

Study Guide

Where The Wild Things Are



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors and distributors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in *Where the Wild Things Are* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot Synopsis: Max acts out in front of his mother and her boyfriend. When he is reprimanded, he runs out into the rainy night. He finds a boat that takes him to a mysterious island inhabited by monsters that first threaten to eat him, but then make him their king. Then the fun begins.

A. Before the Wild Things

Max's adventures with the Wild Things might be interpreted as his responses to his experiences before his journey began. Consider each of the following events, and reflect on how they might connect to later Wild Things moments.

1. The movie begins with Max chasing a dog around a house.
2. Max builds a snow fort/igloo.
3. He unsuccessfully invites Claire, his sister, to come and see it.
4. He marches with and orders around imaginary friends.
5. He attacks Claire's friends with snowballs, and is overwhelmed by their counterattack.
6. He attacks Claire's bedroom, shredding a valentine he made for her, and dumping snow on her bed and floor.
7. Max plays with a toy boat while lying in bed.
8. He looks at a city built from paper tubes.
9. He looks at a globe that has a plaque on it that reads, "Max's world."
10. His mother arrives home and they clean up Claire's room.
11. Max dictates a story to his mother about a vampire that breaks its teeth while biting a walking skyscraper.
12. Max looks out the classroom window at the sun as his teacher describes its ultimate death and the resulting death of earth.
13. He plays and wrestles with friends.
14. He invites his mother to come and see his bedroom fort, but she declines, busy with her boyfriend and dinner preparations.
15. When Max yells, "Feed me, woman!" she orders him off the counter, then drags him down, telling him that he is 'out of control.'
16. As he runs out the door, Max shouts, "It's not my fault!"

B. A Child's Eye View

Spike Jonze, the film director, especially wanted *Where the Wild Things Are* to represent a child's point of view. He wanted the movie to seem like a child's story told by a child through a child's eyes. He designed the movie very carefully to achieve this feeling.

Consider each of the following movie elements and explain how well they helped you understand and appreciate Max's point of view.

1. The movie was photographed using a hand-held camera most of the time.
2. Many of the shots were so close that viewers could not see a whole Wild Thing, but only a portion.
3. The music included children's voices and used acoustic instruments.
4. The film from the island scenes was underexposed, resulting in desaturated colours and deep shadows.
5. Smoke was pumped into the air that masked distant objects.
6. The colour palette was mostly earth tones, containing various shades of gray-brown with few reds, blues or yellows.

C. Being Max

Some critics have observed that *Where the Wild Things Are* lacks a 'Hollywood' style plot. Unlike Harry Potter, for example, the hero does not have a series of personal crises, there is no clear hero or villain, and therefore no climactic confrontation between the hero and villain. They worry that audiences might come to *Where the Wild Things Are* expecting a Hollywood plot, and might leave disappointed. Other critics say that *Where the Wild Things Are* is very complex, and that if viewers look carefully, they will find a very subtle and compelling story. They claim that the ending is every bit as profound as the end of a Harry Potter movie.

The characters in Harry Potter movies are all projections of JK Rowling's personality. She invented them, then orchestrated their speech and actions to tell a very compelling story. The Wild Things and the island are all projections of Max's personality. This includes the Max that viewers see interacting with the Wild Things. The relationships between the Wild Things, and between Max and the Wild Things, and even between Max, the Wild Things and the island, are all taking place in Max's head. In other words, Max and the Wild Things are all aspects of Max, and are working to resolve Max's feelings towards his sister and mother.

If everything viewers see on the island is part of Max, consider the following:

1. Carol is destroying the Wild Things' houses because KW left to be with her friends Bob and Terry.

What part of Max's life might be symbolized when he first sees Carol destroying the houses?

2. When Max befriends KW, the Wild Things pile on and they all fall asleep.

What part of Max's life might be symbolized by the Wild Things sleeping in a pile?

Why might Max like sleeping in a pile?

3. When Carol takes Max to see his model city, they pass through a desert and Carol says, "This part of your kingdom's not so good."

What part of Max's life might be symbolized by the not-so-good desert?

Why is the model city so interesting to Max?

Why might all the carved figures in the model city be in pairs?

4. When Max sees Alexander's dirt clod wound, he says, "I wish you guys had a mom." Then he decides to go home.

Why might Max decide to leave the Wild Things after the dirt clod fight?

5. Why might Alexander caution Max not to tell Carol that he is leaving?

Why might Carol want to eat Max to keep him from leaving?

D. Representing the Wild Things

The Wild Things appear to be large monsters that walk, talk and gesture. They fully interact with the forest, Max and one another. It becomes quite easy for viewers to think that they are natural beings on an exotic island.

In fact, the Wild Things are a complex combination of voice-acting, puppetry and CGI. A group of Hollywood actors were video recorded as they gestured and voiced the parts on a soundstage. A second group of Australian actors wore the Wild Things' costumes and, after watching the Hollywood actors' performances, gestured to the video playback. A third group of animators inserted CGI faces on the Wild Things' heads, using the voice actors' and costume actors' character interpretations as their guides.

