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**Finding a Story in a Book without a Story:
Constructing a Narrative in Shaun Tan's Picturebook**

The Red Tree

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

In his website, Shaun Tan claims that his picturebook *The Red Tree* (2001) was not conceived as a narrative piece in particular, portraying instead “a series of distinct imaginary worlds as self-contained images which invite readers to draw their own meaning in the absence of any written explanation” (2001). Admittedly, this is a book with no action-packed illustrations and events. Instead, every illustration leads to a reflexive process that contributes to a slow reading rhythm. However, there are elements in the story that contradict Tan’s statement. Furthermore, contrary to his words, the relation between the text and the picture is determinant to understand this, as its interpretation motivates the construction of the narrative by the individual reader while creating sense out of them. Besides the protagonist and the red leaf, there are further interconnections between illustrations that are revealed through the interpretation of words and text in conjunction. Thus, I argue that a narrative reading of Shaun Tan’s *The Red Tree* is possible and that the story can be read as an introspective psychological journey. By doing so, this dissertation aims to explore new perspectives of study both for picturebooks as a genre and for this specific picturebook.

Keywords: Picturebooks, Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, multimodal narrative, reader-response, text-image relations, Children’s Literature, introspective journey, visual narrative grammar

0. Introduction

0.1. Overview of Picturebooks and Directions in their Research

In spite of their seemingly revealing name, picturebooks remain ironically a confusing format regarding their nature. As Lewis points out, their ambiguity is evident in the multiple spellings used for the same concept: “How should you spell ‘picturebook’, for example? Is it a compound word (picturebook), a hyphenated word (picture-book), or two distinct words (picture book)?” (Lewis 2001: xiv). Due to their name, they are frequently conceived in general terms as ‘books’ with ‘pictures’. However, this definition is misleading and incomplete, failing to accurately distinguish the genre from other similar formats including pictures, like illustrated books. In addition, it does not acknowledge the inherent relation between images, text and meaning-making processes. Arzipe and Styles (2003) define the picturebook as a “book in which the story depends on the interaction between written text and image and where both have been created with a conscious aesthetic intention” (cited in Driggs and Sipe 2007: 273). Although the picturebook has become an increasingly experimental format, given its stylistic possibilities—resulting in multiple exceptions to their definition—Arzipe and Styles do reflect satisfactorily the common conception of the format. Thus, it is crucial to stress the fundamental role played by the visual artwork in the conveyance of meaning, the message and the construction of stories, whether they are accompanied by words or not. In agreement with Sipe (cited in Driggs and Sipe, 273), in order to emphasise this connection, *picturebook* will be the spelling used throughout this dissertation.

Although not exclusive, picturebooks have been traditionally associated with children’s literature. Consequently, a significant proportion of research has been conducted in relation to children. Due to the aforementioned interaction

between text and images, numerous studies have used picturebooks as a vehicle to explore their emotional development and cognitive processes, as well as potential educational applications. In this regard, Nodelman (2010) comments on the arbitrariness of written textual signs against the iconic pictorial ones; whereas there is no realistic resemblance between the sign and the referent, images offer a closer and more recognisable representation. Admittedly, the idea of picturebook with which he works in his article can be rather limited, too focused on text-image relations with a high degree of equivalence. Nodelman overlooks, for instance, more abstract paintings or the subjective representation of emotions with less correspondent physical models in reality. Nevertheless, this is a relevant underlying notion behind the implementation of the literary format in language and literacy acquisition.

As a sub-genre of children's literature, picturebooks are frequently conditioned by existing ideologies and assumptions related to children and the construction of childhood. One of these assumptions, according to Sanders (2013), is that children have, if not limited knowledge, limited experience, hence the necessity to have the book read by a more "proficient" authority that can perform the verbal language. In other words, as Sanders contends, picturebooks are generally assumed to involve at least two persons, an adult who will read the story aloud and a child who will receive it. Thus, studies on picturebooks have also explored the special ensuing context and relationships that contribute to socialisation processes (Nikolajeva and Scott 2006). Furthermore, they motivate the analysis of the balance of power resulting from the position and role of the individuals involved in the experience of reading-listening.

