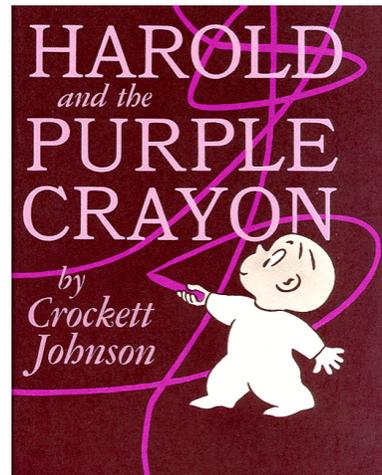


The Search for Safe Space in *Harold and the Purple Crayon*

by Rebecca Vitkus

Alone in the world with nothing but a stubby purple crayon, Harold harnesses his creativity and sets out on an adventure that brands him as one of the most memorable picture book characters of all time. His independence is admirable, and his drawings are imaginative, but where did Harold get that purple crayon, anyway? Where are Harold's parents, and why is he allowed to color on the walls? Furthermore, are those scribbles even set on solid walls, or is Harold outside in an open expanse of blank space?

The lack of background information provided for Harold makes the story susceptible to various interpretations. Just as Harold creates his own story using his purple crayon, readers create their own meaning of the text using their imaginations. Some argue that Harold represents a struggling artist, forever agonized by the dichotomy between the pride of creating a masterpiece and the helplessness of being



1955 book cover ¹

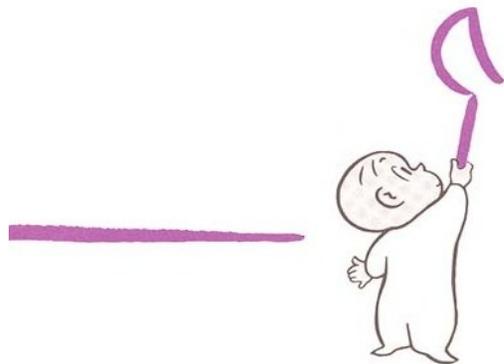
consumed by one's own artwork. Others view Harold as an escapist, a little boy who chooses to flee his monotonous, or even perilous, home life in pursuit of a more exciting adventure. **Regardless of whatever preface critics choose to set before the story, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* serves as a metafictional text in which a self-aware young boy realizes the power of his autonomy while simultaneously learning the limits of his abilities, disassociating the idea of returning home with traditional sentimentality.**

Harold may be one of the few toddlers to assert his independence by taking control of his own story, but a departure from parental dependency was not uncommon in his time. Crockett Johnson created *Harold and the Purple Crayon* in 1955, in the midst of what would become known as the Second Golden Age of Children's Literature. This era, which spanned from roughly the 1940s to the 1960s, brought about "an understanding that reflected that the children were well aware of the world's problems and often had to deal with them in their own ways" (Eiland). With this in mind, it is not hard to imagine that Johnson



Author Crockett Johnson ²

purposely created Harold as an independent figure who relies on the power of his imagination rather than depending on the people around him. In *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, there is one character: Harold. Other figures are drawn up along the way, but from its outset, Harold seems to be the only person who exists in his black-and-white world. This sense of isolation is magnified as Harold sets out on a solitary walk, especially since readers are never informed of the reason for his stroll. He begins by drawing a "long straight path so he wouldn't get lost," but from where does this purple passage deviate, and to where does it lead? Harold soon realizes that "he didn't seem to be getting anywhere on the long straight path," and that by following the trail set before him, he would not find whatever adventure he desires. He has to risk the chance of getting lost for the sake of making a new discovery, so he turns away from his safe, defined line of direction, and "the moon went with him."



"There wasn't any moon, and Harold needed a moon for a walk in the moonlight." ³

Before long, Harold is plagued with intermittent waves of anxiety that arise each time his self-awareness is exaggerated and his security is threatened. As he meanders through the woods, he draws a tree to combat his fear of getting lost. Harold then fabricates a dragon to guard his tree, but this "terribly frightening dragon" sends him away in horror, and Harold soon realizes that he is drowning in a sea of his own creation. As he frees himself from one anxiety-producing situation, he is constantly thrust into another, but "luckily, he kept his wits and his purple crayon."

