



Semiotic Analysis and Visual Narrative in Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar

Najwa Khoerunnisa Muflihin^{1*}, Otong Setiawan Djuharie²

¹⁻²English Literature Department, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

Email: hyeonlee.cam@gmail.com^{1*}, otongsetiawandjuharie@uinsgd.ac.id²

*Corresponding Author: hyeonlee.cam@gmail.com

Abstract. *This study explores how Eric Carle's children's storybook The Very Hungry Caterpillar creates depth in its narrative through visual components and tactile elements despite its limited text. Using a multimodal analysis approach, this study highlights the texture of the collage, the use of symbolic colors, and the die-cut holes as elements that can be felt. The results of this study show that the physical design of this book is not merely decorative, but functions as a key narrative guide that helps children understand the concepts of growth and change independently. The die-cut holes have a specific role as a physical symbol of hunger, allowing young readers to interact directly with the story. The combination of the book's materials and visual storytelling has proven to transcend language barriers, making it an effective literacy tool for beginner readers. This research confirms that visual storytelling intertwined with the physical form of a book can convey complex philosophical themes more effectively than narratives composed solely of dense text. The success of this book confirms that tactile and visual elements are important literary tools in the world of children's literature.*

Keywords: *Children's Literature, Eric Carle, Semiotic Analysis, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Visual Storytelling*

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is often seen as simple because children's stories are short and use simple language, they are frequently thought to be easy. These books, though, are really important for a child's early education and psychological development. They help children learn about the world and, for the first time, control their emotions. The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle is one of the most famous works in this genre. The book has become a huge global success since its initial publication in June 1969, influencing several generations. With over 50 million copies sold globally, it has been translated into 62 languages, which equates to one purchase every 15 seconds (Sini, 2019). This book's enduring popularity over the course of more than 50 years demonstrates that readers find it appealing for more than just a straightforward tale of a hungry bug. It is now an integral component of children's culture worldwide (Sini, 2019).

Quoted from an article on the BBC News website (2019), the book's enduring popularity is primarily due to its overarching message of hope and development. In the story, which Eric Carle himself referred to as a "book of hope," (Sini, 2019) youngsters are given guidance on how to deal with the early obstacles they encounter as they grow up. The concept of transformation and improvement is quite potent for a youngster. The text's brief phrases and the book's visual layout both convey this optimistic message. According to literary specialists, the novel has several instructional layers that function synergistically. It covers fundamentals

such as the days of the week, the names of various foods, and how to count numbers. The book combines its stunning and vibrant collage art with a profound experience that teaches and amuses young readers at the same time.

But, the book's visual inventiveness, particularly the die-cut holes in the pages and the vivid textures of the artwork, is what sets it apart. The book was turned down by American publishers when Eric Carle first presented his concept. They believed the holes and varying page sizes were too strange and would be too pricey or hard to print (Sini, 2019). They failed to see the significance of these tangible elements of the novel to the story. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate that these visual components are more than simply ornamental or entertaining; rather, they function as significant literary symbols that aid in the narrative. The purpose of this essay is to examine the visual symbolism used in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It explores how Eric Carle's use of vibrant colors, hand-painted textures, and physical design serves as a metaphor for the human experience of growing up, learning through consumption, and ultimately achieving a successful metamorphosis (Sini, 2019).

When studying children's literature, pictures and words should be seen as one complete and connected thing. According to Lalbiaknungi (2025) says that the pictures in these books act as a complex system of signs that work together with the written words. This conversation helps keep the story easy to understand and makes it simpler for kids to follow along as the story unfolds. So, looking at the visual parts like the exact colors or the special textures Eric Carle makes isn't just about enjoying art. It is a process of learning how these visual signs change the story's message into a form that kids can understand. This visual translation is important for helping young children understand things (Lalbiaknungi, 2025).

There's a big difference between books meant for grown-ups and those meant for kids. Adult books often use heavy language and complicated sentences to tell a story. Unlike adult books, children's books focus more on pictures and creativity to tell stories. For a young reader who is still learning to speak and read, pictures are not just things that are added to a page to make it look nice. They are important parts that help the mind grow and cause feelings to come up. Illustrations usually give the right visual hints that help kids link new words to what they really mean (Lalbiaknungi, 2025).