Finally, although seemingly less predominant, the presence of images in the book and their weight in the inference of meaning has also drawn the attention

of academics to the artistic dimension, focusing on the visual rather than the accompanying text as a form of art criticism and deeming the book as an object of art history (Nikolajeva and Scott 2006). Similarly, one can address stylistic and design choices: whether the illustrations are more realistic than fantastic, or the lines sharper and bolder or softer and wobbly, as features that affect the overall interpretation and require special attention.

0.2. Introducing Shaun Tan and the Organization of this Dissertation

Shaun Tan (Perth, Australia, 1974) is an author and illustrator acclaimed for his particular approach to the medium of picturebooks and his unique art style and vision.¹ The great influence of his upbringing in Central Perth as the son of a Chinese-Australian multicultural couple² is evident in his works. The subjects of otherness, immigration, the experience of culture and cultural exchange are recurrent in his works. His stories frequently portray a solitary character in a disordered, perplexing and incomprehensible environment in which they are not successfully integrated and from which they are disconnected, either because they have been singled out as different or they do not share the same culture or comprehend its conventions. Despite what it may seem, these works are not

¹ He is the author and illustrator of *The Lost Thing* (2000), *The Red Tree* (2001), *The Arrival* (2006), *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) and *Rules of Summer* (2013), all of which have all won the Ditmar Award. Additionally, he participated in the animation of his own picturebook *The Lost Thing* (2010) and has illustrated books for other authors such as *The Rabbits* (1998), written by John Mardsen. Most notably he won the Lindgren Memorial Award in 2011.

² His father was a Chinese-Malaysian from Penang, Malaysia, and his mother was Anglo Australian.

necessarily pessimistic and negative, often including occasions in the narrative that open windows to optimistic interpretations. For instance, in *The Red Tree* (2001), at the end of the day, the protagonist seems happy to be back home, “a place she can peacefully belong to, with no difficult or unpleasant tasks ahead” (Sikorska 2018: 214). In order to convey the feeling of loneliness and confusion of these characters, Tan frequently experiments with language, both in terms of text and a deeply symbolic visual media.

Ample literary research has been conducted on his works, among which two main directions can be observed. On the one hand, many academics draw their attention to the responses that his picturebooks elicit in the readers, who are often young children in primary education. These studies are part of the aforementioned tendency to explore education and cognitive processes. On the other hand, other scholars have focused on the subject matters of Tan’s work, analysing, for instance, the representation of “otherness” or the resulting disorientation of the characters who are placed in a world that defies all order and logic. Regardless of the approach, reader-response theory stays relevant for most, due to the captivating illustrations and the general concern with unravelling their denotational and connotational potential and mechanisms.

Among his works, *The Arrival* (2006) has sparked the most interest among scholars. It is a wordless picturebook centred around immigration, showing the story of a man who leaves his home in order to make a living and support his family. Due to the absence of accompanying text—the only text is part of the illustration—it has been studied for its artistic value, as well as for the narrative resources of its images. In this line of research, it promoted the academics to study the differences between the formats of picturebooks and comics. Furthermore, its central subject of immigration made it subject of plenty of reader-response

studies, both among young and grown audiences. These studies are not only a means to explore education in values, but also a sensitive means of looking into the topic and how it helps other people relate or empathise.

The Red Tree (2001)³, written and illustrated by Tan, is about a young girl—although as Smith (2017) points out, her representation is “ageless” (63)—who struggles to define herself—her personality—in an overwhelming world that does not seem to welcome or care for her. She has been consensually interpreted as a patient of depression, a reading reinforced by Tan’s (2011) remark about having based the story and having been inspired by his own experience. In his website, the author explains that “*The Red Tree* began as an experimental narrative more than anything else: the idea of a book without a story” (Tan n.d.: “Comments”) and that he had the intention of “produc[ing] an illustrated book that is all about feelings, unframed [of] any storyline context, in some sense going ‘directly to the source’.” (Tan, “Comments”). In spite of the interesting and challenging vision in the author’s remark, there is a blatant lack of exploration of this dimension of the book. While *The Red Tree* has been frequently studied from a reader-response theoretical standpoint, focusing on its understanding by young students and their emotional development, little has been written about its narrative structure and resources.

