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An analysis of verbal and visual aspects of the picture book *Infinity and Me* by Kate Hosford and Gabi Swiatkowska

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Abstract:

The analysis forming the basis of this article focuses on verbal and visual aspects of the picture book Infinity and Me. First, it provides the reader with the concept of infinity stating some examples from children's literature. Then it continues with the importance of the child's aspect in this picture book. It moves onto the verbal elements of the picture book (style and the point of view and figurative language) and then the visual elements (line, area, form, shape, light and colour and rhythm and symmetry).

The concept of infinity – introduction

From a broader perspective, infinity as a concept is often explained and discussed according to different fields. It is used in mathematics and physics to describe the idea of something that is limitless or goes on forever, such as an infinite sequence of numbers or an infinite space. Infinity can also be used in a more philosophical, abstract, theological sense to describe the idea of something eternal and transcendent in a religious and spiritual context referring to the qualities attributed to God, nature or the universe. As confirmed by Rucker (2022), the idea of infinity might be divided into three main categories: the mathematical, the physical and the

metaphysical. To narrow the division to dichotomy, Di Sia (2019) claims that historically there are two principal streams concerning the concept of infinity: the rational and the irrational approach. The first one includes disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics and physics while the second stands for arts, literature and religion. In this vein, Hosford and Swiatkowska wanted their book to broaden the way children think about infinity and to expand the children's view on infinity from a mathematical concept to a philosophical one.

According to online etymology dictionary (2001 – 2023), the word “infinity” is directly derived from the Latin word “infinitem” (“infitas”) that refers to boundlessness and endlessness. The word infinity also has its roots in the old French word “infinité”, which means a very large number or quantity. Easwaran et al. (2021) add that in contemporary English, the usage of this word differs with regard to its contextual sense: first, in a hyperbolic sense, infinity means something indefinitely great, immense or vast, exceeding measurement or calculation. Second, in a strict but non-mathematical sense, it reflects the etymological meaning of that word, so it refers to something immeasurable, and great in extent. This type of meaning often applies to God and His divine attributes as well as to space, time, and the universe. Third, in a strict, mathematical sense, infinity links with quantities that are measurable but have no finite measure. Sullivan, Cramer-Benjamin, Alvarez and Barner (2023) also connects infinity with space, time and number perceiving this concept from the child's point of view focusing on interconnectedness between these three domains using warm-up, infinity interview and number measures without pictures. The main finding of this research was that most children believed that number, space, and time were infinite, and they are mutually interconnected. Similar research was done by Droit-Volet et al. (2007, 2008), Srinivasan and Carey (2010), de Hevia et al. (2014), Tillman and Barner (2015) and Wagner et al. (2016) focusing on child's experience and their observations.

The concept of infinity in children's literature

The topic of infinity or the idea that something has no end or limit has been presented in children's literature and picture books for the past several years. The children's book *The Infinite Questions of Dottie Bing* written by Molly B. Burnham (2023) deals with “infinity” as something inexhaustible, which is on the one hand possible to read in the form of questions in the book, and on the other hand “infinity” comes to its final point when the most important question is asked by Dottie: “How do you heal a broken heart?” – something that is difficult to answer. The picture book *The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity: A Tale of the Genius Ramanujan* written by A. Alznauer and illustrated by D. Miyares (2020) presents “infinity” similarly as the

previous book as something endless, and it explicitly connects it with numbers, specifically with maths and science, which the young boy Ramanujan was enthusiastic about. As a result, this book tends to be more scientific and logical than emotional and philosophical. The children's book *The Gender and Infinity Book for Kids* written by M. Gonzalez (2023) depicts "infinity" through various natural phenomena such as plants, animals, the night sky and the underwater world admired by 11 children, symbolizing limitless nature compared to the human self. In addition, it contains facts about the differences between men and women, providing factual information similarly as in the previous picture book *The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity: A Tale of the Genius Ramanujan*. The children's book *The Infinity Year of Avalon James* written by D. Middleton (2016) works with the number 10 in a very sophisticated way, representing the magical powers of two friends – a girl and a boy – of this age. Unlike the book *The Gender and Infinity Book for Kids*, the reader is not provided with precise facts because D. Middleton wants to emphasize the magical invisible bond between these two friends who miraculously help each other until they reach the age of 11. After this age, their "infinity year" ended. An interesting point is that in the book *The Gender and Infinity Book for Kids* and *The Infinity Year of Avalon James* the number 11 is mentioned. The children's book *Trinity of Infinity* written by E. Johnson (2023) attempts to provide the answer to all the questions stated above about the uniqueness of each individual, the beauty of nature, and the existence of the infinite things which we see around us: it is God who made everything amazing and unique, and it is He who made us contemplate these wonders. All in all, we see in the selected books, including the analysed *Infinity and Me*, that the concept of infinity is attributed to each individual searching for the original answer.

