

## Avoiding Bernard:

### The Illustration of Insecure Attachment in *Not Now, Bernard*

**Barbara Katharina Reschenhofer**

#### Abstract

As picturebooks are growing more diverse in terms of their modalities, design, and subject matters, interdisciplinary approaches of analysis become increasingly warranted. In this article, I advocate for a specific lens through which classics of children's literature can be read so that a deeper understanding of their semantic complexities may be attained – namely that of attachment theory. Attachment theory stems from the field of developmental psychology and investigates the formation of secure and insecure attitudes toward attachment. I therefore believe that attachment theory lends itself well to the examination of texts which focus on parent-child relationships, such as David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard*. In my article, I will provide a brief overview of attachment theory as well as an introduction to *Not Now, Bernard* before analysing the latter via the former. The analysis moreover entails suggestions for how a text like McKee's picturebook classic can be used to promote visual literacy, emotional literacy, and spontaneous speech in the English language classroom.

**Keywords:** attachment, children's literature, picturebook, *Not Now Bernard*, emotional literacy

**Barbara Katharina Reschenhofer** is a PhD student of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna. She is writing her doctoral thesis on picturebooks about flight and specializes in multimodal children's literature. Having taught English in various classrooms, Reschenhofer is also deeply familiar with the practical side of English Language Teaching (ELT).

## Introduction

David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (1980) is a picturebook classic enjoyed by both adult and child readers alike. Because of its subject matter – disengaged parents remaining oblivious to their son's repeated cries for attention – the book semi-comically plays on relatable scenarios for both children and parents. With its multimodal construction of family dynamics in the mundane and domestic day-to-day, McKee's picturebook moreover becomes an ideal springboard for conversations about family, emotion, and narrative meaning in the classroom and beyond. This article therefore draws attention to the multi-faceted pedagogic potential of *Not Now, Bernard* in the English language classroom for learners of all proficiency levels but also critically analyses the portrayal of caregiver-child relationships for a wider discussion on emotional literacy.

From Freudian readings of picturebooks to discussions of trauma as a popularized trope, psychoanalytical readings of literary texts are no rarity (Kidd, 2011, p. xxv, 182; see also Farrell, 1998, p. 2). In this article, however, the intention is not to ascribe a pathologic diagnosis to the fictional adult, child, or monster. Rather, character dynamics are examined through the lens of attachment theory – the study of human attachment attitudes and how these develop and change over time. The key word here is change, as attachment styles are in no way fixed personality traits or disorders, but behavioural tendencies informed by prior experiences. As an attempt to move away from classifying characters as inherently malicious, spiteful, or uncaring, I demonstrate how *Not Now, Bernard* can be read less as a cautionary tale for unruly children or imperfect parents and more as an example for how a multitude of micro-interactions can have a profound, cumulative, and escalating effect on young and impressionable minds. Because *Not Now, Bernard* broaches familiar everyday themes, I argue that it is particularly suited for facilitating fluency practice whilst simultaneously fostering critical thought and emotional competencies in young learners and speakers of English. In order to illustrate how open dialogue around issues of miscommunication can help young readers develop these essential skills, I will first introduce both the field of attachment theory and McKee's book in more detail. I then examine avoidant attachment tendencies and perceived parental rejection in the book and discuss the educational and pedagogical implications of my overall analysis.

### Attachment Theory: Origin and Insights

Attachment theory dates back to the 1950s, when John Bowlby and Mary Salter Ainsworth joined forces to devise a scientifically sound, theoretical framework to categorize human social behaviours according to attachment styles (Bretherton, 1992, p. 759). The theory describes how attachment behaviours and attitudes are formed in early childhood, influenced by the relationship between child and primary caregiver. Attachment styles broadly vary between secure and insecure, whereby the latter is rooted in a lack of trust that reliable, emotional support is available to the insecurely attached individual (Heard et al., 2012, p. 44). Aside from their family life, a child's attachment style can also influence how they engage with peers at school or the approach they take when learning a new skill. For instance, insecurely attached children may be prone to deploying emotional defence mechanisms which interfere with the overall learning process (Heard et al., 2012, p. 82).