³ *The Red Tree* was awarded as the Honour Book for the Picture Book of the Year by the Children’s Book Council of Australia in 2002 and was the winner of Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children’s Literature in the same year. It has also been adapted as a play for the Queensland Performing Arts Center in 2006. There is also a musical performance by the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the choir Gondwana Voices with images from the book.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to take a new research direction that can provide new perspectives on the study of Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*, as well as an original view on picturebooks beyond traditional conventions with a young audience in mind. To do so, I challenge the author's previous comments on the lack of narrative and offer a reading that does include it. Additionally, I defend that the illustrations are not as "unframed" and disconnected as his remarks suggest, given the presence of recurring visual elements that induce the formation of interconnections in the reader's mind. Furthermore, in contrast with the opinion that "each image remains open to various interpretations in the absence of any accompanying description" (Tan, "Comments"), my interpretation stresses the interplay between text-image, considering the presence of words essential in guiding the reader through the pictures and shaping the readers' perception.

This dissertation is organized in two main sections. The first one analyses the role of the two media present in the book—text and images—in guiding the reader through the story and providing sense. In order to better comprehend the intrinsic relation between text and image and the individual resources of each, their most relevant elements will be examined separately. This section will provide the principal pieces of the narrative puzzle that the second one will assemble. There, the potential story will be constructed on the basis of narrative theory. The structure will be analysed, as well as relevant features such as time and its cyclic nature, now considering the written and pictorial language in conjunction. Furthermore, it will present a reading of the story in association to the girl and her troubling experience as a contemplative psychological journey in company of the reader.

1. A Heavy Responsibility: Engaging with Textual and Visual Language

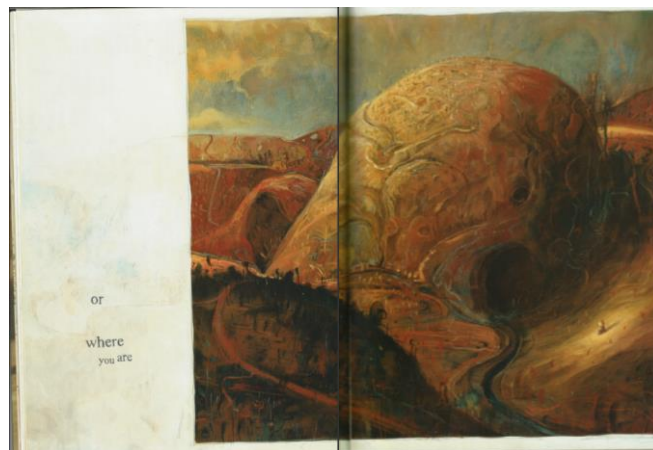
1.1. The Illustrations

There is no doubt that the artwork in Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* is the true protagonist along the reading experience of enjoying the picturebook. It is striking and it predominates over the text, fighting the confines of single pages and expanding across the gutter to the neighbouring ones. The illustrations depict the protagonist's mood and emotional state with surprising accuracy while stimulating the reader to question and wonder in an attempt to reach a deeper level of understanding: typically, "Tan leaves large gaps within his narratives, which can serve to invite the reader into the story and think critically" (Smith 2017: 8). By means of conceptual and metaphorical visual language, they inspire in the audience feelings of sympathy and understanding towards the girl protagonist. In spite of that odd clarity, the pictures remain mysterious and open to a great number of interpretations. Tan ("Comments") considers these interpretations an essential element of the book, which "demands" them in order to include and consider properly the individual experience of "suffering" and "hope." This seems appropriate, as everyone's experience of 'suffering' or 'hope' is unique and personal. Because of this lack of definition, the reader is left with a heavier responsibility to make the necessary cognitive connections to develop a personal reading of their own. It is important to establish and understand the mechanisms to decode the illustrations, because before the puzzle of the narrative can be assembled, it is necessary to comprehend the pieces.

