# An exploration of the child's perspective in the illustrated book *Nicholas* by Goscinny and Sempé

Explorando a perspetiva da criança no livro ilustrado *O Menino Nicolau*, de Goscinny e Sempé

Une exploration du point de vue de l'enfant dans le livre illustré *Le Petit Nicolas*, de Goscinny et Sempé

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## Abstract

Since the beginning of time, storytelling for children has always had a strong pedagogical element, passing along messages that can shape the child-reader. While there are many in-depth studies of fairy tales and their evolution, as well as studies on children's literature from an English-speaking background, the research is lacking in certain niches of literature. Breaching this gap and analysing a set of short stories such as *Nicholas* allows for an understanding of how these narratives might have shaped their target audiences, as well as who is represented and how. A combined approach of critical literacy with educational theory, in a qualitative study, structures this article, working to understand how semiotics and the concept of Othering are explored in these stories and how they might contribute to a better understanding of the self, others, and interpersonal and intercultural relationships for the child-reader who consumes them.

**Keywords:** children's literature, semiotics, othering, education, literary analysis

## Resumo

Desde o princípio dos tempos que os contos infantis têm um forte elemento pedagógico subjacente à narrativa, com mensagens mais ou menos subliminares que visam moldar os/as leitores/as. Embora haja diversos estudos acerca de contos de fadas e da sua evolução, e outros que se debruçam sobre obras de língua inglesa, certos nichos de literatura infantil são deixados nas margens. Analisar as histórias d'*O Menino Nicolau* permite entender que mensagens subliminares são passadas ao público-alvo deste nicho, bem como quem é representado e como. Um estudo qualitativo que combina análise literária e teoria educativa estrutura este artigo, permitindo entender como a semiótica e o conceito do "outro" são explorados nestas histórias e podem contribuir para a consciência do "eu", do "outro" e das relações interpessoais e interculturais para a criança-leitor que as consome.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura infantil, semiótica, o outro, educação, análise literária

## Résumé

Dès la nuit des temps, les histoires pour enfants incluant un important élément pédagogique sous-jacent au récit, des messages plus ou moins implicites ayant le but d'habituer les lecteurs. Malgré l'existence de plusieurs études concernant les contes de fées et leur évolution, ainsi que d'autres concentrées sur des œuvres en langue anglaise, certains créneaux

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de la littérature pour enfants restent en marge. L'analyse des histoires du Petit Nicolas permet de mieux comprendre les messages implicites qui sont transmis au public ciblé par ce créneau, bref, qui est figuré et comment. Cet article s'organise à travers une étude qualitative combinant analyse littéraire et théorie pédagogique et essaye de clarifier la façon dont la sémiotique et le concept de "l'autre" sont exploités dans ces histoires-là, ainsi restant à même de contribuer pour la conscience du "soi", de "l'autre" et des rapports interpersonnels et interculturels concernant l'enfant-lecteur y ayant accès.

**Mots-clés:** littérature jeunesse, sémiotique, autres, éducation, analyse littéraire

## Introduction

*Nicholas* (Goscinny & Sempé, 2005) or, in the original, "*Le Petit Nicolas*", is a collection of French books created by writer René Goscinny and French cartoonist Jean-Jacques Sempé. The stories were serialised in the paper *Sud-Ouest Dimanche* in 1959, then in *Pilote*, then in book form in 1961. Nicholas is narrated by a ten-year-old boy of the same name and showcases a utopian view of 1950s and 60s childhood in France. Throughout the years, eight volumes have been published, millions of copies sold and translated into several languages, and even earned a cinematographic adaptation. In Portugal, this collection comprises five translated titles, edited and released by Teorema in the 1980s and 90s. They were re-edited in 2004 and integrated into the *Plano Nacional de Leitura* (National Reading Programme), aimed at children of around 10 years old. Within French children's literature, *Le Petit Nicolas* grew to become a classic.

Nicolas' authors, René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempé, come from very different backgrounds. Born in Paris to Polish Jewish immigrants in 1926, Goscinny emigrated to Argentina at the age of two. As an adult, he immigrated to the United States before eventually returning to Paris. Jean-Jacques Sempé, on the other hand, was born near Bordeaux to a single mother and suffered a complicated childhood, between being raised by foster parents and his mother, married to a violent and abusive stepfather. He joined the army as it represented the safest and most stable way to access basic life necessities.

Interestingly, these challenging experiences – from an author of a Jewish immigrant background and an illustrator who grew up in the foster system – are never mirrored or represented in these books. Each book from the Nicholas series features recurring characters and comprises short stories or episodes charting life at home, in the classroom, and in the playground. Nicholas is an exploration of an idealised vision of the very specific childhood experienced by white, middle-class French boys within a nuclear family. Outside of this frame of experience, the discourse is limited and fails to reflect other, less fortunate childhood experiences at this time. There is no reflection on children born from immigration, children with culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, children who have diverse or challenging family structures or relationships, or even girls. What is projected in these books is a romantic vision of childhood where the biggest concern is the expectations of adults.

One of the most remarkable elements of these books is how humour is derived from the contrast between Nicholas's perspective and those of his adult counterparts. Nicholas understands and explains adults'

behaviour with refreshing honesty, peeling back layers of social artifice imposed by adulthood to reveal the truth: it is reactive, heavy with responsibility, burdened by rationality, and occasionally hypocritical and exaggerated. This disparity makes these stories enjoyable for both children and adults, with the latter able to see reflected in themselves the behaviours and vulnerabilities of the represented 'grown-ups'.

This article aims to analyse the educational and social role of representation, written and illustrated, in the first volume of the Nicholas series in the English translation. We begin with an overview of the book's style, attempting to locate the book in relation to its genre and looking over the trends of the era in which it was written concerning both text and images. Then we shall look into how the pictures represent the characters and express notions of 'othering', as well as what this might mean from a more pedagogical perspective: what does this book teach children readers about themselves, their relationships with their peers, adults, and their own personal problems?