One insight from attachment theory, which is most relevant to the present paper, is what attachment researchers commonly refer to as the 'Dependency Paradox' (Feeney, 2007, p. 268). In layperson's terms, the dependency paradox describes the phenomenon wherein a child will more independently explore a new environment, so long as they can rely on the presence of a primary guardian for a secure base. Ainsworth first observed such behaviour in a laboratory procedure, titled *The Strange Situation*, which showed that children explored new spaces more fearlessly, knowing their mother was present in the background rather than when the parent either shortly left the room or was briefly replaced by an unfamiliar woman (Bretherton, 1992, p. 765; see also Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Most fascinating in this experiment were the children's varying responses upon the return of their respective mothers. Whereas some expressed their upset through physical violence, others ignored their parent, even after having looked for them while separated (Bretherton, 1992, p. 765). Correlations were found between positive, negative, or outwardly indifferent child reactions to their returning mothers and the circumstances surrounding the pre-existing homelife and mother-child rapport (Bretherton, 1992, p. 765; see also Ainsworth et al., 1974). Such documented child responses gave rise to terminology which has prevailed in various studies of attachment, such as the secure or the avoidant label for the different attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Nowadays, attachment theory has become high in demand – not only in academia but also in more accessible literature for wider audiences – for providing a popular toolkit to examine adult romantic relationships, as first made popular by Hazan and Shaver (1987, p. 511). Attachment theory as we know it today describes four major attachment styles, one of which represents secure attachment, whereas the remaining three are types of insecure attachment. Depending on the scholar and context of application, the names used to label the four main attachment styles slightly differ. For this paper, I choose to use the following terminologies when referring to the four, well-researched attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, anxious-avoidant. For the analysis of *Not Now Bernard*, I will focus on the avoidant, more specifically the dismissive-avoidant, attachment style. My analysis of McKee's picturebook will demonstrate in how far dismissive attitudes toward attachment manifest in several of the depicted characters. Before commencing with the analysis, the following must be disclaimed: A common misconception about attachment styles is that they constitute four personality types. This is categorically false, as attachment styles are fluid and can change over time, depending on multiple factors and circumstances (Davila et al. 1997, p. 826; Hudson et al. 2020, p. 93). Furthermore, one individual can express varying attachment behaviours toward different people in their lives. An attachment style is, therefore, neither a personality trait or disorder nor is it a diagnosis or an unchangeable pattern of behaviour.

### ***Not Now, Bernard: A Challenging Picturebook***

Although David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (1980) is a well-known picturebook, it has not garnered as much academic attention as one might expect. Before commencing with my own analysis, I will outline the plot and highlight some of the research conducted on McKee's book to consider how far it may relate to my own. *Not Now, Bernard* follows the protagonist, Bernard, around his house, as he repeatedly attempts to get his parents' attention. Neither the boy's mother nor father pay Bernard much attention, even when Bernard tells them about a monster in the garden wanting to eat him. Defeated by his parents' disinterest, the boy eventually goes out into the garden, where the monster indeed proceeds to eat him. When the monster then takes Bernard's place and attempts to garner the parent's attention in the house, the parents do not bother to look up and spot the monster. Instead, they address it as 'Bernard', thinking that their

son is still trying to distract them from whichever mundane activity happens to occupy them in that moment. Left to its own devices, the monster entertains itself in the family home, before finally going to bed in Bernard's room. The story ends without Bernard's absence ever going noticed by the parents (McKee, 1980, unpaginated).

Nicholas Royle draws attention to the '**simplicity and profundity**, the gentleness and violence of this tiny text' (2009, p. 22, emphasis in original) and deconstructs much of the book's language and imagery by relating it to Derridean thought. Derrida is cited to illustrate the concept of the replaceable hero, who must be interchangeable in the here and now (Royle, 2009, p. 24; see also Derrida, 2000). This, again, ties back to the picturebook's title – *Not Now, Bernard* – which begs the eerie question: If not now, when? For Bernard in the story, the answer seems to be: Too late. Royle acknowledges that the monster eating the boy can be read many ways. Aside from the various 'unspoken monstrosities that haunt this little text' (Royle 2009, p. 24), such as Bernard being already dead to the parents, Royle adds the possibility that Bernard himself becomes the monster (p. 25). This particular reading of the climax in *Not Now, Bernard* is the one I explore in the present article.

In Klaus Flugge and Janet Evans' conversation about challenging picturebooks 'and their place in contemporary society' (Flugge & Evans 2015, p. 263), *Not Now, Bernard* is also cited. Flugge and Evans (2015) discuss the emergent tendency for over-protective parents to censor potentially problematic books before their children can independently explore them (p. 270). Flugge notes that adults 'often accept a child's existing vocabulary but don't always consider their expanding mind' (Flugge & Evans 2015, p. 270). This conversation is particularly interesting, when tying it to a text like *Not Now, Bernard*, which does not seem to have a clearly designated, intended audience. Readers of different demographics will experience the book in different ways, depending on various factors like their past upbringing or whether the reading is guided or independent.

In fact, research by Karin Murriss (2013) succinctly illustrates a case of young readers responding to the story's grim climax in a teacher-led setting. Like Flugge and Evans (2015), Murriss (2013) asserts that 'teachers tend to protect children at the expense of academic freedom and children's autonomy' (p. 95). In her analysis of *Not Now, Bernard*, Murriss draws on data she had collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s, having interviewed 9-year-olds for her PhD

project (Murriss, 2013, p. 93). Murriss as well as the children clearly seem to draw a line between Bernard and the monster in terms of identity. Because Bernard effectively goes out into the garden to see a monster which ends up eating him, a philosophical discussion about suicide ensues. Murriss recounts conversations between the nine-year-olds and their teacher, who invited the children to speculate as to why Bernard would walk up to a potentially threatening monster. What is fascinating about Murriss' accounts of the children discussing McKee's book is their discernment between suicide as a deliberate and intentional act and self-killing as an umbrella term for suicide but also unintentional self-inflicted death (Murriss, 2013, p. 94). Overall, the detailed exchange between teacher and pupils acknowledges the boy and the monster as exclusively separate characters. The notion that Bernard and his antagonist could represent the same person is not entertained. Here, Murriss stresses that the nine-year-old children did not think to see Bernard and the monster as two embodiments of one figure for purely logical reasons. Rather than them not being mature enough or lacking the life experience to imagine such a concept, the reason as to why young readers see the boy and monster as two separate characters is simply due to the fact that the picturebook depicts them as such: 'For the children, the visual information in the narrative makes it logically impossible [not to separate Bernard from the monster]' (Murriss, 2013, p. 95).

