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Psyche and Society in Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*

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Abstract While *Where the Wild Things Are* may be Maurice Sendak's most popular book, *In the Night Kitchen* is arguably the greater work. Though his journey in *Wild Things* shares many of the elements of Mickey's adventure in *Night Kitchen*—swinging between the protagonist's initiatory verbal assertions and silent, completely pictorial spreads that indicate his eventual dominance over his environment—Max's story is ultimately only a narrative of the self. *Where the Wild Things Are* is a beautiful exploration of how Max (the *max*imum boy) is able to use an imaginative journey to create an individual personality that fills the world around him. But Mickey must confront something more than merely a projection of his own desires. Mickey, unlike Max, is diminutive in his fantasy world, and his adventure is a true dream shaped willy-nilly by his lived experience, not a daydream tailored to defend the ego. The story told as Mickey learns to navigate the Night Kitchen is essentially a social narrative—more realistic, more challenging, and with greater overall dividends than Max's adventure. We can see this in the ways *In the Night Kitchen* combines four sorts of ingredients—Sendak's own life, the psychology of dreaming, popular culture, and the immigrant experience—into a subtle, captivating tale of the self and society.

Keywords Immigrant experience · Psychosocial development · Graphic narrative · Sendak · New York City

The Ingredients of Mickey's Dream

Many of Sendak's works are at least semi-autobiographical. One of the buildings from *In the Night Kitchen*, for instance, reads ''Patented June 10th, 1928'' on the side, a date that happens to be Sendak's birthday. Perhaps because of this tendency to draw inspiration from his own life (May) the author has proven himself fond of dark-haired,

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male protagonists (*Chicken Soup With Rice*, 1962; *Where the Wild Things Are*, 1963; *Hector Protector and As I Went Over the Water*, 1965). He opens 1970's *In the Night Kitchen* with such a boy. Asleep in bed, young Mickey wakes to a loud banging and yells for quiet. Suddenly he is falling, and the world he drops into is a strange, midnight-colored place full of stars both literal (it is a "night kitchen," after all) and social (a trio of identical bakers each resembling the famous film comedian Oliver Hardy), a world packed with commercial references: Mickey Mouse ovens, a cityscape of product packaging, cinematic personalities, and more. As in any good myth or fairy tale, our Mickey sets out to prove his mettle, pounding dough into an airplane, flying to the Milky Way, and pouring down milk for the bakers' morning cake in order to fall back into bed.

Sendak's story, told in a comic-book style that utilizes narrative text boxes, dialogue balloons, and paneled graphics—page 31 is a good example of all three visual techniques working together[1]—might be easy for some to write off as a simple Freudian power fantasy. Mickey's nudity, his rise to the milk bottle, his beatific expression while pouring—all lend themselves to a certain sexual analysis. But by looking at particular graphic structures and symbols in a context of inclusive sensuality rather than mere sexuality, we can see that *In the Night Kitchen* uses cooking implements and themes (such as mixing and blending) to explore more than just a child's wish to rise to power. These elements create a sequence of events that mirrors a child's entire learning process, from initial self-discovery to knowledgeable intellect. The bakers need Mickey's help to create a cake that will nourish the body, and Mickey, in order to provide that help, creates a literal vehicle for enlightenment and nourishment of the mind.

Reading *Night Kitchen* within a greater social context—both urban and ethnic—is particularly crucial to a holistic understanding of the text, and such discussions of the book are not altogether rare. A number of authors have touched briefly on the importance of Mickey's autonomy (Keeling) and his need to negate initial passivity by connecting on a personal and progressive level with the culture around him (Gilead). But there is also the question of Mickey's physical and emotional growth to consider, and so far social pressures as they relate to a budding human sensuality seem to have remained unexplored by critics of *Night Kitchen*. Further, the integration of these analytic angles is likely to enrich the study of a text already built upon the idea of combining disparate ingredients.

That the night kitchen's skyline resembles a view of Manhattan, that when the bakers try to slip Mickey into the Disney oven we are shown a box of salt with what is clearly a Star of David on the packaging, and that the toy plane in Mickey's bedroom is identical to the one he makes out of bread dough, is no coincidence. *In the Night Kitchen* is the second book in a trilogy (beginning with 1963's *Where the Wild Things Are* and ending with 1981's *Outside Over There*) and arguably serves as its hinge. Sendak believes the trilogy explores the emotions and psychology of children through their own eyes (Hastings), yet in *In the Night Kitchen*, each graphic spread is a careful mix of fantasy and social reality, fairy tale and history.

