese Man*, illustrated by Lane Smith, as a representation of postmodernism. This subgenre, in which Smith has presented so successfully, debunks preconceived notions of children's literature within its distorted narratives. His humorous attacks on clichéd fairy tales and intentional disruptions to literary order have created an intertextual work fusing contemporary ideas with visual qualities of classic tales. I will explore the peritextual and pictorial creations in *The Stinky Cheese Man* by considering not only its visual cohesion but also its emotional meaning. The ideas of Perry Nodelman in his chapter "Format, Design, Predominating Visual Features: The Meaningful Implications of Overall Qualities of Books and Pictures" help us understand the aesthetic value of illustrations and textual style—both equally important to visual meaning (53). In this sense, the significance of Smith's aesthetic qualities, in regard to color, space, size, and style, can be understood through Molly Bang's principles in *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. For example, Bang's theory that states, "smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm" helps us to identify the story's uneven lines as an indication of mayhem (52). In this paper, I will analyze the aesthetic properties and scholarly viewpoints regarding the peritextual features, textual style, and illustrations in *The Stinky Cheese Man* to acknowledge Smith's balanced juxtaposition of the traditional and the postmodern, in tandem with the function and meaning of visual nuance as a means of debunking readers' preconceived notions of children's literature.

Keywords: postmodernism, fairy tale, peritext, illustration, stylization, aesthetic

Introduction

Lane Smith's visual elements in *The Stinky Cheese Man* offer values that surpass the storyline and venture into the realm of interpretation. Smith's unconventional design choices and stylized chaos align with contemporary fairy tale revisions and serve as a representation of postmodernism. *The Stinky Cheese Man* is particularly unique to the study of this subgenre because it was one of the first children's literary works to successfully depict postmodern tenets through the guise of illustration. With intent to challenge the continuity of traditional children's literature through meaningful visual representation, Smith's postmodern picture book pushes the boundaries of reader expectations and demonstrates a balanced juxtaposition of past and present. Unlike most existing revisions, which appear in text, Smith's non-conformity to conventional fantasy aesthetic is shaped by a visual interplay between orderly fairy tale tradition and disorderly postmodern satire. Smith's humorous attacks on clichéd fairy tales and intentional disruptions to literary order have created an intertextual work fusing contemporary ideas with the visual qualities of classic tales. All of its seemingly out of place elements work in tandem to encapsulate the whimsical spirit of the story. Thus, emotional content is drawn from Smith's stylized choices regarding color, space, size, and pictorial placement. Consideration of this emotional and visual cohesion in *The Stinky Cheese Man* encourages the close analysis of the story's peritextual features, textual format, and stylized illustration. This essay analyzes the function of visual content in *The Stinky Cheese Man* in relation to postmodernism, Molly Bang's principles in *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, and the views of Perry Nodelman in his chapter "Format, Design, Predominating Visual Features: The Meaningful Implications of Overall Qualities of Books and Pictures."

The Role of Postmodern in Tandem with Classic Fairy Tales: Intertextuality

In John Stephens and Robyn McCallum's book, *Telling Stories, Framing Culture*, retold stories are said to be disproportionately evident in children's literature. This imbalance is due in part to the fairy tale domain, which is often considered to be most appropriate for child audiences. According to Stephens and McCallum, "retold stories have important cultural functions. Under

the guise of offering children access to strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences, they serve to initiate children into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences" (3). Given the significance of cultural function, bringing these notions into conversation with Smith's collection of postmodern fairy tale revisions may further uncover the contextual meaning of his pictorial stylization. Smith's unexpected depictions of well-known stories indicate a balanced reliance on both the traditional and the postmodern that sets his work apart from others of its time. The meaningful juxtapositions and visual nuances that structure *The Stinky Cheese Man* contribute to the postmodern genre in a new way and fundamentally redefine children's literature as we know it.

Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man* is characterized by the disruption of order and preconceived notions as it purposely intertwines chaos to elicit pleasure. This concept is explained by Michèle Anstey in "It's Not All Black and White." She asserts that "author and illustrator consciously employ a range of devices that are designed to interrupt reader expectations and produce multiple meanings and readings of the book" (447). It is apparent that the disjointed figures, obscure color choices, and diverse pictorial sizing, often misunderstood in postmodern works, can veritably offer a wide range of meanings. *The Stinky Cheese Man* employs the postmodern style among its incorporation of non-linearity, satire, self-referential content, and intertextual meaning.