Firstly, the most crucial unifying element in the illustrations is the main character: "What resulted after many scribbles was a series of imaginary landscapes connected only by a minimal thread of text and the silent figure of a young girl at the centre of each one, with whom the reader is invited to identify"

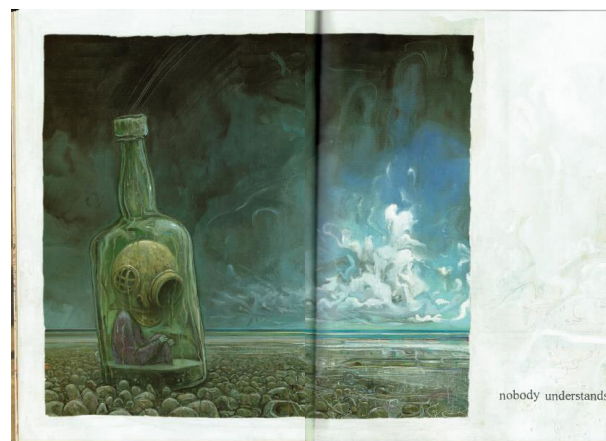
(Tan “Comments”). While she is not necessarily the most prominent detail in all the pictures, she is the centre of our attention. When faced with every scene, one looks for her presence in the pictures, being one of the very few expectations that remain constant throughout the book. Furthermore, it is her experience that the reader identifies and of which tries to make sense.

To interpret the images, it is frequently necessary to draw from one’s personal experience as well as knowledge and references of a shared culture. What is meant as *shared culture* is not by definition a coincidence in socio-cultural background, customs or outlooks on the world and reality, but rather, the capacity to recognise and infer meaning from signs and symbols amongst cultures. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the strong hold that the former conditions undoubtedly retain over the process and their determinant role in the personalisation of the creative encounter in the picturebook. Supporting this idea, Wu (2014) remarks that readers are able to order and interpret intelligibly their perceptions by drawing from previous experience through language.



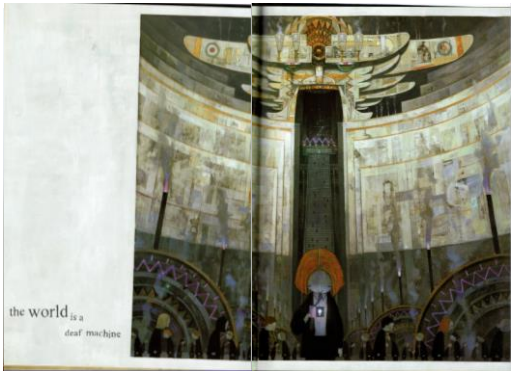
Scene 13. “or where you are”

Following this line of thought, the reader should be able to interpret the negativity and gloominess of the protagonist's expression by means of their mental database of experiences gained from interacting with the world and those within; hence, they create a connection between the downturned eyes and the feeling of sadness. Similarly, in the thirteenth scene the setting is immediately identified as dauntingly dangerous through the skull-like shadow on the side of the hill, a widespread symbol for death, and the miniature size of the protagonist against vast fields and colossal hills that want to devour her, which automatically positions her as inferior.



Scene 4. "nobody understands"

In addition, without even taking into consideration the accompanying text in the fourth scene, one is able to recognise the overwhelming loneliness, anguish and disheartenment simply from the cold palette of bluish and dark colours and the pouring rain that is filling up the bottle in which the girl is secluded.



Scene 5. “the world is deaf”



Scene 6. “without sense or reason”

Both scene five and the following double spread operate on the same basis, conveying inferiority again and the threat of being eaten—consumed and annulled—by a disturbingly tall building with seemingly endless stairs, in resemblance of a huge mouth, in the first instance and a chaotically arranged crowd of loosely anthropomorphic buildings with open mouths, intimidating gazes and violent attitudes in the other. Furthermore, the colour palette enhances the aggressivity of the sight with savage reds and harsh darks.