Continual references to New York, Mickey Mouse, the Holocaust, and Mickey's own belongings imply that though Mickey is currently in a world of dreams, that world is shaped by his own mind, which is influenced by his material and social reality. In the

[1] *In the Night Kitchen* is unpaginated. For the purposes of this discussion, we have designated the very first page as 1, the dedication page as 5, the first paneled page 6, and so on. References to two-page spreads are in the form "x–y" where x and y are consecutive numbers, as in the title page spread 2–3.

dream, Mickey needs to help the bakers which requires that he find a way to integrate himself into their world. Once he wakes up, he will need to find a way to blend into the greater American culture. Like many European immigrants entering New York early in the twentieth century (Sendak's own Jewish Polish parents among them), Mickey is an outsider in the night kitchen, falling into a new world with little more than his Americanized name and his native talent.

Mickey's name, like all labels in this book, is an important one. Sendak admits the strong influence of Mickey Mouse cartoons on his own childhood (Hastings), and there's a distinct similarity between Walt Disney's dark, energetic little character and *In the Night Kitchen*'s young protagonist. Mickey Mouse is a Horatio Alger-type hero. His coloring (not a light-skinned reflection of upper-class whites, but a deep black) and name (''Mickey'' is somehow different from, say, ''Mortimer,'' the name Walt Disney was considering until wife Lillian denounced it as too pretentious [Gibson]) reflect a kind of ''otherness'' attractive to those Depression-era citizens who felt like outsiders themselves. Mickey Mouse could be used by many marginal Americans as a kind of social model, an icon that stood as a reflection of their own aspirations. Sendak's Mickey, another dark-headed little immigrant, must rely on the same luck, pluck, and decency embodied by Mickey Mouse in order to succeed.

That another, less pleasant, connotation to Mickey's name also exists is impossible to ignore in a work that, as we will see, so consciously utilizes language and branding to address social and political conditions. Mickey, whose name is only a two-letter ending away from the derogatory ''Mick,'' is a child of uncertain ethnicity. That his name recalls an ethnic slur used to devalue the Irish, one of the largest immigrant populations in New York during the early twentieth century, adds a certain amount of social consequence to the outcome of his nighttime culinary endeavor.

On page 21 we see Mickey flying past a large box that says ''Ta-Ka-Kake'' along the front. That Sendak chose this particular spelling—instead of, say, ''Take-a-Kake'' —for what is supposed to be understood as ''take a cake,'' is significant. Sendak came from a Jewish Polish home; it's unlikely that he was unaware of the Yiddish pun created by the ''taka'' in ''Ta-Ka-Kake.'' In Yiddish, ''taka'' means something like ''so that's so'' in a way that implies support and/or agreement tinged with deprecation (''He was, taka, not so good an earner, but he was a good father''). And the word ''Kake'' is only one letter away from a second ethnic slur, this one another Jewish reference—''kike.''

Here in the night kitchen, immigrant Mickey is having what appears to be, by page 21, quite a positive experience, but his success is not unadulterated. For *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak draws long sequences of pictures without dialogue, wordless stretches that go on sometimes for pages. In *In the Night Kitchen*, not a single panel passes without the introduction of language of some kind. Even when no narrative box or dialogue balloon is present, written labels are still visibly plastered to buildings and fluttering on flags. Unlike Max's escapist jungle, the night kitchen is only a slightly softer version of the real world, suggesting its harsher edges by forcing the reader to question why and how social labels (often nasty ones) function.

Body Images

Though *In the Night Kitchen* is still quite clearly a celebration of imagination, and a work with which anyone who has had to struggle with self-definition ought to be able to resonate, Sendak's depiction of male nudity has made the book a subject of major

controversy—and frequent censure—from its inception (The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000). But the panel on page eight in which Mickey falls out of his clothes is a crucial one for reasons that go well beyond any puritanical response to anatomical correctness. Clothing is a formal construct that creates a barrier between our skin and the world around us, hampering our full-body sensation of touch and so limiting sensual experience. Mickey's pajamas act as a symbolic barrier between reality and dream as well as a pragmatic division between world and body. It is necessary for him to lose his clothes if he is to immerse himself completely in the world of the night kitchen.

True, clothes protect as well as constrain, but they seem unnecessary here. Mickey appears not embarrassed but happy to lose his pajamas. His body language as he says "AAH" is very relaxed, indicating, as the rest of the narrative makes clear, that in the fantasy to come he won't need the "real world" protection of clothing. *In the Night Kitchen* isn't a nightmare; it's a dream sequence. Mickey's relationship with his parents—as demonstrated by the dedication page (5) and the ease with which he accepts the reality of the strange events literally befalling him—appears to be an intimate and supportive one. Indeed, when Mickey's plane takes off on page 21, it is a "SAFE" rising, because he's going up with the moon—and the moon, from its association on page nine with his "MAMA & PAPA," seems to be part of a protective parental triumvirate. In dreams, freed from the rules and inhibitions of waking life, the mind has long been thought to access natural feeling, and Mickey is pleased to enter his dream *au naturel*.