Although Murriss focuses on the concept of self-killing and the children's responses to *Not Now, Bernard*, she does acknowledge the book's message for adult readers, 'namely that children turn into monsters when neglected' (Murriss, 2013, p. 95). As young learners certainly benefit from exploring their texts in a variety of ways, I want to offer a reading of *Not Now, Bernard* which is, in some ways, similar to Murriss' (2013), but with a more nuanced look through a novel lens. Murriss (2013) seems to conclude that the censorship and silencing of complex texts as well as the overzealous efforts to protect pupils from supposedly disturbing subject matters can inhibit a child's ability to critically contemplate social, emotional, and philosophical issues: 'Philosophical listening in the classroom implies turning one's back on the assumption that older is necessarily wiser, and accepting that a child or young person, like any other, can reveal something not yet considered or so far unspoken' (Murriss, 2013, p. 96).

In discussing *Not Now Bernard*, I am interested in investigating the multimodal construction of a narrative wherein the consequences of primary caregivers' neglectful

behaviours result in their child's development of insecure attitudes toward attachment. Depending on how this text is engaged with at home or in the classroom, it has the potential to give rise to countless pedagogic and educational opportunities.

Gareth B. Matthews calls *Not Now, Bernard* a 'dark comedy' (1992, p. 1) and ascribes to it cathartic qualities. Even more than a cathartic tragicomedy, I see the picturebook classic as a multimodal mapping out of the vicious cycle of insecure attachment styles, passed on through generations. Just as Murriss' (2013) research shows that a guided reading of *Not Now, Bernard* can, for instance, focus on the subject of self-killing, I suggest that an educated – and educating – reading through the lens of attachment theory can be a relatable, teachable and beneficial experience for both adults and children, if conducted in an appropriate setting. In her discussion of psychoanalytic ideas for early education, Julia Manning-Morton (2011) mentions *Not Now, Bernard* as a powerful text in helping 'very young children to start to understand and begin to manage their feelings' (p. 31). Indeed, I concur that the guided reading of a book like *Not Now, Bernard* can help children make sense of complex emotions in a supportive way, before the child experiencing them first-hand can turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms.

As the unique application of attachment theory to literature has, largely, not yet been explored, my approach represents a novel undertaking, inspired by Kay Young, who, in 2012, wrote about the foreshadowed revelations about human attachment found in the work of Dickens (Young, 2012, p. 234). Most relevant to my own analysis is also Mary Galbraith's (1998) application of the attachment perspective to the study of bedtime picturebooks (p. 172). Making the case for the emergent lens of attachment theory as a tool to re-read classics and, in general, decode literary and cultural texts, I exemplify its application via the example of *Not Now, Bernard*, while discussing the pedagogical and educational aspects of reading children's literature through this lens. As hypothesized by Mary Galbraith (2000), a picturebook being 'motivated throughout by a creator's restaging of early trauma' (p. 639) is crucial for it to become a classic within the genre. My discussion examines in how far *Not Now, Bernard* constructs such instances of early trauma through the narrative of parental neglect.

---

### The Cycle of Avoidance in *Not Now, Bernard*

#### Unmet needs: Bernard's attempts at closeness

In *Not Now, Bernard*, Bernard continuously seeks his parents' attention until the very moment he is eaten by a monster he had warned his parents about. Because Bernard initially, rather calmly, attempts to engage his parents in conversation by simply saying 'Hello, Dad' (McKee, 1980, unpaginated) or 'Hello, Mum' (unpaginated), it seems as though the boy's mention of the monster is a sudden and creative fabrication to help him persuade the adults that he is worth their time. Just after his mother tells him, for the first time, 'Now now, Bernard', Bernard is depicted in a pensive pose, standing behind the mother's back. With a finger on his chin and his gaze directed at the ceiling, Bernard's stance could suggest that he is decidedly concocting a strategy to win his parents over. Immediately following the recto of pensive Bernard, the next double spread's verso shows Bernard pointing to the right, in the direction of the garden, saying, 'There's a monster in the garden and it's going to eat me'.

The continuous and cumulative rejection of Bernard by his parents raises questions as to whether this consistent exposure to parental dismissiveness may constitute emotional trauma. Atilgan Erozkán (2016) investigates the interrelated effects of childhood trauma and attachment and to what extent childhood trauma can predict future attachment styles (p. 1071). Though much research on trauma is dedicated to severe cases of child sexual abuse or physical neglect, the steady cumulation of more covert doses of emotional childhood neglect is not to be underestimated. Erozkán (2016) discusses instances wherein caregivers fail to support young ones in coming to terms with their anxieties (p. 1072) and emphasizes that 'such behaviours conducted by the caregivers confront the children with a dilemma of how to safely approach or avoid the person they are attached to' (Erozkán, 2016, p. 1072). A useful discussion in teacher education, perhaps even in the classroom, could be whether in *Not Now, Bernard*, the boy's failed attempts to get his parents to notice him result in Bernard creating a story about a monster in the garden. Rather than being encouraged to practice safe, open, and honest communication, the protagonist may feel as though his concerns are not worth listening to unless he dramatizes them.