## Literature Review

### A) Picturebooks and semiotics

This research began with Peter Hunt's (2005) notion that "all texts are inevitably suffused by ideologies" (p. 30). When looking at texts that are paired together with images, these ideologies gain an interesting dynamic, as they open the space to argue whether the pictures support, add to, go against or express entirely different views from those portrayed in the text.

Perry Nodelman (in Hunt, 2005) explains how we supply children with picturebooks – "a combination of verbal texts and visual images" – with the expectation that "pictures communicate more naturally and more directly than words, and thus help young readers make sense of the texts they accompany" (p. 128). Nodelman further considers that it is "this dynamic is the essence of picture books". This does not allow, however, for the weight of individual interpretation, and it is important to remember that "signs, far from 'naturally' or simply 'labelling' the real world, are socially constructed, and never as 'natural' as they seem" (Branston & Stafford, 2010, p. 23). Pictures might help create a mental image, further the reading, add details, and represent spaces and characters. Still, one cannot simply assume that every interaction between reader and text, be it written or drawn, will navigate the same interpretations and reach the same conclusions.

Sense-making created by pictures fits in the study of semiotics. "Semiotics is defined as the study of signs, or of the social production of meanings and pleasures by sign systems, or the study of how things come to have significance" (Branston & Stafford, 2010, p. 12). This study, largely developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1983), Roland Barthes (& Lavers, 1972) and Umberto Eco (1976), created the notions of the 'signifier'

– arbitrary representation of a concept – and the 'signified' – the concept of the sign. Following this train of thought, Nodelman says that "Picture books in general, and all their various components, are what semioticians call 'signs' – in Umberto Eco's words (1985, p. 176), 'something [which] stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity'" (as cited in Hunt, 2005, p. 131). Picture books are signs, but the elements that make up a picture book are also signs:

> The unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal. Making use of semiotic terminology we can say that picturebooks communicate by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic and the conventional. (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 1)

Likewise, pictographs, explained by Derrida (1971) as the earliest forms of written and drawn communication, denote a purposefulness in conveying meaning through imagery, an intentional communication.

The relationship between written and illustrated signs, analysed by Sipe (1998), is furthered by "Saussure's observations were that words derive their meaning not from a simple connection to the objects they describe but from their relations to each other (…) that this network of meaning is full of opposing pairs and contradictions" (Lawes, 2019). These binaries are very present in children's literature, and this book is no exception. Reading works to help shape and universalise clear notions of right/wrong and good/bad in children, and picturebooks can use both words and imagery to achieve these binaries. But perhaps the most interesting one in *Nicholas* is that of the self/other.

## B) Critical literacy

In the study of critical literacy, Janks (2010) discusses how language can be used to maintain or challenge existing forms of power, through a connection between literary discourse and personal context. Explaining how unequal power relations have top dogs and underdogs, Janks remarks on how order relies on the dominant ideology. This dominance can persuade others that it is natural, justifying the use of force with institutions of authority. This notion of top dogs and underdogs, from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles' (1848/1996) analysis of social class, has developed into other forms of social discrimination outside of class. Discrimination affects language: who gets to speak? Who is heard? Who is able to take action, and whose action is noticed? Giroux (1993) connects language to the struggle among different groups over "what will count as meaningful and whose cultural capital will prevail in legitimating particular ways of life" (p. 116).

We can also see language as refusing to conform. Paulo Freire (1972) views critical literacy as a means of liberation through the making of meaning.

> Signs are struggled over by those who have something to gain from anchoring, or re-anchoring, or resignifying

them in particular ways. Signification is never 'secure' or fixed: many struggles can take place over signification, over how a sign is to be 'officially' or dominantly read. (Branston & Stafford, 2010, 24)

Freire (1972) believes that teaching adults how the world has been 'named' awakens them to the reality of the oppressive naming that has been imposed on their language. Through 'renaming' and reorganising the world in comprehensive, non-oppressive language, one creates the possibility of social transformation. hooks (1994) similarly argues that education should be approached as a practice of freedom that helps students engage in an intercultural development process beyond the limited roles socially assigned by their race, gender, and class, among other markers of social identity. Social transformation that reaches for equality through disentangling hegemonic practices is at the core of critical literacy.

Within any community there is diversity of experiences and interpretations of the world. Moving through communities allows for learning new discourses. Foucault (as cited in Gee, 1990) believed that "discourse is the power which is seized" (p. 211), and Gee (1990) furthers this sentiment, describing discourse as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (p. 142). Individuals grow up within discourses; they form us into particular kinds of humans with certain identities and positions.

## C) Critical literacy and pedagogy in children's books

Children's literature has always played a key pedagogical role, as "how childhood is defined greatly influences what adults want children to know, learn, and experience through literature" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 18). Throughout time, children's stories have been constructed to pass along information, skills, teachings, but also to alienate, integrate or reproduce certain social classes, ethnicities, genders and other cultural differences. This can be done both through narrative and illustrations, and by targeting texts to specific audiences, working actively towards the maintenance of a status quo – typically benefitting the most powerful and affluent (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 20). The power of children's education through literature is ultimately a vehicle for social change.

This is grounded in Giroux's (2004) notion of how "Education, in the broadest sense, is a principal feature of politics because it provides the capacities, knowledge, skills, and social relations through which individuals recognise themselves as social and political agents" (p. 115). With education – referring to both schooling and the consumption and exposure to texts – being suffused with political meanings, communication (written, spoken, and symbolic/pictographic) is affected. We can see language, therefore, as being "situated in an ongoing struggle over issues of inclusion and exclusion, meaning and interpretation, and such issues are inextricably related to questions of 'power, history, and self identity'" (Giroux, 1993, p. 161).