He uses the power of his crayon to escape from drowning and finds himself on a beach, "wondering where he was." After satisfying his hunger, falling off a mountain, and taking a ride in a hot air balloon, Harold tires of the excitement of his imaginative journey and finds himself lost, unable to navigate out of his own artwork. Harold



"It even frightened Harold. He backed away." ⁴

uses his crayon to draw buildings, windows, and even a policeman to aid him on his quest to return home, while all along he deals with the anxiety of "wishing he was in his room and in bed." Johnson designs Harold as an independent and autonomous child realizing his innate capabilities of creativity, but he shows that *with such self-awareness comes new feelings of anxiety* as Harold learns what it is like to be on his own.

As Harold gains more insight into the power of which he is truly capable, he also encounters moments in which he learns the limitations of his abilities.

When Harold draws a tree in

the forest, he seems surprised to find that it "turned out to be an apple tree." He gazes longingly at the small circles scattered about the tree, thinking they "would be very tasty...when they got red." What he does not seem to discern is that his world consists of only him and the drawings he creates with his purple crayon, so the likelihood of finding a



"The apples would be very tasty, Harold thought, when they got red." ⁵

red apple is non-existent. In fact, this contrast of color — the one found in the black-and-white images of Harold, the background, and the text paired with the purple drawings of the crayon — serves to enhance the disparity between that which is real and that which Harold creates. When the dragon Harold draws sends him away in terror, Harold realizes that, although he can design the world around him, he cannot control how his creations affect him in return. In a text that deals largely with a young child's exploration of his surroundings, Harold pushes the boundaries of his newly created world and tests the limits of what makes sense, much like children acquire knowledge by testing the limits of their environments.

Armed with a new sense of self-awareness, Harold is intent on ensuring that he acts responsibly with his newfound power in relation to the world he forms around himself. He exercises his imagination and creates nine identical pies, which are ostensibly representative of "nine kinds of pie that Harold liked best," though the reader cannot perceive the differences among them. When he realizes that he cannot eat all that he created, he "left a very hungry moose and a deserving porcupine to finish it up." Harold makes sure to detail the outline of the moose's rib cage to prove that he is truly hungry, and although readers are unaware of what exactly makes this porcupine so deserving, these extra details about the animals display Harold's keen social consciousness. Rather than leave his pies to spoil, or even give them away arbitrarily, Harold



“So Harold left a very hungry moose and a deserving porcupine to finish it up.”⁶

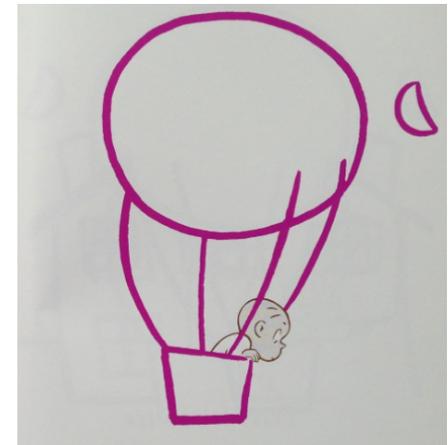
justifies his contribution by donating to characters worthy of such a gift, one who is starving and the other who has, in some way, earned the treat. In this way, Harold realizes that with his new capabilities, he holds the responsibility of caring for the creatures he

designs, giving to those who cannot provide for themselves and rewarding those who deserve recognition.

One reason *Harold and the Purple Crayon* has become such a beloved story is that in the end, after enjoying a carnivalesque adventure of purple lines and tasty pies, all is made well again when Harold finds his home. However, it seems that the idea of home is much less concrete than most readers would assume; in fact, the word "home" is never even mentioned in the text. Harold does not express any desire to find his home, or even his house, but rather just his bedroom window and his bed. This fixation on the bedroom, the structure that represents familiarity after such a peculiar

journey, speaks volumes to the idea of home presented by Johnson. For a toddler as sentient as Harold, the ambiguity of this concept of home suggests that it is a safe physical space where one feels at ease, not a house with a loving family included. Harold continuously reimagines spaces by creating his surroundings, and in doing so, the traditional idea of home, complete with a caring mommy and comforting daddy, loses any hint of sentiment and functions as a physical point rather than a symbolic representation of intimacy.