To Bernard's disappointment, even the mention of a monster does not achieve the desired outcome, as 'Not now, Bernard' the mother merely retorts to her son's concern about a monster



planning to eat him. As she dismisses her son's worries, the mother is depicted looking cross. Bernard appears to have distracted her from watering a potted plant on the verso, as the recto depicts spilled water around the pot and an irritated mother, still with her back turned toward her son. While the woman stands by the plant, her brows are furrowed to show she is annoyed, Bernard coyly stands in the corner with his arms behind his back, perhaps in shame at having angered his mother. This breaks the pattern of prior double-page spreads, which show the boy walking up to his parents optimistically, with a smile on his face. Experiencing rejection via the repetitive 'Not now, Bernard', Bernard walks away, looking pale, frightened, or ashamed, after every initially hopeful attempt to interact with either parent.

### **Reading Bernard: Visual and emotional literacy**

In a classroom setting, the straightforward initial repetition of the boy's parents rejecting his bids for attention opens up numerous possibilities for English language learners to interactively engage with the text. Generally, picturebooks and other multimodal texts are deemed well-suited for teachers to explore creative methods of engaging young learners with content and composition (Bland, 2015, p. 185). Janice Bland (2015), for instance, suggests a possible scenario where a 'teacher might choose to show a film without the pictures or without the sound, and invite the children to predict' (p. 185). Similarly, using a picturebook as an interactive landscape for narrative prediction in the classroom not only provides opportunities for fluency practice, but also promotes critical and creative thought. Because of the repetitive first half of McKee's text, young readers, firstly, become more familiar with the iconic phrase in *Not Now, Bernard* and confident with the language used in the text, and, secondly, can be playfully challenged to co-construct meaning and vocalize their predictions to their peers and teachers.

Aside from becoming more familiar with language through repetition and vocalizing plot predictions in an engaging classroom discussion, young English language learners can moreover be invited to share their thoughts on Bernard's innermost feelings as the narrative progresses. This combination of fluency practice, visual literacy, and emotional literacy development is enabled, in part, by the illustration style of *Not Now, Bernard*. Clare Painter, James Martin, and Len Unsworth (2013) discern three major illustrations styles commonly used in children's picturebooks. Unlike naturalistic and generic styles, the minimalist style, according to Painter et

al. (2013), is typically used in texts which convey a sort of social commentary (p. 34). Painter et al. (2013) explicitly name *Not Now, Bernard* as an example for a minimalist depiction style which creates 'some emotional distance' (p. 34) between reader and character, as the latter is depicted more cartoon-esque than life-like. Moreover, Painter et al. (2013) suggest that 'the minimalist style is the least naturalistic and its decipherment is therefore most clearly a matter of visual literacy' (p. 32).

The illustration style in McKee's picturebook classic therefore promotes the use of visual literacy whilst simultaneously being quite straightforward in its depiction of emotive faces, which in turn enables young readers to practice emotional literacy. Maria Nikolajeva's (2013) observation that a 'vast number of picturebooks are focused on these [basic] emotions' (p. 251), such as happy, angry, or scared, certainly seems to apply to *Not Now, Bernard*. As basic emotions can be more easily recognized in minimalist illustrations, the vocabulary necessary to discuss them in the classroom will be equally basic and less of a linguistic challenge. With more confidence and ease, language learners will draw on words they feel comfortable with already in order to focus on the content of the text instead of worrying about incorrect language use in front of their peers or teacher. Furthermore, a classroom discussion of McKee's picturebook ideally lends itself to a lesson in emotional literacy, as students can be invited to demonstrate their own interpretations of various emotions by creating facial expressions in class, for instance. This way, young learners get the opportunity to experience and observe, first-hand, that one emotion may look differently, depending on the individual experiencing or expressing it. Additionally, students could offer words for emotions and feelings in their own language(s), which the teacher recasts into English, allowing exploration in more detail and with greater attention to nuance and context.

In addition, because the subject matter of parent-child dynamics will be relatable to most children, pupils may be more open to vocalizing their thoughts on a text like McKee's (1980). Especially because the illustrated facial expressions in *Not Now, Bernard* represent a form of comic relief from the more serious underlying topic of neglect, a light-hearted conversation about parents' hobbies and homelife can ensue from reading the *Not Now, Bernard* in the classroom. Unlike perhaps more overtly educational picturebooks on topics like biology or history, a story like Bernard's positions each reader as the expert on family and homelife.

### Critical enquiry: Appreciating Bernard's emotions

Though Bernard attempts to connect with his parents on multiple occasions, their dismissiveness ultimately leads to the boy himself becoming dismissive of reality. Shelley A. Riggs (2010) explains that dismissive caregivers reject or ignore their infants' attempts at garnering attention, resulting in the child displaying avoidant behaviours themselves. Such children grow to become 'overly self-reliant' (p. 11), as they have learned to cope with their caregivers' unreliability in time of need. Though Bernard himself is no longer an infant, his parents' emotional unavailability undoubtedly has a lasting effect on him. Moreover, the parents' consistent show of neglect justifies speculation as to whether their parenting style might have looked similar from the moment Bernard was born.