Education as a social construction is often more focused on classroom settings. But if we replace the word 'students' with 'readers', this statement still holds true:

It is crucial for all students to be able to critically examine their own values, beliefs, and experiences in the face of other values, beliefs, and experiences. It is not easy for students to temper their own values and beliefs because they are embedded in culture. (Doyle & Singh, 2006, p. 22)

Challenging beliefs and experiences through literature, inside or outside a classroom context, is just as valid and just as powerful – but also malleable and complex. Jorge Larrosa Bondía's (2003) conceptions of reading reinforce this, connecting the reading experience to the subjectivity of any reader, as who they are and what they know through personal experience varies so widely.

Social and cultural differences can be productive: they present different discourses in which one can learn to exist, expanding knowledge and understanding. However, with written and symbolic language existing in a public arena of belonging and othering socio-cultural differences can often be seen as negative, as threats to the cultural discourse and the identities at play. This creates a process of 'othering', distancing individuals through engagement in the "us versus them" fight. It is this connection between the child-reader, the reading experience, and the underlying discourses, as well as the notion of 'othering', how it is represented and its connection to relationships and power that underpins this analysis.

## 1. Understanding the pictures: what is the genre?

Salisbury (2004) considers that "The term 'picture book' is normally applied to books that tell the story predominantly through pictures, with a few lines of supporting text" (p. 74). In terms of graphic novels, Hughes and King (2010) explain how "the images and print text come together in the telling of the narrative", reinforcing "the notion that form and content cannot be separated in this medium" (p. 64).

*Nicholas* challenges Salisbury's (2004) definition of a picturebook and Hughes and King's (2010) notion of graphic novels – predominantly text and some supporting illustrations. The role of the pictures is relatively unclear, yet they are abundant. But "Cotton notes, [that] the picture book is one of the most accessible means of conveying cultural values; thus it has the potential to be an effective agent in the dissemination of a sense of respect for the attitudes of others" (Harding & Pinsent, 2008, p. 9). Much like Derrida's (1971) pictographs, in this book the illustrations – both their actual existence and also the symbolic representations within them – have a purpose: to work together with the written narrative to further certain messages we must decode. Goscinny and Sempé might have decided to use pictures in *Nicholas* as a more effective means to disseminate cultural values.

*Nicholas* brings forth the concept of the "illustrated book: the text can exist independently" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 6). This concept allows us to view *Nicholas* as a picture book, while allowing for a more flexible definition of its style. Informed by Nikolajeva and Scott's descriptions of the types of interactions

between text and image in picture books, we can see *Nicholas* as fitting between "the illustration enhances, elaborates text", as it shows further detail to what the text provides; and "the text carries primary narrative, illustration is selective" (p. 7), as the text provides plot and illustrations depict a chosen moment.

Graphic novels and picturebooks "require different and possibly even more complex reading skills than traditional print texts. While the inclusion of pictures (…) provides the reader with visual clues to help understand what is happening in the text, those clues must be interpreted" (Hughes & King 2010, p. 65). This interpretation is essential in terms of both the relationship to the text as well as the underlying meanings and representations it might entail. With this in mind, does *Nicholas* conform to the conventions of its time?

## 2. Conventions, developments and trends of the twentieth century – the book in time

Brown (2008) considers that "two of the most significant developments in the twentieth century in writing for the young were the eschewing of an adult narrative viewpoint in favour of capturing the child's voice, and the increasing and changing role of humour" (p. 300). With *Nicholas*, Goscinny has managed to hit both these points and they function together, feeding off each other: the attempt at capturing a child's voice through Nicholas places emphasis on his humorous interpretation of events rather than the events themselves. This perspective is reinforced by Ktagisz (2012), who attests to Goscinny's "distinct and clear emphasis of child's experience" (p. 4). However, it is relevant to note whose childhood is constructed in these books and whose voice is meant to come through, as we shall explore further.

Brown (2008) argues that *Nicholas'* enduring appeal to children is in part down to the use of child perspective:

> The narrative is given over entirely to the child as Le Petit Nicolas himself narrates trivial excitements and disasters of his life at home and at school such as are familiar to any young or adult reader: the school photograph, a game of football, a new bicycle… (p. 300)

Brown (2008) neglects to consider, however, that Nicholas is an invention: Goscinny's representation of a very particular child and childhood. It is hard to believe that every child in France in the 1950s had the experience of receiving a brand-new bicycle, or being made to write thank you cards, or even having a photograph day at school. Nicholas' experiences pertain only to a privileged few, the white, middle-class, able-bodied French boys. While Nicholas may be relatable to children who share his social status, the choice of representing a privileged perspective cannot be disregarded.

Concerning the illustrations, they are monochromatic, made up of black lines on white paper, restricting the colour scheme. They are simple and vary in size from thumbnails to full pages, although there are no two-page spreads. While the thumbnails often depict a small detail, punctuating the page and often the text

itself, larger illustrations focus on a particular scene surrounded by blank space, heightening the contrast between the two colours and establishing a calm and orderly 1950s France scenario.

As "The 1950s and 1960s saw a flurry of more expressive and painterly illustration facilitated by further improvements in printing technology" (Salisbury, 2004, p. 15), we can see how the illustration style in *Nicholas* differs entirely from the popular colourful works that marked the digital revolution. The illustration style also ensures a homogeneous representation, neglecting diversity and uniqueness in favour of aesthetics, which brings about its own set of consequences.


## Methodology

Understanding how children's books influence and shape a young audience is a task many have undertaken throughout time. Looking into *Nicholas* books through a qualitative analysis that is highly discourse-based allows for investigating how this series can be a vehicle for ideology and social construction. The choice of qualitative analysis is clear when looking into content and critical literacy does not fit a quantitative research method. As a follow-up to this research, a qualitative analysis of *Nicholas* using focus groups of children and young adults could be useful to understand, in reality, what perspectives and values this book may have contributed to. However, this research focuses specifically on the theoretical approach.