Mickey's landing in a bowl of cake dough subsequently deluged with other ingredients—flour, salt, and baking soda—upon arrival in the night kitchen constitutes an immediate sensory assault. The bakers have mistaken Mickey for milk ("MILK IN THE BATTER! MILK IN THE BATTER! STIR IT! SCRAPE IT! MAKE IT! BAKE IT!"). Looking first angry and then overwhelmed, Mickey, at least, understands that his ontological similarity is to the bakers, not the foods, around him. (Ultimately, of course, since it is his dream, Mickey is superior to the bakers. Lacking the imagination needed to bring their endeavor to a successful conclusion, the three bakers, indistinguishable as individuals, spend most of the narrative literally lower on the page than Mickey (Keeling.)) It takes being mixed unsuccessfully into cake dough for Mickey to state his own role in the book's adventure. "I'M NOT THE MILK AND THE MILK'S NOT ME!" he cries. "I'M MICKEY!" He looks happy here (17), popping out of the cake as one would at transitional celebrations such as a milestone birthday or stag party. His excitement is understandable; he has rejected the notion that he's a consumable ("MILK") and has instead begun to define himself as a consumer ("MICKEY").

Up until this page, every panel in which Mickey appears (since he fell out of his clothes, that is, and entered the world of dreams) shows a moon hanging somewhere above his head. The moon, an eternal, feminine symbol, can be reasonably interpreted here as a nurturing authority, and, given page 21's reference to "SAFE YEAST," perhaps also a nourishing one that fosters rising, including Mickey's. In this panel on page 17, Mickey for the first time appears without the moon. Mickey's first sensory experience in the night kitchen helps him to learn who he is and become an individual who can function on his own. Soon he will learn what he can do.

The Individual in the World

For the bakers to finish a cake successfully, milk is necessary. Since Mickey has asserted that he can't be a static stand-in for an ingredient (Gilead), he must "mix" himself into

the narrative by actively procuring milk. Blending and balance are important concepts in this book, because everyone in the night kitchen, as in reality, has a social role to fill.

In his movies, Oliver Hardy typically plays a character trying to find his niche in life, a domestic exploring the ins-and-outs of the system and searching for some kind of concordance within it (The Internet Movie Database). His characters are usually lower class, but Hardy's girth and inexhaustible financial optimism represented an escape for Americans living during the 1920's and 30's who were simply trying to keep their homes and provide food for their families. In more than one sense, Hardy's problem is ''dough,'' and so is Mickey's. Having established himself as a player and not a prop, Mickey needs to take a step similar to Hardy's experimenter, figure out a way to become a useful member of the cake-baking dream team, and thus help create a harmonious and prosperous—and nourishing—society.

On the first page structured into three long, vertical panels (18), Mickey hops out of the cake pan. Covered in cake batter, he has a small backlog of sensory experience in the night kitchen with which to work—but it isn't enough. In panel one, riding the high of his self-emancipating outburst, Mickey is grinning and hopping over the moon. In panel two, his expression is troubled and the moon is just above his head. In panel three, he's mired in dough, looking discouraged indeed, and the moon is high above his head. Clearly a relationship is developing between height and the relative dominance of Mickey and the parental moon.

Mickey's previous sensory experience alone is not strong enough to carry him where he needs to go (ultimately, up to the ''MILKY WAY''). But he finds a way to help himself. Covered in the batter that represents his experience with the cake, Mickey lands in a batch of bread dough that the narrator tells us is ''ALL READY TO RISE.'' Applying his previous knowledge of dough to this new situation, Mickey fashions a plane that will take him ''ON HIS WAY.'' Building this airplane, a literal connection between two places, between the initial lower kitchen level and the milky destination high above it, seems to parallel the way a child formulates the ideas that allow completion of a project: first confront imagined strangeness, then concoct a simple task to master that strangeness, and then acquire the tool to perform the task. For Mickey, the self-made airplane is that tool. Mickey's growing power and maturity is tracked by the airplane's increasing altitude.