The Very Hungry Caterpillar is a great example of this style that focuses a lot on pictures. The book uses very few words and has simple, repeated sentences. Since the text is very simple, the story depends completely on the lively and powerful pictures to tell the story. Without the famous collage artwork, the story of the caterpillar changing into a butterfly would not have as strong an effect. Lalbiaknungi (2025) says that the combination of images and text

gives the reader a special experience. This balance helps the book work well in many different cultures, showing that visual storytelling can be understood by everyone.

This article aims to connect the differences between the application of simple text and the depth of the story through an examination of certain visual choices made by Eric Carle. This study will focus on how collage textures, the use of meaningful colors, cutouts, and visual narratives of metamorphosis act as substitutes for complex textual narratives. By examining these elements, this study seeks to demonstrate that in the absence of rich textual narration, visual storytelling can serve as a primary means of literacy. The following analysis will describe how the visual structure in this book conveys philosophical themes of hope and change to children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The significance of picture books as a distinctive form of communication has been recognized by educators and authors since the 1500s. This medium hit a pivotal turning point in the 1800s with the advent of color printing in England and America, making books far more appealing to children (Resmisari, 2023). Resmisari (2023) notes that despite the rapid expansion of digital media and tablets in modern times, physical picture books remain cherished possessions. This is due to the sensory and narrative experiences they offer like the sensation of flipping a page or feeling different textures that digital alternatives often can't replicate. At its core, this medium relies on storytelling techniques, which Abramsen as referenced in Resmisari (2023), describes as the oldest and most effective way for individuals to retain knowledge and uphold cultural customs. For young readers or newcomers, exploring stories through books is more than just an easy learning opportunity. It forms a vital emotional bond that utilizes style, tone, and visuals to capture interest and stimulate a child's imagination. This approach allows significant moral teachings to be subtly integrated into the narrative without making the young reader feel like they are merely studying a textbook.

In children's literature, visual storytelling acts as a sophisticated and thoughtful means of communication that often holds greater value than conventional text. Salisbury as noted in Resmisari (2023) highlights that effective illustrations should provide more than mere visual appeal or pleasing colors. They ought to engage and educate, igniting a sense of "wonder" that enables the child to connect with the material on a more profound level. This engagement results in a unique cognitive experience where the process of "reading" transforms into the act of "interpreting the image," (Resmisari, 2023). Through this visual engagement, young readers are able to capture critical insights and nuances that might not be clearly expressed through

words. Furthermore, as stated by Resmisari (2023) emphasizes the importance for illustrators to truly understand the viewpoints of their young audience. Children rely on various visual cues such as distinctive artistic styles and recognizable characters to navigate the story and track the plot. Consequently, these visual elements become the primary means of understanding for the child. This allows young readers to build a rich imaginative world in their minds that extends far beyond their limited vocabulary and language skills.

To understand the importance of this visual prominence, it is essential to first consider the conventional expectations associated with narrative texts. (Sukma et al., 2025) narrative text refers to an organized series of events typically seen in fairy tales and folk stories. This method of storytelling aims to fully engage the reader (Dhillon et al., in Sukma et al., 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, narrative texts significantly contribute to imparting values related to life and influencing how readers perceive the world (Boyd et al., in Sukma et al., 2025). In a majority of literary pieces, these objectives are realized through descriptively rich language that lays the groundwork for interpreting the narrative. The narrative text is anticipated to captivate its audience while also acting as a medium for conveying important moral insights.

The relationship between visual storytelling and textual narrative represents the main conflict in analyzing picture books. While a conventional written narrative is anticipated to offer an organized flow of events that influences the reader's viewpoint through the richness of language, visual storytelling acts as a complementary form that frequently discloses insights not present in the text. This generates a distinct literary environment where the act of "reading" transcends mere words and includes the understanding of imagery. In pieces where the written narrative is intentionally sparse, visual storytelling must take on a greater role to meet the ethical and informative purposes usually associated with the text. Thus, the success of a picture book hinges on how these two types of narratives work together to connect straightforward language with deeper storytelling.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted using a qualitative method in the form of descriptive analysis. The main reason for choosing this method was the need to understand the meaning behind the visual elements in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* through semiotic and aesthetic analysis. (Susanto et al., 2024) stated that the qualitative approach is considered a research method that focuses on understanding cultural phenomena through in-depth observation of the object being studied. In this case, the focus of the research is on the ability of children's books to convey

messages about growth through various visual symbols. The emphasis on non-numerical data provides space for gaining deep insights and rich nuances of interpretation, without being constrained by statistical procedures. The application of the qualitative descriptive method aims to analyze in depth the interaction between simple text and visual dominance that is integrated into a complete narrative. This method is particularly useful when the main objective of the research is to build a comprehensive understanding or create a theory from a specific situation. In this context, each visual symbol is considered an independent language and requires critical analysis. The focus of this study is described in four main pillars of analysis: the aesthetics of collage techniques, the symbolic power of color, the structural function of holes on the page, and the visual narrative of the theme of metamorphosis (Susanto et al., 2024).