Investigating the historical context of this book, as well as its genre, entails a combination of not only literary analysis but also imagery. Semiotics became an important field, as analysing signs and their significance matters when studying an illustrated book's underlying ideological messages. Observing the signifiers in the illustrations furthers the discussion on the signified: the way a group of children is represented, the homogenisation of these children within a group allows for a broader discussion of 'the others', those that do not fit the pre-established sameness in the imagery. Noticing the contrast in how the group is illustrated and represented versus the outsider brings up the concept of othering.

The chapter on "The Other" attempts to understand how a collective consciousness is built in these short stories. While investigating the role of the pictures within the book, the importance of power and its ownership (temporary or otherwise) in each episode became clear. A literary analysis of *Nicholas* must entail, therefore, not only a discourse-based approach but also a content-based analysis, as the two are interconnected, and it is only through the second that we may truly understand what discourses are created and how they are managed in this book.


## Analysing: the 'others'

## 1. Reading as experience

Educating through literature, especially for children, comes in many forms, from different genres to employing imagery and semiotics. It can contribute to a better control of language, as "a good children's book does more than entertain. It teaches children the use of words, the joy of playing with language" (Dahl in West, 1990, pp. 65–66). Furthermore, Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) view education as "a collectively produced set of experiences organised around issues and concerns that allow for a critical understanding of everyday oppression as well as the dynamics involved in constructing alternative political cultures" (p. 127). So it is the multicultural and intercultural aspect of educating through reading that is worth analysing in this section.

We must be aware that "when you read to a child, when you put a book in a child's hands, you are bringing that child news of the infinitely varied nature of life. You are an awakener." (Hearne and Kaye, 1981 p. 24) The awakening through content is intrinsically intellectual development, and Bruner (1960) develops this idea by describing two pathways in which this learning serves the future: the specific transfer of learning, or practical skills, and the so-called "non-specific transfer". The latter is essentially "the transfer of principles and attitudes (…) which can then be used as basis for recognising subsequent problems as special cases of the idea originally mastered" (p. 17). This transfer is mutant, subject to interpretation, social and cultural context, and personal experience. Reading, far from being simply entertaining or instructional, is a form of experience in which there is space for appropriation of words, concepts, and ideas. The text is "no longer an object, a thing in itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader" (Fish, 1980, p. 25). It is the reader that makes the experience, interpreting and highlighting, rather than the text, standing as a "repository of meaning" (p. 29), devoid of engagement.

Goscinny and Sempé create a narrative they intend to lend to the audience, through plots and imagery, building on a particular sense of childhood and a universe in which one can observe a portrayal of a 'self' (Nicholas, as a first-person narrator) and of 'others' (the adults and the other children) through the experience of reading.

## 2. The Self and The Other in the reading experience

Botelho and Rudman (2009) create "metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors [which] permeate the scholarly dialogue of 'multicultural children's literature', as using literature to (…) gain entry into one's own culture and the culture of others" (p. xiii). In this particular case we may note the contrast between the culture of adults and that of children. To use the mirror metaphor, a child might get to see themselves reflected in the child narrator's voice, even if only due to the shared condition of child. But Botelho and Rudman go further in remarking how, as well as the mirror inviting self-reflection, "the window permits a

view of other people's lives" (p. xiii). We could argue that the self-reflection ('mirror') and the viewing of the other ('window') are connected, as the viewing of the other only exists in contrast and comparison with the viewing of the self. While *Nicholas* creates a mirror by showcasing either relatable childhood experiences or simple kinship with the child reader, it also creates a window by observing the relationships of the main character with others, fostering processes of identification, differentiation, and othering.

As noted by Cooper (as cited in Hearne & Kaye, 1981, p. 14), "In 'realistic' fiction, the escape and the encouragement come from a sense of parallel: from finding a true and recognisable portrait of real life. In these pages, we encounter familiar problems, but they're *someone else's problems*". In other words, there is a sense of comfort in the process of reading, born from either the relatability of the incidents or from finding a stationary, non-invasive medium that creates space to explore another's life. Like the reassurance of the ground beneath us, it provides the comfort and steadiness necessary to take a leap into the unknown, explore it at will, and return to a familiar place.

Wherever there is relatability in literature, the "reading of narratives that literally or symbolically parallel one's own condition can provide a language in which a child or adult may begin to talk about what has previously been inchoate" (Crago as cited in Hunt, 2005, p. 187). For any experience of reading, immersion into a narrative can lead readers to an expansion of tools to externalise their own lives, making feelings and experiences more intelligible and allowing for better self-expression. Crago reiterates this view, arguing that "reading can provide vicarious insights into one's problems, and even a measure of integration of previously disowned feelings". Reading can, Crago points out, "provide suggestions (…) of ways to resolve the reader's problems" (p. 187). We can suggest, therefore, that narratives that parallel the reader's life can promote personal and individual growth, relating strategies of interpretation to acts of identification, as inferred by Fish (1980).

What about readings that echo another's experience? Giroux (1999) critically addresses Disney's influence on children, warning that there is a vested interest in using politics of innocence to disguise ideological principles that legitimise racist conceptions of global imperialism, a warped sense of history, and an assertion of family values. Giroux's assertions of media influence aimed at younger generations are relevant as *Nicholas* reflects a narrow perspective on childhood, making it vulnerable to the same accusations levelled at Disney: a lack of representation and idealisation of family values and privilege.

This lack of representation is visually evident in how simple lines are used to give uniformity to the characters: these children, including Nicholas, are all part of a group and are indistinguishable from one another (Fig.1).