Intertextuality plays a key role in the presence of postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man*. The blurred boundaries between classic fairy tales and distorted renditions are apparent within the stylistic mockery of hackneyed tradition. Interestingly, Smith's recurring trend of visual satire, in spite of classic fairy tales, is made possible amidst the deliberate integration of conventional fantasy aesthetics. According to Nodelman, "a choice of medium conveys an attitude toward the subject of a picture because the artist has exploited our conventional expectations for pictures in that medium" (75). For instance, conventional fairy tale picture books convey a "tradition of richly detailed environments...by filling them with objects and details and textures and wonderfully decorated surfaces. The more these pictures look like traditional oil paintings, the more solidly real seem the fantasy places and objects" (Nodelman 76). Thus, many of Smith's stylistic choices may be interpreted as

an extension of this stylization. The manner in which he utilized paint to texturize his postmodern illustration for “Little Red Running Shorts” closely resembles the visual essence of oil painting that is commonly affiliated with the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*. Illustrations of this classic tale were historically brought to life through oil paintings by artists such as Gustave Doré, whose work coincided with the Perrault fairy tales, Otto Kubel, whose paintings depicted the Grimms’ tales, and Jessie Willcox Smith, whose work can be found today in books such as *A Child’s Book of Stories*. However, the satirical addition of whimsical cartoon-like figures scattered across each page of *The Stinky Cheese Man* contrasts with the sophisticated colorations and realistic detailing that Smith conveys through this traditional art medium. The subtle juxtaposition of classic stylization, recognizable in this re-envisioned tale, showcases Smith’s success in visual postmodern distortion.

Dominic Catalano solidifies this perception in his narrative, “The Roles of the Visual in Picturebooks: Beyond the Conventions of Current Discourse.” He claims that Smith’s work is “indicative of the cultural, social, and historic frameworks that have shaped it... While the work is considered humor, the [traditional elements in the] pictures produce meaning that stands in opposition to the written text’s humorous intent” (Catalano 338). The pictorial meaning Catalano addresses in relation to intertextuality is best presented in the “Giant Story,” which celebrates postmodernism among its fusion of well-known tales. Smith’s illustrative tactic incorporates the use of pictorial and textual collaging to formulate humorous, topsy-turvy renditions of many exhausted tales. Hammond and Nordstrom, in their chapter “The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales: 1993 Caldecott Honor” addressed this specific visual stylization in relation to postmodernism. They observed that “nonlinearity appears within the fairy tales...the ‘Giant Story’ is told in nine lines of various fonts pasted together. It begins with ‘THE END’ and finishes with ‘Once upon a time’” (Hammond and Nordstrom 194). We can understand this particular page spread as a sort of chaotic cohesion among the nonlinear elements patched together to create unity. In the “Giant Story,” the collaged illustrations and quotes, directly pulled from classic tales, are individually enclosed in tattered frames. Thus, it is reasonable to consider that Smith used framing to objectify the outdated stories in attempts to cease further redundancy. Furthermore, in

Geoff Moss’ chapter “Metafiction, Illustration, and the Poetics of Children’s Literature,” he suggests that “The result of this shift...to postmodernism is an increased self-consciousness in art and writing, an exploration of the limits and possibilities in art and of the past which informs it” (55). In this regard, Smith’s use of collaging to stitch seemingly unrelated matters together could be a means of recycling recognizable fairy tale conventions among visual disorder to further symbolize the debunking of tradition and highlight his creation of a cohesive and original work.

Peritextual Features: Covers, Endpapers, and Disrupted Order

The most effective exploration of visual meaning in *The Stinky Cheese Man* considers all elements that add to the story’s cohesive nature. Thus, we may be more apt to discern value in the stylization of the front and back covers, endpapers, dedication page, and table of contents. Each element of the book works in tandem with the overarching textual and illustrative spirit to create a unified effect. In “Picturebook Endpapers: Resources for Literary and Aesthetic Interpretation,” Sipe and McGuire refer to these cohesive features as the “peritext” of the book, a term used to depict, “all the physical features within a book aside from the author’s words...especially planned and designed so that there is an aesthetic coherence to the entire book” (291). Thus, analytic consideration of *The Stinky Cheese Man* mustn’t overlook the illustrative value of its peritextual features.