Harold's preoccupation with the idea of finding a safe space begins with his need to draw a moon — he "needed a moon for a walk in the moonlight," of course. The first few pages are filled with only scribbles, but the moon is drawn as a defined crescent, remaining visible in each scene of the book. The moon's constant presence provides the comforting sense that Harold desires; in each anxiety-provoking adventure, "the moon sailed along with him." When weariness kicks in and Harold longs for his bed, he sets out on a mission to find his bedroom window. He longs to escape this



“He had a fine view from the balloon but he couldn't see his window.”⁷

imaginary realm and return to the normalcy he previously knew in his world of black and white. When he cannot find his window from the top of a mountain and does not see it from a hot air balloon, Harold creates a new house, hoping that his window will appear. "None of the

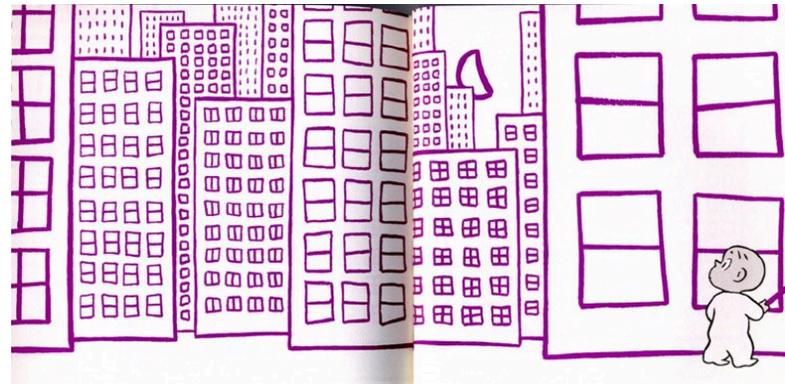
windows was his window," though, so he continues to make more windows and more buildings until he has "a whole city full of windows." Harold tries to recreate a familiar idea of comfort by repeatedly drawing what looks like his bedroom window, forcing meaning into what are merely purple squares on a page. He makes window after window, only to find

that none of them provide him with what he desires. Harold seeks help from a policeman, a figment of his imagination, but the policeman proves to be ineffective in helping Harold reach his destination. The drawings Harold creates cannot point him in the direction of a bedroom that exists outside of his imagination because they only reveal to him that which he already knows.

As Harold walks along, his anxious mind yearning for the security of his room and bed, he suddenly recalls an important detail: his bedroom window "was always right around the moon." Harold quickly

draws a window around the moon, sketches a bedroom and a bed, and seems content after he "got in and drew up the covers."

Could Harold's distressing search really be so simply resolved? If Harold's bedroom window was always around the moon, and the moon was always with Harold, then Harold always had what he was looking for in his reach, somewhat suggesting a "the-power-lies-within" ending to inspire little readers. However, this narrative resolution may be more complicated than it appears.

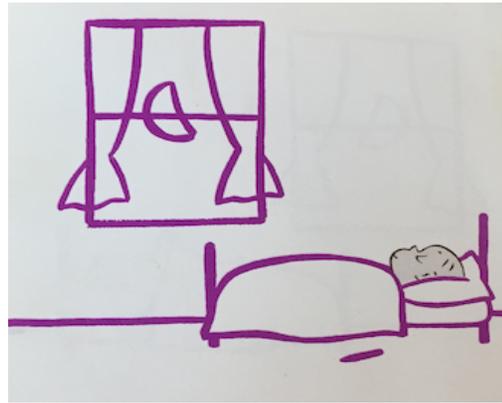


"He made a whole city full of windows. But none of the windows was his window. He couldn't think where it might be." ⁸

The crayon drops, Harold sleeps, and the story ends, but Harold still exists within the margins of his purple scribbles. His black-and-white head peeks from under the purple covers he drew up around himself. Although Harold seems to have found what he desired, he never reaches the room he once knew, settling for a mere imitation of his old bedroom. In a text that is shrouded in ambiguity, it makes sense that this story ends in obscurity. Just as *Harold and the Purple Crayon* is a narrative without a resolution, Harold is a boy without a home, a character without a context, and a self-aware toddler without a conventional, loving family.

Supplied with the knowledge of his self-governing potential and the awareness of his restrictions in relation to the domain around him, Harold embarks on a creative journey that redefines the concept of traveling and returning home. He wants to venture off the straight and narrow path, but he drew this path himself. For quite a while, he longs for his bedroom, not his home, but he settles for a few purple lines scrawled across the page instead.

Readers are not granted the privilege of knowing whether Harold finds his parents again, or whether his parents exist at all. There is no foreshadowing as to what happens when, and if, Harold awakes the next morning. In an ending that is neither cheerful nor gloomy, neither expected nor surprising, the ambiguity of the story's conclusion enables readers to determine the epilogue for themselves, just as Harold determines his conclusion on his own. Harold learns that with his artistic abilities, he can create a safe space for himself, satisfying his need for comfort and security despite his lack of a conventional family.



"The purple crayon dropped on the floor. And Harold dropped off to sleep."⁹

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