The examination of the visual dimension also reveals recurring elements that can establish symbolical ties between the illustrations, abandoning the idea of disconnected illustrations and contributing to the construction of the narrative. The red leaf—a symbol of the concealed albeit surviving hope amidst misery—accompanies the protagonist throughout every page. In addition, it proves to be a vital feature for the narrative, as it is responsible for the surprising ending that acts as a kind of “plot twist,” effectively changing the mood and expected prospects for the girl:

Even in the most difficult and overwhelming pages, the small red leaf appears. The leaf is always just out of the girl’s sight. Although hope still exists in her life, she is not yet able to find it or use it. It is left to the reader to will the leaf into her lap, to show her that all is not lost. (Smith 2017: 70)

Although represented through different means, the notion of time is always present in the shape of snails, clocks or hourglasses. What makes time in *The Red Tree* so special is the fact that it does not seem to move forward or follow reason. On the one hand, the snails—and the numerous associated spirals—suggest a slow heavy flow, which is enhanced in the seventh double spread, where the girl is seen on top of a huge snail. Here, time loses meaning, as its passing is imperceptible and does not seem to get anywhere, as supported by the inwards spiral movement; the animal does move, but it always ends up in a similar position, rendering the whole process useless. On the other hand, both the clocks and hourglasses reflect a more fatidic facet of time: in the sixth double spread, all the clocks have different times and contribute to the pervasiveness of chaos and madness, whereas in the tenth, the hourglass is running unstoppable in the hands of a monster, reminding the protagonist that “terrible fates are inevitable.”

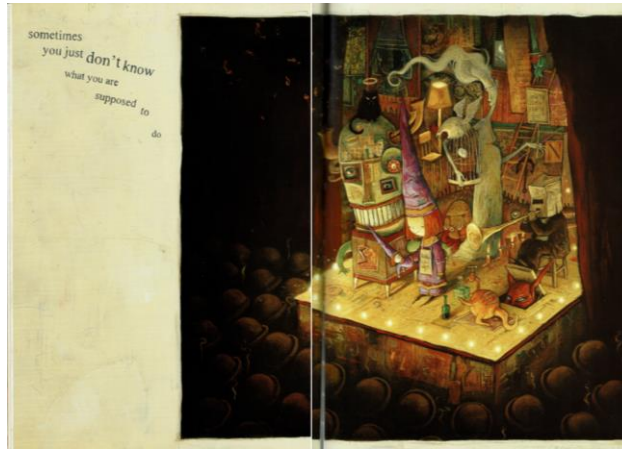
1.2. The Text

Attention has been drawn to the inexhaustible possibilities of the artwork in regards to the inference of meaning by and through the reader. However, one should not forget the accompanying written sentences, as they are responsible for the guidance of the reader through the journey by narrowing the number of feasible elucidations (Sikorska 2018), contrary to the author’s belief that “each image remains open to various interpretations in the absence of any accompanying description” (Tan, “Comments”). The profuse semantic alternatives of the images could become an obstacle to the understanding of the narrative as a whole and the establishment of connections between pages—“From Barthes’ [1985] perspective, an image can and does mean far more than its producers intend. The sea of possible meanings is terrifying, sublime in the Burkean sense that it is too

enormous to be comprehended” (Sanders, 60). Thus, the words ground the images and contextualise them as experiences and emotions felt by the protagonist. In fact, their semantic value without the company of the visual art would be just as wide and confusing. Consequently, in the present interpretation both mediums are dependent on each other, in contrast to Tan’s ideal of text-image relation: “[words] do not really explain the pictures, and likewise, the pictures aren’t there to explain the text” (Tan 2010: online). They operate in what Sipe (1998, in Driggs and Sipe 2007) refers to as “synergy”—closer to Tan’s (2010) vision of “creating a potential voltage through a ‘gap’ between telling and showing” (online)—remaining general enough to welcome interpretations and avoid authoritative enforcements, but limited enough to support the narrative:

The words can only give so much access to the girl’s world before they start to shape it. The text has to walk a very fine line between giving enough information to guide the reader, and telling the girl’s story outright. The ability to connect with the girl and her plight comes from the gaps that Tan leaves between his text and his illustration (Smith 2017: 76)

The format and composition of the verbal message also plays a part in this process. Words appear to be conceived as images themselves, as their format and design reinforces their overall meaning. For example, under the image of the room being filled with leaves, the text “and things go from bad to worse” emphasises the “bad” with a bolder font and the unfortunate turn of events by tilting the “worse” downwards. Similarly, in the next page, the text parallels the image of the large fish looming over the protagonist by having “darkness” in a comparatively large bold font hovering over the smaller “overcomes you.”