The front cover of *The Stinky Cheese Man* arguably holds some of the most visually significant meaning. Its obligation to foreshadowing and intrigue is essential in framing expectations that, as Nodelman remarks, “sum up the essential nature of the story” (49). In order to appropriately prepare for the chaos inside the book, Smith appears to play with visual and symbolic contrast. The cover of *The Stinky Cheese Man* features illustrations that mimic those seen in the body of the story. Smith’s contradicting stylization of these pictures helps similarly voice a contrast in meaning. The proportionately placed and equally sized illustrations on the cover project a strong sense of orderliness and structure that is absent elsewhere. For instance, according to Margaret Mackey in “The Postmodern Picture Book and The Material Conditions of Reading,” the cover’s tidy layout contradicts the visual body of the story, which, “plays

with the potential for anarchy that is made possible by disrupting the schema of orderliness” (105). One way of deciphering this juxtaposition is among the consideration of pictorial framing. The wonky illustrations on the cover are neatly displayed in several strip-formatted frames. Each curated image consumes its entire frame as if yearning to burst out of the confining walls that enclose it. In reference to the ideas of Nodelman, this “strip format” framing is used to discern a series of individual pictures as separate entities (50). The consideration of these separate entities breaking free from their frame on the cover may help explain the result of visual mayhem in the body of *The Stinky Cheese Man*. Likewise, this contradiction between constricted boundaries and chaotic freedom may run parallel with that of traditional fairy tales and postmodern renditions. Maybe it is within the story that these fairy tale characters finally escape into the modernism of our world and are set free from the confinement of classic, unchanged tales.

The Stinky Cheese Man’s humorous and topsy-turvy visual distortions juxtapose the standard conception of a story’s peritext to express meaning. For example, in *The Stinky Cheese Man*, the narrator, Jack, struggles to construct a linear story and shoves the upside-down dedication page out of the pictorial frame. This unexpected visual manipulation of the page being inverted and pushed out of view ultimately insinuates that its content is irrelevant and invites the reader to reconsider the necessity of genre conventions. Furthermore, we might consider peritextual connections to self-referentiality, a postmodern term Bette Goldstone references in relation to elements of a story that, “refer to the physical presence of the book or the process of making a book” (qtd. in Catalano 319). Self-referentiality is a driving force in Smith’s recurring theme of satire as his distorted use of peritext evokes humor in non-linear and postmodern ways. Hammond and Nordstrom specifically discuss self-referential function in tandem with non-linearity among their consideration of the story’s endpapers. They propose that “the copyright page occupying space as an endpaper . . . is an example of self-referential text. Readers can never become lost in the story because they are constantly reminded that this is a constructed book” (Hammond and Nordstrom 194). We can further connect this point of view to Smith’s distortion of peritext in the table of contents, which purposely rejects its conventional structure in light of satire. In *The Stinky Cheese Man*, the table of contents falls out of the sky,

disrupting literary order. The book’s peritext is brought to the forefront as the table of contents squashes the characters and is left with visually misaligned text. It may be perceived that the words and page numbers scattered across the surface foreshadow the visual frenzy of Smith’s twisted tales.

Aesthetic Function of Textual Content

The visual nuance of *The Stinky Cheese Man* is consistent due to the recurring experimentation with disrupted order. Smith plays with anarchy in such a manner that its relevance and meaning surpasses its pictorial construction. According to Catalano, Smith values “visual aspects of the written text” in an equal magnitude to that of illustrations, in the understanding that “the font, size, spacing, and even the letter forms themselves are manipulated to aid in creating meaning” (332). We see diverse manipulations of text in both the peritext and body of *The Stinky Cheese Man*. For instance, on the front and back covers of the story, large clusters of text consume the entirety of the creative space, eliciting the idea that “the book is filled beyond its capacity” (Catalano 307). This expectation is consistent with the internal aura of the story, which neglects the use of white space and packs its pages full of mayhem.