While the presence of sexual undertones is undeniable with the combination of male protagonist and ''rising'' dough, Sendak's pages balance each phallic image with a corresponding feminine symbol. On the first page that shows Mickey in the plane (21), there's a drill bit to Mickey's right. But on Mickey's left is a jar with both rounded windows and lid that depicts a rising moon and the words ''SAFE YEAST'' and ''up with the moon.'' The label shows a sunrise and thus suggests both female (in words) and male (in pictures) are rising. Three pages later, a bunch of phallic asparagus spears is countered by a saltshaker's prominent dome. And when Mickey finally tops the tall, thin milk bottle that is ''THE MILKY WAY'' (27) he also tops the moon. While there's a certain sexuality inherent in our full experience of sensuality, Sendak seems to be saying that that is not all there is. A child's fantasies of sexual maturity are balanced by, and closely related to, fantasies of a parallel intellectual maturity. And in Mickey's case, intellectual maturity includes finding one's social role.

Mickey's rise above his dream world resolves itself in something unique for *In the Night Kitchen*, a frameless two-page spread (28–29). Mickey's experiences have carried him (by way of his dough plane) through four thin, vertical panels in which a sky initially speckled with just a few stars has steadily grown full of them. Now, immersed in the two

types of edible dough—one a luxury item (cake) and one more generally available (bread) that represent his levels of previous intellectual experience (and, it might be safe to say, capitalist ''richness,'' since ''dough'' is American slang for money)—Mickey has surmounted the parental moon and finds his view unlimited. He is surrounded by light and hovers above the milk bottle wearing a cup on his head. (It's difficult not to compare the cup, a vessel waiting to be filled with our first nourishment—milk—to a child's mind, waiting to be filled with knowledge.) Mickey's senses are operating on maximum, and these pages show almost the entire world of the night kitchen. There are no frames because the night kitchen has become entirely real to Mickey; he has created a successfully totalizing dream, one coordinating the self, other individuals, and society at large.

Yet, though the frameless pages and impressive spread create a visual climax parallel to the triumph of his inventive journey, Mickey (smaller here than he appears in any other panel) is looking down. Unlike Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, who is able to fill his world both psychologically and pictorially, Mickey's domination is strictly pictorial. Though he is now a confident consumer, he can't help but contemplate the cityscape below him; like America itself, the night kitchen is a virtual paradise of consumption. The buildings are full of food and plastered with advertisements. The Milky Way—usually a part of the greater environment, mysterious, enormous, and untappable—is here just another consumable. Magical as the illustrations make it appear, the view is sobering in its inability to be divorced from the economic and political systems that reign over day-to-day reality. Mickey's thoughtful expression implies that on some level he understands this, which is another indication of his increasing maturity.

As Mickey dives into the milk bottle, he begins the last, arguably most important stage of sensory education present in *In the Night Kitchen*. The dough costume that has carried him so far begins to slough off. Like the pajamas at the beginning of the book, Mickey's dough suit has become a barrier to his perception, and must be eliminated for him to ''blend'' with the milk—and blending is certainly what Mickey is doing. ''I'M IN THE MILK,'' he cries, ''AND THE MILK'S IN ME'' (31). If milk stands for life, fertility, and the mother, it could be argued that Mickey's nude immersion in it represents a kind of regression, a return to the womb.

But milk is also the nourishment divinely provided for heroes, as we see in countless representations of the suckling Christ and of the suckling Romulus and Remus. In Mickey's context, milk, which he seeks with eyes, hands, and brain by making an airplane, is nourishment for the body even as understanding the true nature of milk is knowledge that is nourishment for the mind. Mickey, like all great children who become culture heroes, grows in strength and knowledge. According to dominant Western cultural traditions, knowledge can be both carnal and intellectual, but either way, its source is divine. Mickey acknowledges this, even if only implicitly, with his next line: ''GOD BLESS MILK AND GOD BLESS ME!''

When Mickey delivers that line his cup is tipped so that he appears to be drinking. This is the first time during the narrative that he has taken anything from the night kitchen into his own body. Now that he has become an active consumer and taken in the knowledge of milk, he can share the milk with others—and two panels later (32), that's exactly what he does, pouring milk down to the cake pan two of the bakers proffer. This two-panel sequence is important in that, like the frameless two-page spread, it not only contains all of the characters from the night kitchen, but shows each fulfilling his social role. The bakers carry in the cake pan, and Mickey delivers his contribution. In the right

panel, we see the ever-present drill bit, in the left panel the domed saltshaker. The round cake pan is balanced in the right panel by the shaft of a wooden spoon held at 90°. Mickey himself, while pouring the milk, is roughly the same size as, and directly next to, the moon, and tucked into the right-hand corner of the page we even see the dough plane, which appears headed for a landing. All elements of the world are in harmony.