FIGURE 1
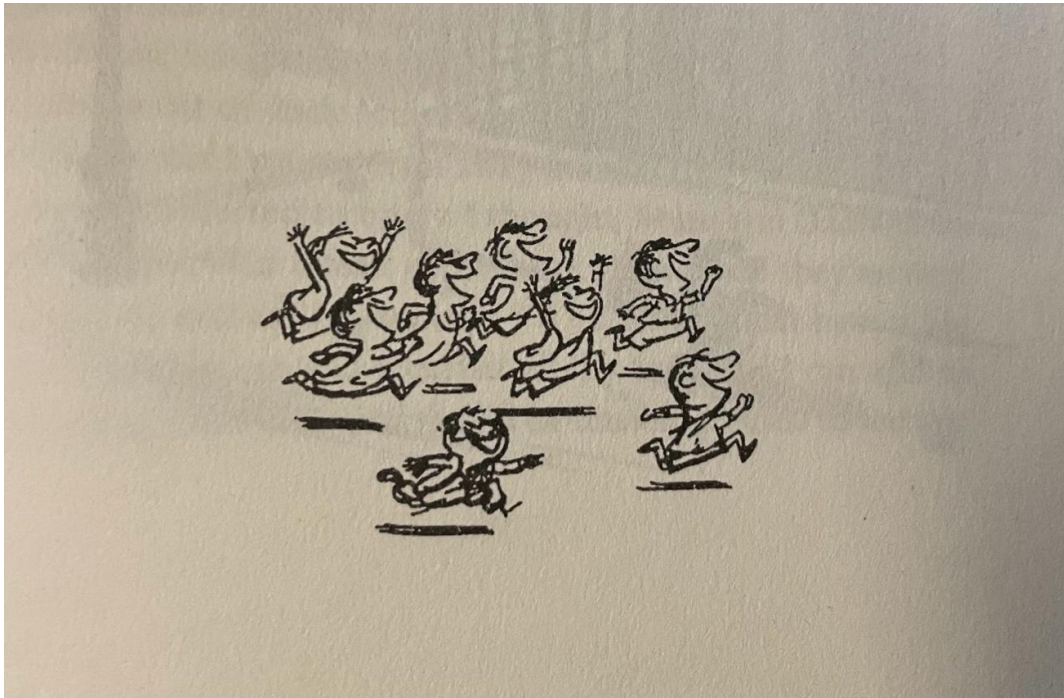
While we can consider that this lack of personalisation could be because "picture books tend to be plot-oriented rather than character-oriented" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 82), this homogeneity erases the diversity of the children pictured. Despite the boys sharing a similar background, the text is explicit in differentiating them, for example Geoffrey is very wealthy; Cuthbert is the teacher's pet; Max has long legs and runs fast, and Rufus always carries a whistle. These small details, integral to how these characters are presented, are not incorporated as signifiers. This choice to ignore these facets erases any notion of individuality, denies us the opportunity to interrogate any visual representation of difference, and communicates to the reader that it is the group and not the individual that counts. Maintaining the group makes it easier to 'other' those outside of it, as we shall see.

## 3. The foreign student as The Other

Szkudlarek (2007) makes a relevant re-formulation of Laclau's (1990, 1996) works on empty signifiers, remarking:

> Social identities are constructed differentially, i.e., the existence of externality – or of "the Other" – is crucial to their establishment. "The Other", however, cannot be constructed as *purely external* to the desired identity (totality), because then it would not be significantly related to it: it would become "just another difference". It must be therefore based on something that *belongs* to the domain demanding identification, but is *excluded* from the task. (Szkudlarek, 2007, pp. 238–239)

In *Nicholas*, this tension between a sense of belonging and exclusion is explored, particularly by 'Jocky',

a boy who attempts to integrate himself into the friendship group.

Jochen van der Velde (Jocky) arrives in the seventh episode of the book and is sent to school by his parents as a means of learning the language. His relative ignorance, combined with a willingness to secure his place in the group, means Jocky "learns some childish expressions, that he repeats during the lesson, causing some confusion for the teacher" (Ktagisz, 2012, p.10).

FIGURE 2



The 'othering' is brought forward by the illustrated picture in the classroom (Fig. 2). One can see how the signifier 'foreign' has been translated into iconic symbols, or signifiers: Jocky is the only one wearing a black jacket; his face is marked by freckles, and he has a wide smile on his face. While the other children's teeth stay hidden – even when smiling, – Jocky's are depicted prominently, a visual representation of his othering in the classroom both in terms of his appearance and behaviour.

The illustration also reinforces the homogeneity of the group. The other children have no distinguishing features, and this further differentiates Jocky. It is as if, "In a result of such exclusion, all *other* differences in a way lose their significance against the difference of the excluded – in relation to the excluded element, they appear equivalent" (Szkudlarek, 2007, p. 239). The already homogenous group becomes even more

of an empty signifier, easier to overlook by comparison with Jocky. Szkudlarek explains how "empty signifiers need to be *constructed* as such. Their "emptiness" is a task, an assignment, a role to be played in relation to other signifiers. Hegemony, and – consequently – identity, need, then, strategies capable of *producing emptiness* for the making of totality" (p. 240). Through creating empty signifiers, homogenising the group and creating totality, one can truly be aware of the other.

## 4. The adult as The Other

Throughout the series, Sempé's illustrations portray adults as unpleasant, grumpy, and overemotional. Adults are drawn frowning, shouting or crying, especially when interacting with children. Of the two instances in which they smile, neither involve interactions with children.

Children, however, express a variety of emotions. One can consider how "The actions and responses of the child characters are, moreover, privileged over that of adult authority, which is often represented as ridiculous and is joyously, even when unconsciously, undermined or thwarted" (Brown, 2008, p. 302) Despite adults being authority figures, it is the children that usually come off as top dogs and it is the contrast between children's joy and adults' displeasure that makes the latter figures of ridicule. This is evidenced in episode 18, "Mr Bainbridge and the Fine Weather" (p. 115, Fig. 3), where one realises that good weather is interpreted differently by the children and the caretaker, Mr Bainbridge. To both, good weather equals playing outside and, while for the children this is a positive (more room for mischief), this is a nightmare to Mr Bainbridge who is acutely aware of the potential for chaos that playing outside represents, in addition to his responsibility for controlling the children.

