USING Maurice Sendak’s **Where the Wild things are** to explain literary theory

Based on work by Activity contributed by Barbara Bleiman and   
Lucy Webster, of the [English and Media Centr](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk) in the article on this page -http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/seminars/activities/picbooks.php

Start

Copies of a single picture book (for example Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are for students to share one between two or three.)/ youtube version for whole class to view/ on computers per group It is important that all students read the same text

1. In pairs, give students a picture book to read and enjoy.
2. Share general responses to the text, for example, what students like/dislike about the text, any memories they might have of reading the book as young children (which in itself may highlight interesting points about the ways in which the meaning of a text may change for a reader), the relationship between words and pictures and so on.
3. Next allocate a critical position to each pair of students and tell them they are going to read the picture book again, this time through the lens of a particular theory.
4. Ask students to talk about any new insights they have gained by approaching the book through this lens and consider also whether the book loses anything from being read from a specific critical perspective.
5. Students take it in turns to feed back their discoveries, beginning by reading out the simplified critical position card and summarising their reading of the picture book. Examples of the sorts of things students might highlight  *Where the Wild Things are* include the following:

* Structuralism: the significance of the changing balance between text and image and its relationship to an interpretation of the story as a fantasy – a figment of Max’s imagination, oppositions.
* Feminism: the role of the mother (and the absence of the father), the balance of power between mother and son, the role Max adopts with the ‘wild things’, the representation of the ‘wild things’ as gendered or genderless.
* Postcolonial: the role Max adopts with the ‘wild things’, his colonising – and subsequent desertion – of the creatures, the behaviour of the ‘wild things’, the colour symbolism of Max’s clothing.
* Psychoanalytic: what the ‘wild things’ might represent, Max’s relationship with his mother, the absence of the father, dream/reality distinctions, sublimation of desires into fantasy.

1. As a whole group, spend some time ‘debriefing’ the activity:

* Supporting students in recognising both the potential and the limitations of reading a text from a single critical perspective.
* Discussing the ways in which some of these insights might be used as part of their own reading of the text.

1. At undergraduate level, one might want to make the approach more sophisticated. For instance, in a course on feminism, one might ask different groups of students to research different strands of feminist critical debate and ask each one to comment on the text from their particular position.
2. The next stage, of course, is to experiment and ‘play’ with reading a more challenging text from different critical positions. It can be helpful to take this in stages. We have provided as downloadable pdf files a story by Ernest Hemingway, [‘Cat in the Rain’](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/seminars/activities/handouts/Hemingway.pdf), which works well as a focus for this activity, and [some starting points for discussion](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/seminars/activities/handouts/Hemingway_points.pdf). A critical positions activity on ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’ by Flannery O’Connor, is included in [*Text Reader Critic*](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications/cat_detail.php?itemID=45), a resource published by the English and Media Centre. This unit takes the approach one stage further by also helping students engage with a substantial piece of criticism on the text.