Data sources are categorized into two main parts to ensure strong academic validity. Digital documents (PDF) from the original edition of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle have been determined as the main data source. The use of digital formats is considered methodologically valid because these documents accurately reflect the visual details of the original work. Observations of each PDF page were conducted to capture the essence of four core elements: (1) the aesthetic of the collage technique on tissue paper texture, (2) the color palette representing emotions and growth in color symbolism, (3) the symbolic design of die-cut holes, and (4) the visual that forming the metamorphosis narrative. Secondary data was also used to strengthen the argument through academic references, scientific journals, and children's literature theory. Information about Eric Carle's creative process in using painted tissue paper and color theory from a psychological perspective was an important part of the secondary data.

The data collection procedure was carried out through visual observation without participation, supported by systematic documentation techniques. Research on the content of PDF documents was conducted repeatedly to find visual patterns related to the four sub-chapters of the discussion. The "visual reading" process was carried out in several stages: identification of collage techniques to assess the "liveliness" of the illustrations, mapping of color transitions from the beginning to the end of the narrative, analysis of the position of holes in the caterpillar's food objects, and observation of the visualization of the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An exploration of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* presents the results of an in-depth study of the visual elements that shape the narrative in the book written by Eric Carle. The analysis shows that the main strength of this book lies not in the complexity of the text, but in the ability of visual language to communicate independently. Through observation of the digital version of the book, it was revealed that every artistic aspect, from the texture of the collage to the choice of colors, acts as a system of signs that conveys messages about growth, hope, and survival. The following discussion will address four main pillars that have been identified, beginning with an analysis of the collage technique that forms the basis of Eric Carle's aesthetic, followed by a study of color symbolism, the structural role of page holes, and the narrative of metamorphosis.

The Aesthetic of the Collage Technique

Eric Carle's distinctive visual aesthetics stems from a highly unique artistic process, in which each painted sheet of paper serves as a personal "palette" (Carle Museum, n.d.). To create these famous collages, acrylic paint is applied to white tissue paper, resulting in bright colors and patterns. Documentation of Carle's creative process shows a studio filled with stacks of manually painted tissue paper, demonstrating how personal and intimate the artist's relationship with his materials is. Each sheet of tissue paper becomes an independent abstract work of art, which is then cut and arranged into a narrative composition. Chronologically, there was an important technical development in the material of her work; before the mid-1980s, commercial colored paper proved to be ineffective because it faded quickly. To ensure the longevity of the work, acid-free paper and methyl cellulose glue were used as a substitute for rubber cement (Carle Museum, n.d.).

The creation of texture in this book did not happen instantly, but rather through a meticulous and thorough method of layering colors. As cited from the Carle Museum website, the process began with a striking sweep of red, followed by waves of blue and dots of yellow after the base layer had dried. The visual representation of this stage shows how random brush strokes actually give the object a "lively" impression (Carle Museum, n.d.). The final step involves printing patterns with black paint using unusual texturing tools, such as pieces of carpet, which leave geometric patterns that still feel organic on the surface of the paper.

When forming the caterpillar figure, this process requires tracing paper and a utility knife to make precise cuts while maintaining the characteristic rough edges. This detail is very important because it creates a tactile effect, so that readers can almost feel the layered texture of the caterpillar's body. The union of tissue paper that has been painted with a final touch

using crayons creates a balance between professional art and aesthetics that is familiar to children. The main principle of this technique lies in the detail of the brush strokes and the richness of texture, which provides artistic satisfaction through the process of combining pieces of paper into a comprehensive and meaningful pictorial whole (Carle Museum, n.d.).

The technical strength demonstrated by the museum is in line with Lalbiaknungi's (2025) research findings on the global importance of illustration. The method of using hand-painted tissue paper is an important element that transcends language barriers, making international publishers very consistent in not altering the original aesthetics. The phenomenon of "visual fidelity" is triggered by the fact that the manually produced textures and colors reflect the "soul" of the narrative that connects with the reader's emotions (Lalbiaknungi, 2025). This global loyalty confirms that Carle's collage technique is not just a stylistic choice, but also a primary means of communication.