The Quiet Triumph of an American Hero

The narrative reflects this visual harmony in that Mickey's milk allows the bakers to mix up their cake again, this time successfully. There's no need to continue the dream. Mickey's sensory observations have allowed him to learn enough to complete the simultaneously personal and social task he alone was capable of, and now (36), cup back on his head (the cup a sign of authority much like the tall crown Max wears once he has conquered the land of the Wild Things), Mickey has a brief moment as alpha male, calling up the sun, before he slips back into bed. All traces of the night kitchen leave him as he falls into a vaginal-looking blanket, emerging a panel later "CAKEFREE" (39) in the clothes he left behind. Sendak drives home that Mickey's adventure was no wasteful wet dream with the word "DRIED."

Mickey's last word, delivered with a smile, is "YUM!" (39) His time in the night kitchen has been educational, enriching rather than merely diverting, an idea emphasized by the fact that, though he fell out of bed to begin his adventure, he must also fall down into bed to end it. That is, the return to bed is not an undoing of the dream experience but the signal that Mickey has gained something from above, just as in the dream he brought milk from above. Mickey's dream experience implies repeatability—our protagonist is young; his years of learning and social struggle are by no means over; but he will rise and rise again, each time returning to safety—as in his bed—enriched. Thus, the last, circular panel of the book (40) carries a critical weight.

Emphasizing not only the importance of dreams, but the importance of imagination and sensual experience to the creation of a balanced—and therefore successful and sustainable—learning experience, the last panel also creates a pictorial and textual conclusion that satisfies the book's political and economic motifs. Mickey, now is not only not subservient to the parental moon but is actually emblazoned on the surface of a beaming sun which is the fully risen version of the sun we saw on the "SAFE YEAST" label [21]. Mickey stands clothed in batter, his right arm around a bottle of milk. His eyes aren't open—he isn't knowledgeable enough yet to see exactly what he's accomplished—but his smile and posture convey new confidence. He is wearing cake, a food traditionally associated with the upper classes (and therefore off-limits to most new immigrants) but the text wrapping around him says, "AND THAT'S WHY, THANKS TO MICKEY[COMMA?] WE HAVE CAKE EVERY MORNING." By turning Mickey's experience in the night kitchen into an explanatory myth, Sendak confirms the notion that Mickey is a culture hero, in this case a hero for a democratic culture. What Sendak now seems to be referring to is the circular pancake, something everyone can eat, regardless of social status, and, in historical fact, a very early example (in mix form) of mass-produced and mass-consumed convenience food (Wallechinsky). After all, it is "WE" that have cake, not "THEY" or "SOME." The reader, formerly an outside observer of the world of Mickey's story, has suddenly become part of the group reaping the rewards of Mickey's labors. Max, returning from a world of internal,

individual profit, has managed to attain food for himself alone. But Mickey, returning from a world where he has learned to play an external, social role in the environment, is able to provide food for all.

As Mickey's social status has gone up, cake's has come down, and *In the Night Kitchen* ends with an inclusive statement smiling up around a circular, integrative graphic. A positive assimilation has taken place and the audience, as well as the protagonist, has benefited from the experience. The sunburst design around Mickey is composed of all the colors—and only the colors—of the races that make up America.

It seems somewhat ironic that a book so conscious of commercial and social integration should remain inferior to many of Sendak's other works in overall sales. The problem is clearly not a lack of thoughtful content or of graphic skill—*In the Night Kitchen's* broad cityscapes, detailed caricatures, and rapidly changing layout result in one of Sendak's most richly colored and visually complicated works. Perhaps it is all a question of properly savoring the ingredients. Misreading the book's emphasis on sensuality as a fixation on sexuality may start many readers out on the defensive. Should those same readers find themselves unfamiliar with the multicultural environment and popular culture of early twentieth century New York, many of Sendak's symbols and allusions may pass unnoticed or seem nonsensical. Unlike *Where the Wild Things Are*, a book set almost entirely in a fantastic jungle full of imaginary beings, *In the Night Kitchen* is rooted in a reality that has become dated. Most children today won't recognize Oliver Hardy and perhaps not even the Mickey Mouse oven, and it is hard to believe that any children from 1970 on could catch the similarity between Mickey and Winsor McCay's comic-strip character Little Nemo in Slumberland (published 1905–1913). *In the Night Kitchen* is certainly not a book that everyone can appreciate all at once, but to reject it for that reason seems a great waste and a sad mistake. Sendak's complex work is a special rarity—a book strange and beautiful enough to delight children, and intellectually rich enough not only to delight the adults reading it to them but to convey a message of self and society worthy of all ages.

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