*Not Now, Bernard* cleverly plays with the comical ambiguity of mundane circumstances (distracted but not overtly abusive parents) versus extreme consequences (a boy being eaten by a monster). In a classroom context, this ambivalence can function as a springboard for critical conversations surrounding perspective and empathy. For instance, young readers may benefit from learning that children like Bernard are not to blame for their parents' neglect. This critical enquiry into the child's as well as the parent's perspective calls for readers to pause and reflect on the verbal and visual cues in the text. As pointed out by Meryl Jaffe and Talia Hurwich (2018), who primarily discuss graphic novels, multimodal literature can aid the reader's acquisition of verbal as well as visual literacies (p. 75-77). I find that their acronym, OREO, can be applied to the reading of picturebooks like *Not Now, Bernard* as well:

**Observe details** in the text, panel images, and design elements.

**Read text** provided in dialogue, thought, and narrative balloons.

**Evaluate** what you just read or saw in and between the panels to make sure it makes sense before continuing.

**Onward** to the next panel or page (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018, p. 77).

Details to be observed in *Not Now, Bernard* include depictions of facial expressions and body language and the way these change from one panel to the next on each double spread. Because the verbal text in this picturebook is rather minimal and repetitive, the illustrations provide

valuable information about the characters' emotive delivery of the otherwise scant direct speech. Evaluating the significance of the build-up of rejected bids for attention is moreover necessary for the reader to make sense of the second half of the text, wherein a monster finally eats Bernard and takes his place in the household. Only by appreciating the multimodal relationship between the repetitive phrase 'Not now, Bernard' and the progressive despair on Bernard's face will readers be able to reach their own conclusions as to whether Bernard is eaten by or transforms into the monster – aside from other possible hypotheses. In this way, a slow reading of McKee's book which follows Jaffe and Hurwich's (2018, p. 77) four-step OREO model can motivate young readers to practise synergizing emotional, visual, and verbal literacies.

### **Deactivation: A vicious cycle**

The minimalist yet expressive looks of discomfort on Bernard's face after each failed attempt at a dialogue are also symbolic of the trauma of emotional neglect building up in the boy. Studies on child-guardian relationships and attachment suggest that a primary caregiver's neglect can indeed contribute to a child developing an insecure attachment style (Naismith et al., 2019, p. 351). Children who develop an avoidant style of insecure attachment tend to become afraid of emotional closeness (Naismith et al., 2019, p. 352) and this can, roughly, be explained by the child feeling left to their own devices early on. Having to self-soothe and cope with the absence or neglect of one or more primary caregivers, the child, over time, recognizes safety and familiarity in solitude but discomfort and entrapment in situations involving emotional intimacy. This is exemplified by Bernard choosing to wander off alone before risking another failed attempt at engaging his parents in conversation. Results from a study on child sensory processing, conducted by Kerley et al. (2021), found in addition correlations between parenting behaviours and the respective children's attachment styles. For instance, it has been observed that '[p]arents of avoidantly attached children reported higher levels of parental strain and used fewer protective parenting behaviours (e.g., they were less likely to encourage the child to avoid painful activities)' (Kerley et al., 2021, p. 1554). Studies like Kerley et al.'s (2021) evidence that a vicious cycle of avoidance is likely to ensue when both parties, child and caregiver, capitulate to their respective insecure proclivities.

For educators of children of all ages, such insights can become invaluable in terms of

informing in-classroom approaches and potentially even spotting avoidant tendencies in young pupils. Of course, a critical reading of *Not Now, Bernard* most likely will not suffice to help a child overcome potential attachment issues. I nevertheless believe that broaching the topic of attachment and emotional responses in a language-learning context can lead to the symbiotic achievement of encouraging speech production and inviting open dialogue about human emotion. When children are given the language tools to express themselves on more abstract subject matters, they will naturally be able to cognitively access and consciously consider new perspectives on existing beliefs. Practising these skills in the context of discussing a fictional family moreover creates a more neutral and less daunting circumstance than a classroom discussion about individual, personal anecdotes. This way, young learners benefit from practising effective communication skills on how to openly talk about delicate emotions without having to overstep personal boundaries.

Some of the maladaptive responses to negative emotion which apply to Bernard include deactivating – a term used for avoidantly attached individuals emotionally detaching from a person or a situation. Riggs (2010) describes this as ‘compulsive self-reliance’ (p. 7). Growing up with negative core beliefs and maladaptive coping mechanisms, children like Bernard are likely to transfer learned behaviours from childhood into adulthood, oftentimes resulting in dysfunctional adult relationships. Severely insecurely attached individuals who do not actively work toward becoming more securely attached are thus at risk of passing on their attachment wounds to their offspring in a vicious cycle of trauma (Riggs, 2010, p. 8).

When Bernard finally ventures out into the garden and greets the monster in the same manner he had consistently greeted his parents, the purple, unfriendly-looking creature devours the boy. In the context of attachment theory, the monster eating Bernard can be read as the protagonist's first deactivation, marking the solidification of an avoidant attachment style. After having repeatedly tried to engage his parents in conversation, Bernard surrenders to the fact that he cannot rely on his primary caregivers to meet his emotional needs. He disavows his needy existence as Bernard the boy and, in an act of deactivation, turns into the very monster he initially fabricated for attention.