In *The Stinky Cheese Man*, pictorial and textual elements work together to create a product that speaks further than the dialogue itself, proposing an alternative message to that of traditional tales. Within each short fairy tale, we notice its title enclosed in a solid-colored frame. That color, unique to each story, is also utilized to accentuate the recurring phrases central to cliché tales and contemporary renditions. According to Catalano, we can understand these stylistic devices as “design motifs that tie the work together” (315). For example, the title “Chicken Licken” is framed in maroon; likewise, the text reading, “Once upon a time” and “The End” are also colored in maroon. In reference to this color trend, we bear in mind Bang’s ninth principle, which claims that “we associate entities of the same color, and we read a meaning into their association” (97). In consideration of Bang’s point in tandem with intertextuality, one’s perception of Smith’s recurring color choice evolves from a trivial pattern to a meaningful relationship. We may ponder the possibility that the text was manipulated to evoke a feeling of unity within each postmodern rendition, stylistically tying together the beginning and end

of each story. This would imply that a tale starting with “once upon a time” can still feel complete and cohesive without the need for a “happily ever after.”

Smith’s diverse stylization of text mimics his illustrations in such a manner that the story’s overarching emotions and anxieties are heightened. Nodelman addresses this point, referencing words as “visual objects that create relationships *within* the image” (56). This connection between textual and pictorial manipulation helps us to decipher Smith’s stylistic approach in “Jack’s Story.” The wording on the left side of the page spread seemingly mimics the illustrated figures on the right; just like the pocket-sized character is being squashed by the towering giant, the small text on the bottom half of the opposite page is being crushed by the larger text. These visual relations can be better understood among the application of Bang’s fourth and eighth principles. One proclaims that, “the bottom half of a picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or constrained,” whereas the other connects large pictorial objects with strength (Bang 71, 90). Bang’s reference to the placement of objects on a page correlates with the wording in “Jack’s Story” as it becomes more spatially and dimensionally condensed the further down it reaches on the page. Likewise, in the correlating illustration, the squashed character is placed in the lower half of the page, whereas the larger character functions in the upper half. In both the textual and pictorial examples, the smaller entity suggests an inability to fight back due to the strength that the larger matters appear to uphold. The potent sense of anxiety drawn from this page spread is due to the contrast in sizing and weight, as the smaller text and figures appear to be endangered or constrained by their large, powerful counterparts.

Aesthetic Function of Illustration

Postmodernism in *The Stinky Cheese Man* is best reflected by Smith’s illustrated, topsy-turvy manipulations of aesthetic function and intentional spins on familiar tradition. The story’s diverse and stylistic use of color is one of its most predominant outlets of pictorial meaning. According to Nodelman, we must consider the idea that certain colors “come to evoke specific emotions and attitudes and thus can work to convey mood more exactly than any other aspect of pictures” (59-60). Therefore, it is understood that narrative and non-narrative elements work in tandem with one another to create the cohesive

nature undoubtedly prevalent in *The Stinky Cheese Man*. For instance, Nodelman specifically addresses the color green as symbolic of “a growing, abundant world” (64). Smith’s overarching use of green in “The Other Frog Prince” and “The Tortoise and the Hair” may thus be reflective of the growing postmodern style, showcasing the physical and stylistic evolution of the fairy tale genre. In a similar manner, Hammond and Nordstrom’s reference to Smith’s color palette as “dark in hue and humor” can be seen as contradictory to the story’s satire (195). Yet, in consideration of Bang’s theory that darker colors insinuate a sense of “adversity or obstacles,” we may fathom Smith’s stylization as an extension of the hypothetical “happily *never* after” (46).

Just as we associate the color green with “growth,” we may similarly deduce the employment of red as an extension of danger or warning. This is because we identify colors in relation to specific natural objects or what Bang references as “natural constants” (95). Thus, we can understand that the color red, in association with stop signs, may evoke feelings of danger. In *The Stinky Cheese Man*, the overwhelming amount of dark, eerie hues is interrupted by one brightly colored background. This bold color choice is noted on the second-page spread of the story “Chicken Licken” where its red background elicits anxiety and an instinctive concern that the characters are on the verge of peril. Likewise, the character Foxy Loxy is holding his hand upright as if warning the other animals in the story to halt. This visual correlation between danger in both body language and color choice can be seen as foreshadowing the tale’s unfortunate conclusion.