While this concept of infinity can be challenging to grasp, it is an essential idea that helps us to explore and understand surrounding realities. That could also be the reason why Kate Hosford decided to shed light on this idea – to bring this abstract concept closer to child-like imagination. As she notes at the end of her picture book, the symbol of infinity (lemniscate or "lying eight") could make the idea of infinity more comprehensible, but not much easier to imagine (Hosford – Swiatkowska, 2013). Thus, Hosford and Swiatkowska offer the recipient their views on the idea of infinity through the illustrated story of Uma while using their own expressive means – words and visuals.

Child's aspect in Infinity and Me

The child's aspect, a term adopted from the literary scholar Miko (1969), manifests itself in children's literature at its core, independently of the adult aspect. Miko explained that the aspect

of the child should not be understood as a reduced value or difficulty of the work, nor as a limitation for the author. Miko (1969) explains that the author should be disposed to this aspect. It means that the author (writer) voluntarily enters the child's world, meaning he does not descend from above but is disposed to the psyche, interests, and expressive qualities of children. In other words, the children's aspect is the presence of a child's voice within the literary work, created with the help of direct speech and internal monologue capturing the inner world of a child – their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, opinions, etc. Miko (1969) further states that narrating in the first person naturally presupposes a greater degree of subjectivity and a narrowing of the epic presentation. It means that the child's aspect is enriched by the necessary depth and breadth brought into the story by its author (ibid.). It follows from above that Miko (1969) had named an essential feature of children's literature, yet the aspect of a child is often overlooked and unconsciously perceived. A reader usually does not think about the author's involvement nor the degree of application of the "child's point of view" in the given text. Also, a child recipient does not directly seek a certain aesthetic quality in the story but perceives its presence or absence through the above-mentioned authenticity of children's statements and the usage of a certain degree of "believability" that the child reader can relatively quickly recognize and evaluate.

The reason for mentioning the child's aspect is its application in the chosen picture book *Infinity and Me*. For instance, it is visible in simple sentence constructions, which, according to Miko (1969), is not a matter of simplifying the syntax of adults to adapt to the possibilities of children's understanding, but a matter of the authentic syntax of children's speech in a considered stylization (ibid.). Understandably, an eight-year-old girl would not use complicated sentences, sophisticated words, or ironic phrases. Instead of that, the writer gives Uma the words that suit her, that are adequate and accurate to her age, knowledge, and emotional development, which consequently strengthen the expression of authenticity. However, certain lexical peculiarities create a dynamic between the adult's aspect and the child's aspect. In other words, some statements indicate the author's "advance" and her presence in the work. For example, the responses of adult characters about the infinity concept. Nonetheless, the author does not teach or educate a child through these characters but tries to widen her imagination and view on the idea of infinity.

An analysis of the verbal elements of the picture book

Style and the point of view

The picture book *Infinity and Me* is a prosaic literary work primarily intended for child readers, written from the first-person point of view, narrated by the main character Uma. This suggests the subjective tone of the storytelling as well as the application of the child's perspective through the whole picture book, which is about to be explained further. The reader recognizes the main character as the narrator in the very first sentence: "The night I got my new red shoes, I couldn't wait to wear them to school" (Hosford – Swiatkowska, 2013, p. 6 – 7). From the outlined quote, we may see that the story begins in medias res, in the middle of the plot, since there is no introduction of the character or surroundings. By this, the child receiver may naturally enter the world of its protagonist. The first-person narration is also more intimate for it. It allows the reader to see what is behind the actions and dialogues and what happens in the character's mind. In addition, the personal perspective is relatable, especially to early-age children who tend to put themselves into the character's role and identify with the literary figure. And finally, it highlights the authenticity of the impression by using child-like vocabulary.

As for the chosen picture book, the outer organization of the text follows the visual rendering, while the syntactic scope of the literary text consists of mainly simple sentences, direct speech, internal monologue, parallel constructions, and repetition. The repetitive structures of sentences occur, for example, when Uma asks about infinity or when she appoints different actions, she could do forever like here: "Maybe I'd like to be eight forever" or "Maybe I could lick an ice-cream cone forever" (ibid., p. 18 – 23). Similar repetitive patterns appear in various forms in the text. Predominantly, it highlights the semantic interpretative layer, specifically searching for the answers by asking the same thing over and over again or the way children repeatedly ask something if they seek a resolution or clarification. Parallel constructions are also distinctive of children's literature since the story is read to a child, so it naturally follows the pace of everyday conversation or captures authentic thoughts in a child's mind. That is probably why the writer, Kate Hosford chose for her picture book language characterized by colloquial lexis, mostly denotative words, and occasionally literary devices of figurative language.