The fact that figuratively turning into another being becomes Bernard's last resort is a testament to how unsafe the boy feels in his own home. In his human form, he is vulnerable to

the emotional pain from the neglect by the people he relies on most. The act of wandering off into the supposedly unsafe garden is, therefore, not necessarily an act of self-harm but rather an escape from an environment Bernard already knows to be unsafe for certain: 'Children exposed to abusive and neglecting environments are likely to present distressed behaviour which is hard to control and may also consider their environments as unsafe' (Erozkan, 2016, p. 1076). The fact that his own home has become emotionally hurtful leads Bernard to walk off by himself. Alone in the garden, he turns into the monster and leaves behind his fragile identity as a human boy who consistently had to experience disappointment and hurt from those closest to him. Examining *Not Now, Bernard* through the lens of attachment theory undoubtedly presents the texts in a rather serious and less playful light. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that the book's minimalistic depiction style (Painter et al., 2013, p. 34) and overall comical nature relieve the text of most of its underlying heaviness.

### **Self-soothing strategies: Bernard as the monster**

The ending to *Not Now, Bernard* raises important questions about the potentially maladaptive self-soothing strategies of children who develop an avoidant attachment style. Riggs explains that avoidant strategies are implemented to avoid negative emotions and to achieve 'distance, control, and independence' (Riggs, 2020, p. 22; with reference to Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). As Bernard had previously been at the mercy of his parents' (un)willingness to interact with him, Bernard takes control by re-inventing himself. He may still have the same needs for intimacy and closeness but no longer expects his parents to meet these for him. Instead, Bernard, in monster form, goes on to meet his own needs by practising self-soothing activities.

Before turning to these activities though, Bernard experiences a final rejection by his indifferent parents, when he, as the monster, attempts to startle the mother or get the father to look up from his newspaper. The parents do not acknowledge Bernard's new, purple, and frightening appearance and treat him no differently than before. This supports a reading of *Not Now, Bernard* through the lens of attachment theory, whereby the boy is not physically eaten and replaced by a monster. To everyone but Bernard and the reader, the boy still looks the same. His deactivation is not visible to the parents, who are equally blind to their own short-comings as neglectful caregivers.

When now-turned-monster Bernard sees that his parents are unshakeable in their indifferent dismissiveness, he indulges in self-soothing activities. Monster-Bernard eats dinner by himself, watches television by himself, reads comics by himself, destroys toys by himself, and finally goes to bed by himself. Not once does he repeat the behaviour displayed in the very beginning, namely calmly walking up to his parents for an attempted chat. Instead, Bernard embraces his monstrous identity by intentionally bothering his parents before going to play by himself. Monster-Bernard has learned that recoiling and relying on nobody but himself is less painful and therefore safer. This way, the picturebook, albeit rather humorously, emphasizes the negative effects of excessive self-reliance by not providing any sort of resolution for the dysfunctional parent-child relationships. Pointing out the advantages of effective self-soothing as well as the disadvantages of excessive self-reliance in a language learning context can pave the way for a lively and engaged classroom discussion in which pupils share organic thoughts and ideas through spontaneous and engaged speech in the form of a co-operative booktalk. Going back to Bland's (2015, p. 185) use of multimodal means to invite prediction, the open ending in *Not Now, Bernard* is an ideal opener for class predictions about the future of Monster-Bernard living with the two oblivious caregivers.

Ultimately, Bernard pays the price for his maladaptive coping mechanisms by losing his human form, that is parts of his identity and innocence. This omission of a potential resolution or happy ending can be viewed as a type of narrative gap in McKee's text. Janet Evans even deems *Not Now, Bernard* 'a brilliant example of a picturebook with a "gap"' (Flugge & Evans, 2015, p. 267; see also Iser, 1978). Sandie Mourão (2013) adds that 'communication between reader and text begins when the reader fills the gaps' (p. 99), and many argue that this can be optimally exploited in a language learning context. A joint reading of *Not Now, Bernard* requires ongoing dialogue not just between teacher and pupil and/or pupil and pupil but also between text and reader. Because of the book's double-panel format, meaning can be re-negotiated from one double spread to the next, as young readers co-construct meaning with one another, their teacher, and the text itself. The gap in communication between Bernard and his parents is likewise a narrative gap which the reader might fill by co-constructing meaning as the text is read and re-read with classmates and teachers.

In her discussion of picturebooks as tools for oral language practice in second language

acquisition, Teresa Fleta (2019) explains that 'children use illustrations as a language scaffold' (p. 243), making 'picturebook illustrations [...] ideal tools to elicit oral language from children as well as to support natural acquisition of language' (p. 243). Moreover, by scaffolding the speech of young learners, minimalist illustrations help bridge the gap between a child's cognitive capabilities and their language skills (see Flugge & Evans, 2015, p. 270). In being multimodal in nature, picturebooks constitute ideal circumstances for language learners to, for instance, point at images which they lack vocabulary for. This way, a mutual form of elicitation can take place between the educator and the learner. Aside from the teacher eliciting spoken responses to a double spread, the child can request oral language assistance by briefly pointing toward a depicted character, object, or element. The key here is for the educator to only fill the language gaps which are explicitly indicated in the child's pointing. Completing a child's entire sentence should be avoided as this would defeat the purpose of oral language elicitation.