In addition to pictorial color, we might also address the construction and shaping of illustrated matter. The structure of shapes and their embodiment of lines, curves, or points function with certain emotions to communicate a message. Oftentimes, we see scenes or characters undergo minor visual changes throughout a book to express a symbolic evolution. According to Nodelman, these valuable and thought-provoking transformations “often seem invisible,” especially among the untamed chaos which draws our focus in multiple directions at once (43). For example, we might observe a sense of cohesion in Smith’s stylization of the character’s teeth; in every tale, each figure is linked together by the same small, rounded teeth. However, the narrator Jack, once connected to the other characters in this sense, undergoes a visual transformation by the last page of the story.

Immediately upon his successful escape, Jack's teeth, once illustrated as uneven and rounded, become one solid rectangular shape. As none of the other characters in *The Stinky Cheese Man* evolve in such a manner, we may analytically ponder Jack's character development throughout the story. We can begin to decipher this evolution in consideration of Bang's first principle, relating "smooth, flat, horizontal shapes" with a means of "stability and calm" (52). We may specifically connect this concept to the straight, smooth lines shaping Jack's new teeth. The abnormal abundance of white space on the story's final page can help us understand this evolution in relation to Jack's escape from havoc. This narrator, who constantly struggled to reign in the chaos and create a linear story, visually transformed into a stable and calm character as a result of his victory. Jack was able to debunk the cliché theory that recognized his small size as weak and powerless while ultimately constituting *The Stinky Cheese Man*'s first "happily ever after."

Conclusion

The ideas of Bang and Nodelman affirm that picture books, as a genre, convey the symbolic link between appearance and meaning. Smith's stylization of *The Stinky Cheese Man* proves this generalization as it represents postmodernism in tandem with the function and meaning of visual nuance. The story's topsy-turvy distortions of classic tales and literary order serve as a thematic vision of mayhem and celebrate satire among the direct mockery of tradition. Smith's postmodern tale functions as a cohesive, meaningful story from beginning to end. Our analytical consideration of Smith's pictorial choices helps us decipher the specific uses of color, size, style, and shape as a direct outlet for meaning. The integration of familiar style that carries throughout the story's peritext, textual format, and illustrations evokes a feeling of stability amidst the story's chaotic nature. Smith's fusion of unity and non-linearity prevalent throughout *The Stinky Cheese Man* successfully debunks preconceived expectations of fantasy literature among its intentional and stylized disruptions.

Works Cited

- Anstey, Michèle. "'It's Not All Black and White': Postmodern Picture Books and New Literacies." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2002, pp. 444–457.
- Bang, Molly. *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. Chronicle Books, 2016.
- Catalano, Dominic. *The Roles of the Visual in Picturebooks: Beyond the Conventions of Current Discourse*. 2005. Ohio State University, PhD dissertation.
- Moss, Geoff. "Metafiction, Illustration, and the Poetics of Children's Literature." *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, Routledge, 1992, pp. 44–66.
- Hammond, Heidi K., and Gail D. Nordstrom. "The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales: 1993 Caldecott Honor." *Reading the Art in Caldecott Award Books: A Guide to the Illustrations*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Mackey, Margaret. "The Postmodern Picture Book and The Material Conditions of Reading." *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality*, edited by Lawrence R. Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo, Routledge, 2012, pp. 105–116.
- Nodelman, Perry. "Format, Design, Predominating Visual Features: The Meaningful Implications of Overall Qualities of Books and Pictures." *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, University of Georgia Press, 2017.
- Scieszka, Jon, and Lane Smith. *The Stinky Cheese Man & Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. Viking/Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 2002.
- Sipe, Lawrence R., and Caroline E. Mcguire. "Picturebook Endpapers: Resources for Literary and Aesthetic Interpretation." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2006, pp. 291–304.
- Stephens, John, and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. Garland Publishing, 1998.