Figurative language

Expressiveness is created by various devices in the discussed picture book. For instance, by the repetition of the same words soon after each other, such as "growing bigger and bigger", by

specifically chosen expressions characteristic of children's language, such as "very, very small" or by the use of figurative literary devices (ibid., p. 6 – 9). Even though Kate Hosford decided to use colloquial lexis in most parts of *Infinity and Me*, she included figurative expressive means in her writing as well. For example, the personification "an eight that fell over and took a nap" or its abbreviation and epithet, "napping eight" (ibid., p. 10 – 11). A child unconsciously decodes the connotative meaning of this simile, and it immediately arises in their visual imagery. This fact is perhaps the purpose of the poetic language here – to stimulate the imagination of the reader and to increase the level of expressiveness and overall impression of the text strengthened by the visuals. The previously mentioned simile is another literary device that serves to intensify a certain feature of a thing or phenomenon. In the case of *Infinity and Me*, it is the concept of infinity itself that is compared to various things (i.e. the sky is as big as infinity, the symbol of infinity is a racetrack, infinity is as an ever-growing number, infinity is as a circle of sheet music, etc.). Another example of figurative language could be the following metaphor: "Actually, my head was starting to hurt from all these thoughts" (ibid., p. 20 – 22). The meaning of this phrase is not literal or denotative but metaphorical. There is an external and internal similarity and connection between the head and thoughts; therefore, a child may decode its meaning when they understand that Uma does not have a headache but feels overwhelmed and confused by all the thoughts in her mind.

An analysis of the visual elements of the picture book

Line, area, form

The illustrations in *Infinity and Me* are composed of fine, soft lines that create an apparent outline. In most cases, these lines do not delineate the visible surface, but the viewer completes them based on their previous experience. Moreover, lines do not separate the figures from the background precisely and sharply but subtly, indicatively so that the illustrations appear harmonious, smooth and undisturbed. The softness of the lines also suggests a kind of gentleness or innocence, which could refer to the childlike world that the pictures depict. It follows from the above that framing the figures with a black contour (as an artistic practice) is not used here as it is no longer necessary because children themselves outline what they see in the pictures. As Kubalová (2005) claims, by "framing" visible forms, children perhaps express their need to separate or properly "store" things in their assigned space, to give them clear boundaries of reality, which is probably related to their cognitive development. The spots and areas forming the individual figures or shapes in the picture book are not tightly bounded, thus they look effortless, natural and unforced. Drawing combined with painting, as the techniques

Gabi Swiatkowska chooses for her illustrations, are more transparent, resulting in a feeling of more lightness and brightness. This also resonates with the children's world as such; first, because children are led from an early age to draw, to express what they see around and inside of them by this means, and second, since the children express themselves in this way, we may assume that they can comprehend this type of visual rendering more naturally.

To specify the lines even more, there are horizontal, vertical as well as diagonal lines in the chosen book. For example, a horizontal line can be found on the very first double page (p. 6 – 7), where it probably evokes the earthly dimension, the passage of earthly life and time, expressing a certain feeling of stability, security, abiding and silence. On the other hand, diagonal lines, for example on page 25 express an instability, certain tension, activity and excitement which correspond with the imagination that the book scene depicts – sheet music in a circle that expresses movement and gradation. As for the straightness of the lines, there are both straight and crooked lines in *Infinity and Me*. While straight ones seem static – curved, wavy, rounded, circular, and bent ones create the feeling of movement. The most striking example might be found on double page 27 – 28, where the curled lines visually and gradually increase in size, leading one's gaze to the character Uma. In general, this type of line carries an almost cosmological-symbolic meaning, for it expresses the dynamism of life itself, its endless flow, which resonates with the concept of infinity as well.