I therefore concur with Fleta (2019), who asserts that 'picturebooks offer rich potential for meaning making and play a role in children's spontaneous speech production during spoken face-to-face conversational interaction' (p. 247). The gaps throughout and at the end of *Not Now, Bernard* create room for language learners to use both imagination and critical reflection to infer and suggest what may happen to the monster and Bernard's parents after the final page has been turned. This type of co-constructing meaning beyond a text's given information is a clear example of how a picturebook with challenging subject matters and open endings can be used to transition into other, related topics after a joint reading has ended.

### **A note on gender: Spotlighting the dismissive mother**

What is striking in *Not Now, Bernard* is that most pages focus on the mother dismissing Bernard's need for attention and closeness. Although the father is also shown disregarding his son's desire to be heard, the mother figure appears on ten single-page images whereas the father only appears on four (see Table 1). Therefore, a heavier focus emerges on the mother's parental shortcomings as compared to the father's. Bernard's father is depicted hammering a nail into the wall or reading the news on the sofa, whereas the mother is seen filling a jug with water, watering the plants, painting the walls, calling Bernard to dinner, telling Bernard to go to bed, and switching off Bernard's lights once it is bedtime.



Mother being dismissive	Father being dismissive	No parent depicted
10	4	8

Table 1. Number of single pages (recto or verso) featuring either the mother, father, or neither in *Not Now, Bernard*

The parents clearly adhere to stereotypical gender roles, whereby the mother is in charge of most of the domestic housework. Though only half of the father's activities serve the household as a whole, arguably all of the mother's duties benefit more members of the family than just herself. Shining the spotlight on the mother not only reveals gendered expectations about what the maternal caregiver should be taking care of, but it also shifts most of the blame for poor parenting onto the woman of the house. While Bernard's mother is doing the dishes or watering an indoor plant, the reader has no knowledge of what is keeping the father busy at that moment. Furthermore, the fact that Bernard appears to seek out his mother more frequently than his father might suggest that the latter has been even less accommodating to Bernard's needs in the past.

Being aware of gendered depictions of parental figures is particularly important in a 21st century English language classroom context. The picturebooks which children are given to consume represent impactful stimuli, which can affect individual pupils to varying degrees. Being aware of implicit biases in texts accessible to children and explicitly raising their problematics in the classroom can help counteract the un-checked internalization of sociocultural stereotypes. This way, the potential bias in *Not Now, Bernard* opens up opportunities for teachers to promote critical literacy in the classroom and beyond. In openly questioning the depicted roles, educators can demonstrate critical enquiry to their pupils. Drawing on their teachers' approach, young learners are then able to, more autonomously over time, deploy similar critical thinking and reading strategies when reading other texts.

### Conclusion and Implications

In most English language classrooms, attachment theory will, naturally, not be taught outright. However, just like with other complexities of human psychology, literature can serve as a medium to get pupils thinking about other people's inner workings as well as their own, and

developing their theory of mind. Just as picturebooks about war or the environment can let young learners reflect on thoughts and experiences of others as well as their own (Habegger-Conti, 2021, p. 64; Goga & Pujol-Valls, 2020, p. 1), reading books like *Not Now, Bernard* through various lenses can help facilitate in-classroom discussions about human emotion and the differing responses to it. Teacher-led discussions, as observed by Murriss (2013), can guide age-appropriate conversations about emotion regulation, self-soothing practices, or ways to support children like protagonist Bernard.

Furthermore, because of *Not Now, Bernard's* minimalistic depiction style, relatable plot, and narrative gaps, it ideally lends itself to a joint reading in a young learner English language classroom. As shown by picturebook scholars (e.g., Pantaleo, 2021, p. 228; Nikolajeva, 2013, p. 251; Painter et al., 2013, p. 34), multimodal literature supports young learners develop critical reading skills and emotional competencies and encourages spontaneous speech acts through abundant provisions of visual aid (Fleta, 2019, p. 247). Through open dialogue about human emotion in the context of *Not Now, Bernard's* initially mundane plot, which escalates into a bizarre ending, young readers and language learners, in particular, are invited to develop visual as well as emotional literacy skills before critically reflecting on their own thoughts and feelings on the text by engaging in co-operative booktalk. The use of repetitive language in the picturebook, a minimalist style, and familiar themes create a learning context for children to confidently explore new concepts and original ideas, as the core subject matter permits child readers to feel capable of contributing to a classroom discussion on a topic they – in being children of caregivers themselves – will feel somewhat knowledgeable about.

This article has provided a brief introduction to attachment theory as well as an examination of *Not Now, Bernard*. The discussion has moreover put forth how a text like McKee's picturebook can be used to promote visual literacy, emotional literacy and encouraging co-operative booktalk in the English language classroom. Future research on the gendered portrayal of dismissive parents might be warranted in order to unpack covert beliefs and expectations about motherly versus fatherly care in a heteronormative household. Particularly in the context of attachment theory, the understanding that attachment styles vary across genders could enable the deconstruction of parental stereotypes in literature for children.