FIGURE 3
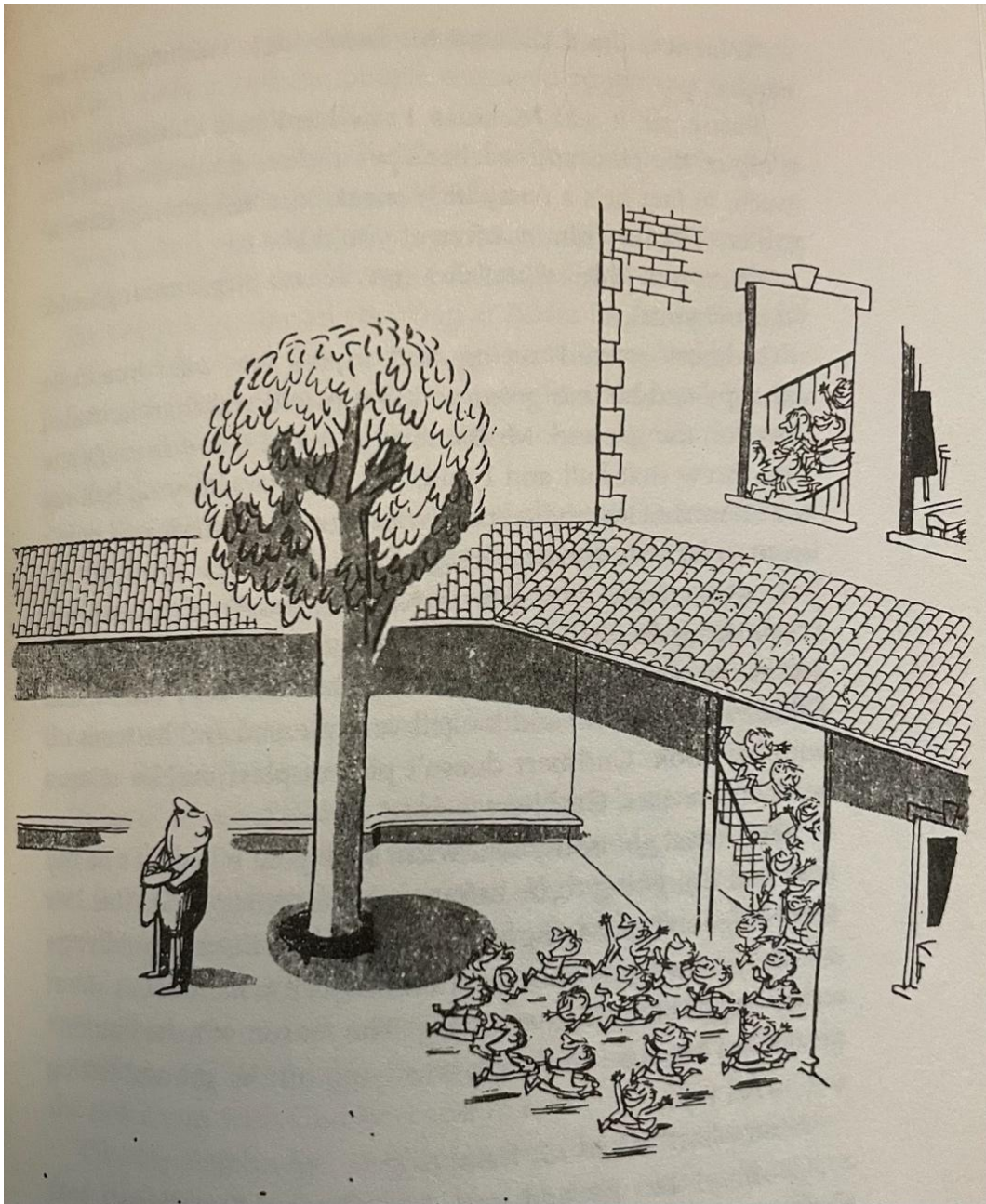


The children's hectic nature and collective power often lead to full-on takeovers. For instance, we are told that "the children's anarchic obtuseness and inability to adapt their instinctive reactions" overwhelms "the school inspector who patronises the schoolmistress with his demonstration of the effects of simple child psychology and the photographer who boasts that he knows how to talk to children" (Brown, 2008, p. 302). Almost feral in nature, the group of children are insuppressible, both overpowering and embarrassing the adults who claimed they could control them.

This power dynamic, characterised by wild behaviour and disregard for any consequences, gives *Nicholas* an originality and sense of fun, albeit simultaneously feeding into a somewhat insulting oversimplification of children's psyche and a brutality of adult reactions.

The illustration from page 107 (see Fig. 4) shows Nicholas's nightmares, as he worries about the consequences of skipping school.