Shape

The visual properties of objects or their representations are expressed by contours, matter and space, defined as the outward form, shape or appearance. So, by visual form, we mean how reality is represented in a particular image – the visual shape of the book illustrations. In *Infinity and Me*, the stylization is slight, for we still recognize concrete objects and figures. Since most of the illustration shapes have a concrete form and colour, they meet the requirement of comprehensibility and readability for the recipient. Perhaps this phenomenon is most evident in the figure of Uma. Gabi Swiatkowska, the illustrator, marks her characters with her own artistic handwriting, meaning that the illustrations have similar recognizable features such as accentuated dark-coloured eyes and mouths, pale cheeks, or rounded body shapes. Despite the similarities, the faces of the characters are individualized with an emphasis on mimicry and gesticulation. Apart from this, we may find in the picture book a shape hyperbola (pages 20 – 22), concretely, an ice cream cone exaggerated in size. The reason for hyperbolizing this particular motif is probably to point out that by the time Uma would have licked all the ice cream, her tongue would have started to hurt. Similarly, there is the example of a noodle on the

next double page. The noodle is thicker than Uma's hands and its pieces are larger than they could ever be in reality. In both cases, it is a shape hyperbola of the object, which supports the overall meaning and theme of the picture book, namely the idea of infinity, of something that does not end, but increases, grows, and flows on. To sum up, most of the figurative and non-figurative shapes in *Infinity and Me* are concrete and specific, and also smooth, round and slightly imaginative, creating a dynamic, spontaneous impression on the child recipient. Additionally, this corresponds to the world of the protagonist Uma and her thoughts and imagination about the infinity concept that is abstract in nature. Therefore, we may sense certain dynamics between the concrete and abstract throughout the whole picture book's visual rendering.

Light and colour

The first visual aspect – light in *Infinity and Me* – is closely related to colour. There is no specific light that would model the shape of the objects and figures nor light dominance that would have its source recognized, but it is an illusionary light depicted through artistic means. Furthermore, the light is illuminating, thus merging with other visual expressive means such as shadow, colour, perspective, or space (Pariláková, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a luminous accent alongside a luminous/colour contrast that is most apparent on the first and last double pages of the picture book (p. 6 – 7). Concretely, the dark night sky contrasts with the figure of a little girl who is pale and white coloured, which results in the contradiction of light and dark areas and thus creates a light contrast. Interestingly, the most significant light and colour contrast is right on those pages – the opening and the closing ones. Except for the fact that it adds a certain atmosphere to the visual rendering as such and thus increases its expressiveness, it functions almost as a visual “framing” of the storyline connecting the beginning and the end of the narrative in both thematic and artistic layers.

Colour, another essential expressive means of visual art, is usually one of the most significant components in creating an emotional and atmospheric mood in an artwork. As Pariláková (2005) confirms, from the psychological perspective or the semantic-expressive point of view, colours have an impact on our psyches, they arouse various emotions, feelings, thoughts, and associations. The colours in *Infinity and Me* are mostly glazed, transparent, toned and pastel since they are closely associated with light and created with fluid handwriting. Furthermore, these colours appear calm, harmonious, sober and thoughtful, yet playful and vivid. To be more specific, the colour palette of the chosen book consists mainly of cold colours, including various shades of blue, green, grey, and dark – used especially when it comes to

depicting backgrounds, space, or objects. We may also find warm shades of red, yellow, pink and orange here, which are mainly associated with the characters.

As for the background colours, the most frequent is a shade of white. White in general represents possibilities, “emptiness that awaits to be filled”, something pure, untouched, maybe even unreachable. From a technical point of view, a white background makes all the other elements excel; therefore, it is often used as a primary base for a drawing. On the other hand, there is also black, mainly used as a background colour for the night sky, but also for Uma’s hair and marginally for the racetrack, chessboard, and decorative patterns. This colour often raises negative connotations, such as death, the unknown, mystery, sorrow or fear. In this case, however, it could be linked with the mystery cloaked in darkness which Uma faces when exploring the concept of infinity.

Regardless, there are pages in which the background is made of a combination of colours, for instance, light blue and light yellow (p. 16 – 17). On the stated pages, the colourful setting serves as a tool for dividing Uma’s imagination into two main categories; the first one represented by cold, light blue embodies mundane school activities and routines, while the yellow one creates a background for the activities that seem like the fun games played during recess. From the above-mentioned, we might note that yellow expresses a certain lightness, playfulness, joy and radiance, whereas blue tones resonate with something ambiguous, objective and more distant. On the other hand, the red used for Uma’s shoes, parrot’s wings, curtains and butterfly naturally stands out in the scene. This colour is notable, bold and intense, in its light tones it exudes charm and loveliness such as in the case of the butterfly and flowers (p. 31 – 32) while in its darker tones visible on curtains (p. 30), it represents a kind of robust serenity. Likewise, there are subtle shades of pink and purple used for the background when Uma talks to her grandmother. While purple, according to Kubalová (2005), refers to the imagination, to the transcendent, to something excessive, even mysterious, pink calms and softens which even supports and strengthens the meaning of the scene. Lastly, there is green, used only in small amounts for parrots, plants, and a car, which is associated with growth, development, openness, receptivity and gaining experience; it is relaxed and unforced (ibid). This colour completes the child’s world and communicates the ability to be amazed and delighted by what one discovers. After all, we could conclude that in *Infinity and Me*, warm colours represent emotions, feelings and relational bonds between characters, while cold colours stand for something more rational, conceptual, and reason-based.