Color Symbolism

The color in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle serve not only as visual elements, but also as storytelling tools that convey feelings, spirit, and biological changes. The use of bright acrylic paint on tissue paper produces a striking level of color, which based on the principles of child visual psychology, it is the very effective in attracting cognitive attention in the early stages of development. Mastery of a specific color spectrum at various stages of the caterpillar's life provides visual indicators of the character's inner state without the need for lengthy textual explanations.

In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the choice of colors not only serves as an aesthetic element to attract attention, but also as an effective tool to convey emotions systematically. This approach is in line with the idea of *Farbensprache* or "language of color" proposed by Wassily Kandinsky (Bätschmann, 2016). As stated by Bätschmann (2016), explains that Kandinsky believed that colors have the independent ability to express deep spiritual and emotional meanings without the need for words. While Kandinsky used colors to reach the spiritual dimension in adults, Carle applied similar principles to strengthen visual literacy in children. In this case, color functions as an initial vocabulary that children intuitively understand long before they learn letters or more complex sentence structures.

Through the dominance of green on the caterpillar's body, Carle not only depicts a natural entity, but also represents the spirit of life and unending energy of growth. In Kandinsky's color theory, green has a dynamic character that is greatly influenced by its color composition. According to Kandinsky's theory, the shift of green toward the yellow spectrum creates an impression of vitality, full of cheerfulness and youthful spirit. This statement

accurately explains why the caterpillar in Carle's work appears so friendly to young readers. The bright green color applied to the collage texture of the caterpillar's body visually conveys the spirit of life of a newborn creature, while evoking a sense of optimism in readers and audiences alike.

The development of spiritual life in art theory is often described through hierarchical and progressive schemes. Bättschmann (2016) argues that spiritual life can be accurately described with a diagram of hierarchy and development. In this book, the scheme of progress is manifested through striking color changes; starting from a bright red head that symbolizes burning passion, ending with colorful butterfly wings. This change reflects emotional development from basic biological needs to complete and mature beauty. Therefore, the green color and other variations in Carle's work are not merely complementary to the text, but also become a universal language that helps children understand the idea of life change through dynamic visual vibration (Bättschmann, 2016).

Apart from a philosophical perspective, the use of color in Eric Carle's work can also be analyzed through a scientific approach to visual perception. As stated in the Color Theory material, color can't be separated from human perception; an object has color because it absorbs certain light spectrums and reflects others to our eyes. This phenomenon is very important in the development of children's literacy, because color perception is subjective but has a concrete biological basis. The human eye contains cone cells that specifically function to capture certain wavelengths, ranging from short waves associated with blue to long waves associated with red and yellow. This understanding sheds light on Carle's decision to use striking primary colors: he wanted to reach children's visual receptors so that their reaction to the caterpillar character would be maximized (*COLOR THEORY*, n.d.).

Moreover, this concept reinforces Johannes Itten's statement as quoted in Color Theory source, that "Only those who love color are allowed to feel its inherent beauty and presence". In the context of Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, this love of color is manifested through a series of sensory experiences offered to younger readers especially children. Although color perception is quite subjective, the use of bright colors such as red on the caterpillar's head is biologically more quickly captured by the eye, creating immediate attention for children before moving on to other elements of the story. This shows that Carle's color selection technique is not just a matter of beauty, but a method to ensure efficient visual perception for an audience that is still in the stages of cognitive development and verbal language skills.

Die-cut Holes

The key attraction of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* lies not only in its easy to understand story, but also in its unique physical design, which sets it apart from other children's books. With real holes on every page, Eric Carle has succeeded in changing the way children interact with literacy. Whereas children would normally just sit quietly looking at the illustrations or listening to the story being read aloud, these holes invite them to touch, feel, and experience the story directly. The holes make the book more than just a stack of paper; they turn it into an interactive object that children's little fingers can access. With these physical elements, the learning experience becomes more enjoyable, as children can insert their fingers into the holes as if imitating the movements of a caterpillar eating. In this case, the holes serve as a highly efficient medium of communication, connecting what is seen with what is felt by the sense of touch.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar, written by Eric Carle, is a clear example that a children's book is not only a means of conveying text, but also a physical object with interactive properties. By using physical holes, Carle created what experts refer to as an "object book." This view is in line with (Campagnaro, 2019) statement that the design of certain picture books has set new norms in the world of children's literature, as they are considered learning media that go beyond mere text. Campagnaro mentions that children tend to be fascinated by the opportunity to organize their reading experience more freely, thanks to innovations in graphic and typographic mechanisms.