FIGURE 4
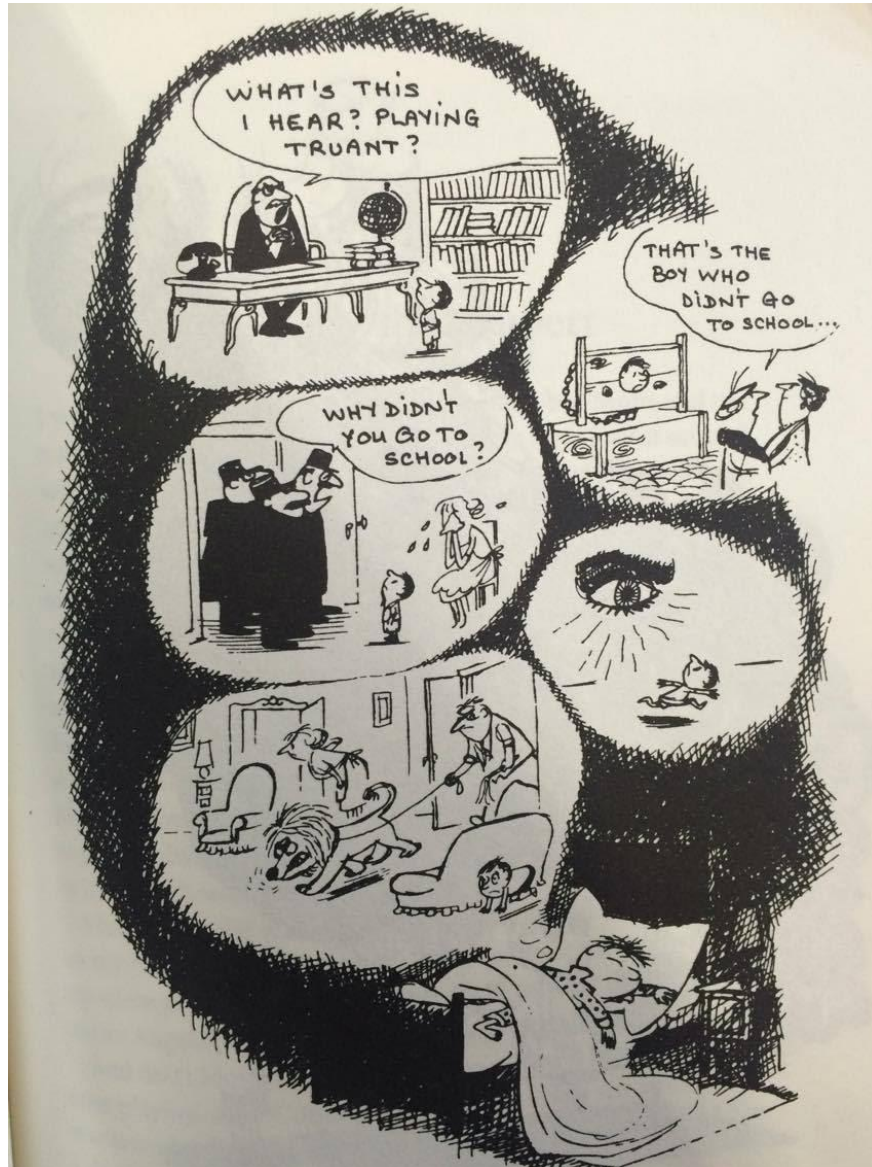


Containing a series of 'dream bubbles' in which Nicholas is being reprimanded by adults including the police and even an all-seeing eye, this illustration is clear: Nicholas is under attack. The eye, in particular, could be interpreted as an iconic signifier of God and, while not overtly mentioned, this alludes to the religious influences and associated morality of the time.

The heavy sense of morality hangs over this scene as each 'bubble' personifies Nicholas' guilt. He is very much aware that skipping school is not allowed, and emotive images of his mother's tears, sniffer dogs, and guillotines are all signifiers that could represent severe wrongdoing. The disappointment projected onto the adults is nothing more than his own guilt and fear.

While the child-reader could relate to Nicholas' dreams and therefore guess what's likely to happen next, they might also be ignorant of these experiences and so are confronted with this 'forbidden' behaviour – this depiction allows them to witness from a safe distance (a "window").

In the first scenario, where a child reader directly relates to Nicholas's predicament, there is a process of self-identification with foreign bodies using shared experiences. When speaking of expression and empathy, Dan Zahavi (2005) states that the process of mimicry happens in the following format: "I observe that other bodies are influenced and act in similar manners, and I, therefore, infer by analogy that the behavior of foreign bodies are associated with experiences similar to those I have felt myself." (p. 148). Given that *Nicholas* is a book written by adults embodying a child-centric perspective, we can assume that there is an attempt to mimic the experiences of the child reader. For a reader in close cultural proximity to the protagonist, these episodes could help the reader understand expectations, behaviours and consequences, creating a much clearer picture of cause-and-effect correlations. On the other hand, in a scenario in which the child-reader is watching Nicholas's predicament they cannot directly relate, they have to imagine themselves in Nicholas' position and infer how they would feel.

## Conclusions: exposing "The Other" as a learning tool for the child-reader

### A) The learned social aspect

As "Children's books can be tools for discussing social and emotional issues", they can employ methods, such as "well-constructed language and illustrations" to "mask underlying messages in texts" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 10). Botelho and Rudman further this idea, arguing "The exercise of coercive power often appears artfully and can be internalized by unwitting readers" (p. 10). From this perspective, children's books are vehicles driven by the ideologies of the author(s).

While in the "Jocky" episode of *Nicholas* the illustrations unambiguously 'other' the character, the text that shows his initial interaction with his peers takes on a different hue: "Out in the playground we all gathered round Jocky. We asked him lots of questions, but all he did was grin." (p. 46) While surrounding him is confrontational, this is an interaction based on curiosity. The children do not exclude the new student or use his differences against him. They recognise said differences, but are more interested in engaging and quizzing the newcomer. Using this incident, we could argue that the students are open to integrating a newcomer from a different culture, a message of inclusion and thirst for knowledge and information, rather than one of rejection. It is also notable that the usual power relations feuds and conflicts within the group are erased in favour of the presence of a brand new outsider. Once again, the homogeneity sustains 'the other'. There are still, however, clear signifiers of difference in how Jocky is portrayed: even with

acceptance, he remains "the other".