Scene 11. “sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to be”

In addition, when the girl is facing the unresponsive audience in the center of the crowded stage in scene eleven, the text seems to be collapsing, anticipating the next page where in order to emphasise the identity crisis of the girl, words are scrambled and “who” stressed to intensify the uncertainty and interrogation, and encourage that direction in the interpretation. Interestingly, the author chose to integrate “without sense or reason” (see scene 6) within its illustration rather than relying on font like the aforementioned instances when conveying sense. The busy visuals and the swarming presence of signs, symbols and other incomprehensible texts in many different languages strip the main text of its predominance in the page while enhancing the feeling of confusion that it transmits: “This is an excellent example of a page using what is unsaid in an ironic fashion; that is, there are so many things conveyed on this page that they cancel each other out until nothing but the text is able to speak” (Smith 2017: 76)

Unlike the deep and complex images, the text is concise, minimalist and simple in terms of grammar to allow for the aforementioned open reading. For instance, “nobody understands” and the repeated “waiting” in the seventh double spread are short sentences with only the most basic components to function. In fact, “without sense or reason” is not even a sentence but a phrase. Interestingly, against the independence that one could imagine ensuing from such simplicity, all

the pieces of verbal language are clearly connected either implicitly in a conceptual manner or explicitly by means of conjunctions or sequence markers, namely *and*, *or* and *then*. An example of the first type of association can be found in “the world is a deaf machine,” which can be understood as a motivator of the two previous scenes where the protagonist expresses her feeling of defeat—“darkness overcomes you”—and being misunderstood—“nobody understands you.” In comparison, the use of *and* in “and things go from bad to worse” in the second scene creates an automatic understanding of it as the continuation of the first scene, setting the development of the story in motion. Similarly, scene eight drives the narrative forward, not only using *then* to indicate passage of time and introduction of a new event, but also indicating a change of pace in contrast to the previous stillness and inactivity. Furthermore, there are no punctuation signs, which contribute to strengthen the continuity of the narrative and the rejection of ceases in between scenes. The implications of these features in the general construction of the narrative will be further explored in the following section to study the cyclical nature of the story and its timelessness.

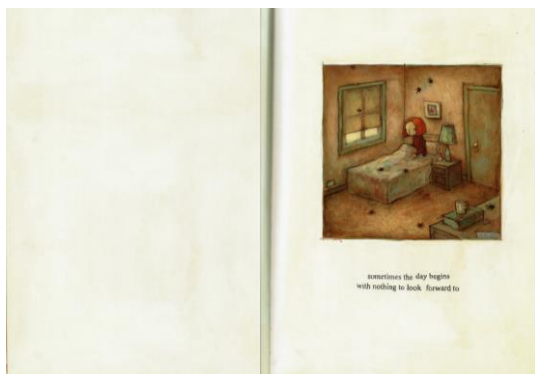
2. Putting the Pieces Together: The Construction of the Story

2.1. Narrative Structure

The Red Tree was conceived by Tan (“Comments”) as being “all about feelings, unframed [of] any storyline context.” Indeed, unlike traditional children’s literature, which “is a plot-oriented literature” (Nodelman 22), its illustrations show states rather than actions. If one understands the narrative as being goal-driven and depicting sequences of events connected by means of causality (Cohn 2007), it will be a difficult enterprise to apply it to this picturebook. However, not all of them are so; Nanay (2009) offers a wider and

much flexible definition: “narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience” (120). *The Red Tree* does portray experiences, hence the theoretical possibility of narrative construction.

In order to determine a plot and structure, it is essential to examine first the portrayal of time. Time is extremely ambiguous, despite paradoxically having a very powerful presence. The previous section commented on a few textual evidences of sequential markers, like *then*, suggesting progress. Nonetheless, how long those scenes extend in time—or, as a matter of fact, any event in the book—remains unclear.