In this context, the holes in Carle's book serve as elements that encourage children to not only look at the story, but also actively interact physically with the narrative (Campagnaro, 2019). By touching and inserting their fingers into the holes, the book transforms from a mere stack of paper into a concrete play space for children. This shows that the materiality of books plays a significant role in fostering an interest in reading from an early age, where the reading experience becomes an exciting and educational physical activity. As further explained in Campagnaro's research, the freedom to explore provided by physical features such as these holes allows for the maximum use of simple materials such as paper and cardboard, thereby creating an emotional connection between children and books (Campagnaro, 2019).

Symbolically, these holes represent the real hustle and bustle of unstoppable hunger. Each gap in the fruit is physical evidence of the caterpillar's existence. For young readers, these holes are concrete proof that the caterpillar has actually 'gone through' the food, forming a convincing storyline that development requires concrete consumption.

From a technical point of view, this die-cut design creates a unique spatial narrative. These holes allow children to review the pages they have already read and peek at the next page at the same time. This creates a sense of time in children's minds: they can see what has been consumed (the past) and what is to come (the future) through the same physical hole.

Visual Narrative of Metamorphosis

In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the story of the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly is shaped by the powerful interaction between text and illustrations. This idea is clearly explained by Painter and Martin (2011) in their article discussing the complementarity of different forms. They note that picture books for children often appear very simple because of their short texts, but actually have extraordinary depth due to the "relationship between pictures and words," (Painter & Martin, 2011).

In the context of metamorphosis, Eric Carle's short sentences repeating the phrase "but he was still hungry" serve as the driving force of the story, while the illustrations provide a picture of the caterpillar's biological development as it grows larger. According to Painter and Martin's study, stories in children's books are not merely a number of pictures and text, but rather the result of the collaboration of these two elements to convey a deeper meaning (Painter & Martin, 2011). In this way, the depiction of the caterpillar growing and evolving into a butterfly is not just an additional image, but a core element of the narrative that helps children understand the stages of life's transformation even with limited vocabulary.

Based on Serafini's more in-depth research, this narrative of metamorphosis can be explained through the latest theory he proposed in 2024. In his article in the *Journal of Visual Literacy*, Serafini emphasizes that picture books are not merely a combination of separate images and text, but rather a "multimodal unity" in which these two elements interact to produce meaning that can't be expressed if one of them stands alone (Serafini, 2024).

In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar's* metamorphosis, the limitations of text provide an opportunity for visual elements to perform what is known as narrative expansion. While the text only mentions day-by-day developments, Carle's illustrations present the caterpillar's physical transformation in great detail from body size to color changes. This synergy provides young readers with the opportunity to understand the essence of complex biological growth. As Serafini states, the images in picture books not only accompany the text, but often add richer information, making the process of transformation from a large caterpillar into a charming butterfly a comprehensive and visually powerful narrative experience.

The explanation of the power of visual elements in depicting this metamorphosis process is reinforced by research conducted by Al Farisi et al., (2025) in the journal *Diksi*. They state that in picture books for beginner children, the relationship between text and images tends to be “enhancing” or “complementary,” (Farisi et al., 2025). In this context, while Eric Carle’s text only provides basic information about the day and type of food, the accompanying visual illustrations work to “enhance” that meaning by showing the physical changes in the caterpillar in a tangible way.

This complementary interaction is crucial in books for elementary levels because it helps children understand the complexity of stories that can’t be explained through words alone (Farisi et al., 2025). In the story of metamorphosis, this can be clearly seen when a caterpillar transforms into a cocoon and then into a butterfly. Although the text used is very simple, the rich and colorful illustrations provide important additional information, enabling children to understand the message about biological growth and change well. Thus, this collaboration ensures that even though children’s reading skills are still limited, their understanding of the metamorphosis storyline remains sound.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that the appeal of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* does not stem from the complexity of the language used, but rather from the intelligence of its tactile and visual design. The use of cut-out holes and collage textures is not only an artistic innovation, but also an effective literacy strategy to help children with limited vocabulary. By making this book more than just text to be read, and transforming it into a physical object that can be interacted with, Eric Carle has successfully created a language that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers.

In conclusion, this article states that effective visual storytelling can convey profound philosophical themes, such as hope and transformation, without the need for lengthy text. The success of this book provides important insights for future creators of children’s literature where the materiality of the book and the multimodal relationship between images and physical form are key elements in building emotional connections and cognitive understanding in young readers.

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