Rhythm and symmetry

Rhythm, as one of the most significant elements of the composition, i.e. the regular repetition of a certain phenomenon, arouses interest, activates and calms. It appears in various forms (often subtle ones) in *Infinity and Me*'s illustrations. For instance, the alternation of warm and cool colour shades, which we have already mentioned above, creates a certain rhythm. Another example is shape rhythm – the alternation of straight and curved lines and forms which can be also found in the book, e.g. rounded versus square photo frames (p. 14 – 15) or black and white chess squares contrasting with ornamental patterns on the wall (p. 8 – 9). This example, the motif of a chessboard, represents ornamental symmetry balancing abstract and figurative elements, whereas the regular alternation of black and white areas rhythms the scene as well. Similarly, a wall covered by numbers creates a dynamism and gradation with the help of multiplying the elements in asymmetrical scope.

Another example of a compositional principle is “mirror symmetry”, which is based on the equal positioning of identical or similar elements around a symmetrical axis or line. An example is the timeline on pages 18 – 19 which figuratively mirrors Uma's life and her friend Samantha's life. Thanks to the application of symmetry, the given picture looks well-composed, organized and rhythmic. Moreover, it impressively suggests the chronological continuity and juxtaposition of the first and second plane, which are divided by a horizontal line. Another compositional element is rotational symmetry, in which the parts are arranged around a symmetrical point – a circle (p. 25 – 26). All of the mentioned types of symmetry in the chosen picture book are approximate rather than strictly geometric. In this way, they are not monotonous and resemble human perception even more because apart from symmetrical elements, they include various diversions, exceptions and asymmetrical components that activate the scene and give it the necessary tension.

Conclusion

All that a reader perceives through words carries its own semantic and expressive meaning. The images in the book *Infinity and Me* stimulates children's imaginations and encourage them to express their own thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, the child's voice presented in the book in the first person captures the inner world of a child. The illustrator of the book, Gabi Swiatkowska, supports the text using bright, light and pastel colours which create feelings of stability, security and silence while cold colours stand for something more rational, conceptual and reason-based. Her artistic style, visible in the illustrations of the picture book, is in general marked by a simplification of the elements, a poetic and even dreamlike visual rendering of settings, concrete scenes, and the usage of ornamental templates. The visual element of *Infinity*

and Me is rich, diverse and full of subtle nuances of colour and motif that correlate and communicate the story of the little girl Uma through various visually expressive means. The images in the picture book illustrate the narrative and portray the abstract concept of infinity in a comprehensible, approachable and child-like way. Perceiving these colours, the variety of interpretations of infinity increases, grows and flows which may also be considered to reflect the theme of the book. The next element which contributes to the richness of the book is rhythm, which is represented by regular repetition of warm and cool shades of colour, the alternation of straight and curved lines and forms, and by black and white chess squares contrasted with ornamental patterns on the wall. The motif of a chessboard represents an ornamental symmetry balancing abstract and figurative elements, whereas the regular alternation of black and white areas provides a rhythm to the scene. Another example of a compositional principle is “mirror symmetry”, which is based on the equal positioning of identical or similar elements around a symmetrical axis or line. It suggests the chronological continuity and juxtaposition of the first and the second plane, which are divided by a horizontal line. Another compositional element is rotational symmetry, in which the parts are arranged around a symmetrical point – a circle. Repetitive structures occur frequently in the text. They highlight the semantic interpretative layer, specifically searching for answers by asking the same question many times. Repetition of the same words soon after each other, e.g. “growing bigger and bigger” or “very, very small” indicate that the state or things are more important than they really are. Hosford uses mainly simple sentences, direct speech, internal monologue, parallel constructions, denotative words, repetition and occasionally figurative language which perfectly fits the language of eight-year-old girl Uma. Hosford tries to broaden her imagination and view on the idea of infinity, including a very important message at the end of the book which is originally addressed to Grandma: “... my love for her was as big as infinity”. This final message and also other observations in the book show us that the book is intended for the adult reader as well, because unlike the other children’s books mentioned above, the uniqueness of the picture book *Infinity and Me* lies in the fact that it connects mathematical, philosophical and spiritual ideas in one book.

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