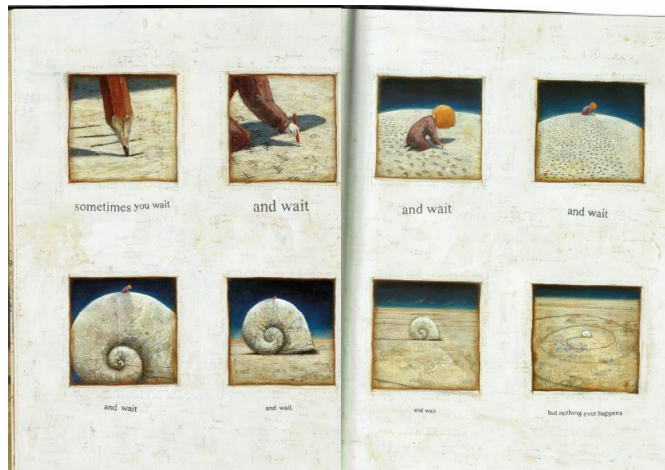
Scene 1. “sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to”



Scene 15. “just as you imagined it would be”

The two opening and ending scenes set in the interior of the girl’s room—the illustration of which is coincidentally smaller in comparison to the exterior representations and confined to a defined square in a single page—indicate the beginning and end of a day with a light blank space in the former case that becomes darker in the last pages. No further clues can be found in the remaining pages that offer a more specific reference to time. Furthermore, the situation is aggravated by the fact that the clocks and hourglasses recognisable in the pictures are impractical and futile. In fact, they add to the constant feeling of hazard and

havoc of the other scenes. As a result, time in *The Red Tree*, like meaning, is perceived as frustrating and undefined: “Any apparent meaning is always laced with uncertainty. The red tree may bloom, but it will also die, so nothing is absolute or definite; there needs to be an accurate reflection of real life, as something that is continuously in search of resolution” (Tan, “Comments”).



Scene 7. “sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait but nothing happens”

The double spread in scene seven is the most revealing when exposing the features of time in the picturebook. Here, the layout opts for a smaller sequence of panels showing the girl on top of a snail waiting for something:

The illustration shows the slow toil of waiting and compares the journey to that of a snail, while the text uses repetition to drive the point home. (...) The text slowly shrinks with each zooming away from the girl as well. The use of zoom and repetition emphasizes the monotony of waiting when one is anxious for something to happen. (Smith 2017: 66)

The image of the panels zooms out progressively—both the protagonist and the text’s font are reduced along the process—, showing the reader the process backwards—the marks she has been writing while waiting and the path of the snail—while paradoxically time moves forward. This is the first instance showing

the girl as an active subject—“sometimes you wait”—rather than a patient as in previous scenes. Similarly, it is the only moment in the story where the reader can find an explicit passage of time. In spite of this fact, this agency seems to contribute to the feeling of frustration and powerlessness of the girl, building an impression of time as apathetic and impassive, as even then, there is no progress.

This scene also emphasises the recursivity of the story by means of the snail and the spiral. These motifs have been presented as recurrent in the first half of the previous section. On the one hand, the sluggish snail slows down the pace of the narrative even more and the spiral points to the absurdity of time in this context. The spiralling trail of the snail shows movement, simultaneously displaying the ongoing outcome of a seemingly infinite duration of time. The point to be made here is that even if there is movement there is no progress, as it feels impossible to change positions in space and time; despite the illusion of progress, one ends up in the same position as they were initially. In fact, the inwards direction of the spiralling path could be a foreboding that the present distress is going to increase progressively.

The recursivity explored above opens the possibility—it even seems to encourage it—of interpreting the story in a cyclical manner. This is further supported by the apparition of the red tree in her room at the end, which could be the source of the brown leaves that invade the protagonist room at the beginning of the day:

The girl starts everyday by being pushed out into the world that does not understand her by the nightly wilting of her solace and happiness. Each day begins with the death of her comfort of the home and finishes with her return to sanctuary and the regrowth of a brand new red tree. (Smith 2017: 71)

Smith further associates the lack of punctuation signs mentioned in the first section with the promotion of the conception of the cyclical narrative. She claims that their absence together with the lack of capitalisation characteristic of written

language does not mark the beginning and ending points of the written story, allowing time and narrative to flow in between in cycles.