---

## Bibliography

McKee, David (1980). *Not Now, Bernard*. Andersen Press.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41, 49-67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1127388>
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Bell, S. M., & Stayton, D. (1974). Infant-mother attachment and social development. In M. P. Richards (Ed.), *The introduction of the child into a social world* (pp. 99-135). Cambridge University Press.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C, Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the Strange Situation*. Erlbaum. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t28248-000>
- Bland, J. (2015). Oral storytelling in the primary English classroom. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3-12 year olds* (pp. 184-200). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bretherton, I. (1992). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology*, 28(5), 759-775. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.28.5.759>
- Davila, J., Burge, D., & Hammen, C. (1997) Why does attachment style change? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(4), 826-838. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.4.826>.
- Derrida, J. (2000). *Demeure: Fiction and testimony*. Stanford University Press.
- Erozkan, A. (2016). The link between types of attachment and childhood trauma. *Universal Journal of Education Research*, 4(5), 1071-1079. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2016.040517>
- Farrell, K. (1998). *Post-traumatic culture: Injury and interpretation in the nineties*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Feeney, B. C. (2007). The dependency paradox in close relationships: Accepting dependence promotes independence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(2), 268-285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.2.268>
- Fleta, T. (2019). Picturebooks: An effective tool to encourage children's English L2 oral

- production. *TEANGA*, Special Issue 10, 243-261.  
<https://doi.org/10.35903/teanga.v10i0.81>
- Flugge, K., & Evans, J. (2015) The legendary Klaus Flugge: Controversial picturebooks and their place in contemporary society. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Challenging and controversial picturebooks: Creative and critical responses to visual texts* (pp. 263-284). Routledge.
- Galbraith, M. (1998). 'Goodnight Nobody' revisited: Using an attachment perspective to study picture books about bedtime. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 23(4), 172-180. <https://doi.org/10.1353/CHQ.0.1120>.
- Galbraith, M. (2000). Primal postcards: Madeline as a secret space of Ludwig Bemelmans's childhood. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 39(3), 638-646.
- Goga, N., & Pujol-Valls, M. (2020). Ecocritical engagement with picturebook through literature conversations about Beatrice Alemagne's *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day*. *Sustainability*, 12, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12187653>.
- Habegger-Conti, J. (2021). 'Where am I in the text?' Standing with refugees in graphic narratives. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 9(2), 52-66.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511-524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511>
- Heard, D., Lake, B., & McCluskey, U. (2012). *Attachment therapy with adolescents and adults: Theory and practice post Bowlby*. Karnac Books Ltd.
- Hudson, N. W., Chopik, W. J., & Briley, D. A. (2020). Volitional change in adult attachment: Can people who want to become less anxious and avoidant move closer towards realizing those goals? *European Journal of Personality*, 34(1), 93-114. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2226>.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801821011>
- Jaffe, M., & Hurwich, T. (2018). *Worth a thousand words: Using graphic novels to teach visual and verbal literacy*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119548690>

- Kerley, L., Meredith, P. J., Harnett, P., Sinclair, C., & Strong, J. (2021). Families of children in pain: Are attachment and sensory processing patterns related to parent functioning? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30, 1554-1566. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-01966-8>
- Kidd, K. B. (2011). *Freud in Oz*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.cttv88k>.
- Manning-Morton, J. (2011). Not just the tip of the iceberg: Psychoanalytic ideas and early years practice. In L. Miller & E. Pound (Eds.), *Theories and approaches to learning in early years* (21-37). Sage.
- Matthews, G. B. (1992). Review of Not Now, Bernard by David McKee. *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, 10(2), 1. <https://doi.org/10.5840/thinking19921021>
- Mourão, S. (2013). Understanding response to picturebooks. *Encuentro*, 22, 98-114.
- Murris, K. (2013). Reading the world, reading the word: Why Not Now, Bernard is not a case of suicide, but self-killing. *Perspectives in Education*, 31(4), 85-99.
- Naismith, I., Guerrero, S. Z., & Feigenbaum, J. (2019) Abuse, invalidation, and lack of early warmth show distinct relationships with self-criticism, self-compassion, and fear of self-compassion in personality disorder. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 26(3), 350-361. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2357>
- Nikolajeva, M. (2013). Picturebooks and emotional literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(4), 249-254. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1229>.
- Painter, C., Martin, J.R., & Unsworth, L. (2013). *Reading visual narratives: Image analysis of children's picture books*. Equinox Publishing.
- Pantaleo, Sylvia. (2021). Student meaning-making of an allegorical picturebook in social studies. *The Social Studies*, 112(5), 217-230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2021.1896464>
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2002). Attachment-related psychodynamics. *Attachment and Human Development*, 4, 133-161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730210154171>
- Riggs, S. A. (2010). Childhood emotional abuse and the attachment system across the life cycle: What theory and research tell us. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19(1), 5-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926770903475968>

---

Royle, N. (2009). *In memory of Jacques Derrida*. Edinburgh University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748632282>

Young, Kay. (2012). 'Wounded by mastery': Dickens and attachment theory. *English*, 61,

234-247. <https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efs034>.