As you watch the Wild Things, consider how the voices, body language and facial gestures combine to represent each monster. Some viewers have said they can see James Gandolfini in Carol and Lauren Ambrose in KW. Can you? Do you see Catherine O'Hara in Judith and Forest Whitaker in Ira?

Max Records (Max) was not present when the voice actors worked on the soundstage. Instead, Spike Jonze, the director, acted Max's lines. Jonze made this decision because he wanted Max Records' performance to be as genuinely child-like as possible, and so opted for little or no rehearsal for him. Do you think the Hollywood actors acted differently when responding to Spike Jonze as Max than they would have if Jonze had used Max Records, or perhaps another 9-year-old actor?

E. Representing the Wild Things

Consider the following statements. How might a discussion of them help children understand the feelings and actions that *Where the Wild Things Are* is expressing?

1. "You are the king and you make everything right."
2. "Will you keep out all the sadness?"
3. "Are those other kings?"
4. "This part of your kingdom's not so good."
5. "How do I make everyone OK?"
6. "Will you say good things about us, Max?"
7. "You're the only king we haven't eaten."
8. "I want to eat you, I love you so."

Which other statements are significant?

F. Violence in *Where The Wild Things Are*

The Wild Things have jaws that bite and claws that catch. They throw large objects, including one another. They jump on top of one another, and can punch holes in trees and walls. They can topple large trees, almost crushing one another. They can even tear each other apart. And they can eat children.

Because these actions and threats occur frequently on screen, *Where the Wild Things Are* has a feeling of constant danger—mortal danger—for Max.

As a result of its dangerous atmosphere, some people might feel that *Where the Wild Things Are* should not be seen by children. They might feel that children will be scared by the Wild Things' appearances, voices and actions. They might even fear that watching the movie will cause nightmares.

Some of these concerns were voiced when Maurice Sendak's book appeared in 1963. Defenders claimed that the book was important because it honestly acknowledged children's feelings and fears, something quite rare in

children's books of the time. They cited the fact that, despite the underlying violence, Max was able to confront and control the Wild Things. The book became popular and has remained so for almost 50 years. Most of *Where the Wild Things Are's* adult viewers grew up with the book in their family or school libraries.

How will *Where the Wild Things Are* WT be received?

Will it be given a rating that discourages children from seeing it? Should it be?

Will parents be urged to keep their children away? Should they be?

Will the children who see it have nightmares?

How might parents and children use their experience of *Where the Wild Things Are* to better understand and manage the violent feelings that children often experience?

Which characters, and which moments, are the most important ones to discuss with children?

What questions might be useful to ask children when discussing the violence in *Where the Wild Things Are*?

G. A Tale of Childhood or Boyhood?

Snowball fights. Secret forts. Wild rumpuses. Sleeping in a pile. Dirt clod wars. Are these elements of most children's lives, or are they more a part of boyhood than girlhood? Will girls see themselves in *Where the Wild Things Are*, or will they see it as a boy's story?

Girls can feel displaced when their siblings exclude them from their friendships and their parents turn their attention on new friends.

Would most girls climb on a counter and shout, "Woman, feed me!" or might they express their feelings in a different way?

Would they announce to their Wild Things that they had defeated Vikings and been made Queen?

Would their Wild Things punch holes in trees and build secret models?

How might female viewers see themselves represented in *Where the Wild Things Are*?

How might they be able to use their viewing experience to understand and appreciate the complexities of relationships?

How does *Where the Wild Things Are* invite female viewers to understand and appreciate their viewing experience?

H. Wild Things Everywhere

The tag line of the movie is 'There's one in all of us.'

Are there wild things in each of us? ...in EVERYONE?

Where ARE the wild things?

Which of the wild things (KW, Carol, Judith, Ira, Alexander, The Bull, Douglas) are in you?

G. Beyond the Wild Things

1. The Poster

The *Where the Wild Things Are* poster is a shot of Max and Carol standing at the bottom of a sand dune in a desert. While some scenes are shot on this dune, most scenes are shot in a forest.

Why might the promotional department have used the dune shot rather than a forest shot?

Would the movie be more mysterious if the poster had not shown a Wild Thing, e.g., showing us the fires on the island that Max first sees?

What other images might have made effective posters? Why?

2. Marketing

Where the Wild Things Are opened October 16, about two weeks before Halloween and about two months before Christmas. Warner Brothers makes movies and television shows, publishes books, and distributes music. The company could also license images, dolls, games, iPod apps and costumes. What sales and marketing opportunities might *Where the Wild Things Are* provide for the upcoming Halloween and gift-giving seasons?

How likely might *Where the Wild Things Are* become a favourite sleep-over movie?

3. Sequel

Maurice Sendak never wrote a sequel to *Where the Wild Things Are*, but there might be a sequel to the movie.

What elements might be included in the sequel?

Considering that Max might be older, what new challenges might his character meet?

Would it be better to cast a new actor, who is 9-years-old?

What new characters might be added?

Where the Wild Things Are's setting is a remote forest. What new setting might be used for a sequel?

For more information on *Where the Wild Things Are* see wherethewildthingsare.warnerbros.com

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