In terms of the adult as the other, Brown (2008) explains how in *Nicholas*, "the behaviour of adults is mocked, whether the violent quarrels of fathers at football matches, the repressiveness of teachers, or the mind-blowing slowness with which his grandparents play Scrabble, and they are frequently seen as aliens" (p. 304). Pinsent (1997) speaks of the inseparable nature of language and culture, because "the values of any group are inevitably strongly associated with the way they speak about these values". But even as aliens, adults are still the authority. Pinsent goes on to explain how outsiders are still able to "adopt the culture of the indigenous group and learn the language" (p. 109). This can be used to make the connection between adult-child relationships in *Nicholas*. In the same way that newcomers can adapt to fit into the group they join, as Jocky attempts to do, children can also change to fit the adult roles that are asked of them. Stallcup (2002) argues that, "in some cases, fear-alleviating books offer a model in which children overcome their fears not simply through relying on adults but through developing adultlike characteristics themselves" (p.127). A hypothesis can be made, therefore, that if a child mimics the behaviour of the adults they encounter in literature, they can develop adult-like skills and peace will ensue.

Finally, writers and illustrators, as creators of content aimed at children, are active participants and collaborators in creating culture. The language and imagery used help readers critically engage with their own experiences and cultures. The authorial voice carries responsibility, be it in the representation of diversity or in conveying morals and ideologies (Doyle & Singh, 2006, p. 26). There are notions of right and wrong, good and bad in *Nicholas*, as the children are punished or told off by adults when hurting others, misbehaving, or failing at their school tasks. But even these moral binaries are blurred by the permanent eschewing of the adult perspective in favour of a hypothetical child's voice, where despite the 'wrongness' of an action, a child still comes out on top, with adults' behaviour being painted as dramatic. As such, the perspectives and ideologies promoted in *Nicholas* are from two adults, Goscinny and Sempé, depicting an abstract childhood. They are the gatekeepers of diverse experiences, holding a hegemonic representation of childhood and, consequently, of adulthood too.

### B. The learned emotional aspect

Nicholas continuously fails to adapt and develop adult-like characteristics: he does not grow up. In fact, it is his confusion as a result of adults' behaviour and his understanding of how contradictory it can be that creates humour since

> Many incidents involve Nicholas's puzzled or disgruntled view of adult behaviour, like the rivalry between his father and their neighbour, his father's sycophantic attitude towards his boss, and the tensions between his parents over money that often result in Nicolas being sent to his room while they argue. (Brown, 2008, p. 302)

This can function as social critique, lifting the veil, showcasing contrast between assumed points of view of children and adults. For the child reader, being able to understand what is happening and enjoying Nicholas's cluelessness can be a pathway to learning what characteristics they themselves are expected to develop that Nicholas is failing to.

There is an oversimplification of adults and children through their immediate reactions that feed into pre-established stereotypes of both childhood and adulthood: children who are unburdened, free, light-hearted, and adults who are the opposite. A childhood that is ultimately adult-centred, where only adults' perspectives and expectations weigh childhood down. A fully dichotomised vision, which fails to hold true for all childhoods and adulthoods, reinforces a particular representation of idealised childhood – and miserable adulthood.

## Final thoughts

*Nicholas* books achieve a stable balance between following their contemporary conventions and subverting them. Goscinny's writing style fits the trends of twentieth-century literature, attempting to embody a child's voice. Sempé, on the other hand, departs from the trends of the digital revolution, creating simplistic black-and-white illustrations. With a narrative style that fits the structure of its time and imagery that neglects it completely, the text and pictures still support each other. The powerplays and othering are represented in the text through the plot and in the illustrations through semiotic imagery, where the visible homogenisation of a group stands in stark contrast to outsiders and where the expressions of adults contrast with those of children.

Although Brown (2008) argues that "The humour of the Le Petit Nicolas series is diverse enough to appeal to readers of all ages, and, despite its anarchic elements, is unproblematic in its content" (p. 302), a counter-argument arises: the episodes do not reflect more than a very restricted childhood, pertaining to a particular social class, gender, ethnicity, and family structure. The authors fail to use their voices and images to fully represent the diversity from their own experience and beyond. Reading, as performative social action, can constitute an anti-discriminatory and counter-hegemonic performance.

> The question of intercultural competencies has to be understood within a broader notion of literacy linked to both the acquisition of agency and the ability to recognise that matters of difference are inextricably tied to issues of respect, tolerance, dialogue and our responsibility to others. Multicultural literacy as a discursive intervention is an essential step toward not only a broader notion of self-representation, but also a more global notion of agency and democracy. Literacy in this sense not only is pluralised and expanded, it is also the site in which new dialogical practices and social relations become possible. (Giroux as cited in Guilherme, 2006, p. 172)

*Nicholas* might not be overtly problematic, outright expressing discriminatory views. However, there is no exercise of intercultural competencies. The baseline for the episodes is, in and of itself, narrow-minded and aimed at the privileged few who will intimately relate to the adventures. Those who, much like Nicholas, are permanently looked after, cared for, loved, and can watch the destabilisation of the adult-child relationship in the narrative without leaving their comfort zone. The experience of reading for these audiences can lead to the acquisition of agency through self-representation, and better awareness of the self, the other, and social expectations and consequences.

For audiences who do not fit within these categories, perhaps the only redeeming factor is how humour comes through, suggesting unexpected outcomes in any given situation, occasionally surprising the reader completely. In fact, "Much of the humour of the anecdotes derives from the deconstruction of the familiar and the upsetting of the reader's expectations, and indeed, those of the characters, demonstrating the underlying sophistication of the narrative" (Brown, 2008, p. 302).

When considering how Goscinny and Sempé were given an opportunity to enter *Nicholas* into the cannon of 20th-century French children's literature, a question remains: was there a purposeful avoidance of diverse representation by this duo in favour of the prosperity of their work, knowing that colluding with privilege is a known strategy for survival and success? Ultimately, more could have been done had the authors used their voices to project and promote diversity, essentially opening the cannon to reach the 'other' they so carefully curate.

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