Due to the uneventful nature of the story and the absence of a clear evolution in the girl, be it physical or psychological, one might be tempted to classify its plot as “slice-of-life,” the term coined by Scholes and Kellogg (1966) for Modernist fiction. This kind of plot usually recounts sequences of ordinary events during a character’s life that trigger no change and do not entail any kind of development. The only variation in mood in *The Red Tree* comes from the final birth of the red tree and its invitation not to lose hope, which due to the cyclic nature recognisable in the narrative could be interpreted as a feeble attempt at optimism that irremediably fails to survive another day. According to this reading, the narrative would be a condensed version of a repetitive series of episodes.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to consider the narrative as a summary of a general account of an indefinite duration in the form of a single episodic sequence. This alternative opens the possibility of reading the plot in a more traditional light, given its better conformity with “introduction, complication, climax and resolution” (Nikolajeva 2010: 29). In accordance with Smith (2017), the weight of the development of the narrative lies on the illustrations, rather than the text, the function of which is to contextualise them and offer guidance to the reader through their interpretation. Thus, to accurately define the structure of the plot, this will be first analysed according to the main narrative categories of Visual Narrative Grammar explained by Cohn (2010).

Cohn defines five main narrative categories: “establishers,” “initials,” “prolongations,” “peaks” and “releases,” all of which can be grouped together in “phases of constituency, which are coherent pieces of a structure (...) [that] belong to an ‘Arc’ in narrative” (421). Consequently, there are four distinct phases

in *The Red Tree*. The first one covers the six first scenes and is the initial of the single arc. Scene one introduces the girl in her room, the mood and the time. The second scene follows the same feeling and introduces the conflict that prompts the coming experiences, which function like traditional actions in narration, by increasing the negativity of the mood, which goes from “bad to worse.” The following two scenes are prolongations that describe in advance the emotional outcomes of the peak, divided between the fifth scene and the most powerful scene six, which enhances the moment with the extension of the image in a large double spread. The next phase, corresponding to the prolongation state in the main arc, is contained in the next two pages, as the layout introduces panels instead of big illustrations. Here, the initial corresponds to the first panel, continued by six prolongation panels building up expectations for a great peak that never comes. Instead, there is a resolution that emphasises the aforementioned sluggish qualities of time.

The third phase is the closest one to being a peak in the arc. Scene eight acts as an initial, positioning the protagonist in direct threat of being swallowed as the whole page, text included, seems to be spiralling down into a whirlpool and the surrounding ships collapse into her insignificant boat. After that, there are two prolongation scenes, which expand the meaning of the “troubles” mentioned in the initial scene of the phase. Next, comes the peak, justified by the return of the agency to the girl—“sometimes *you* just don’t know” (my italics) in contrast with “wonderful things are passing you by,” in which she is the patient. In actuality, this is a sub-phase that comprises the initial scene eleven, with twelve and thirteen as prolongations.

Interestingly, peak scenes, both in the main arc and as part of a phase, address questions of *who*, *what*, *where* and *why*. Smith identifies these questions

and draws attention to the lack of answers and the absence of *when*. She defends that the aim of this is to stress the indefiniteness of time, as well as providing the source of her insecurity and displacement:

The girl does not know who she is, what she is doing, where she is, or why any of it is happening to her. These basic questions that children are taught early on as a way to break into a story are explored in the negative in order to push the girl out of her own story, as well as show the reader that sometimes there are no answers to these questions, and it's that feeling of being lost that is paramount in disorders like depression. (Smith 2017: 69)

Finally, one reaches the hopeful resolution phase of the main arc, which extends through the last four pages of the story. Unprecedentedly, the establisher is restricted to a single page, where it offers a time reference, manifesting that daytime has ended and alluding to the recursivity of the story by comparing it to the starting point. In addition, the lack of image is an effective resource to stop the madness and confusion stemming from the inevitable visual and overstimulation of the depiction of the outside world before leading the reader to the comfort of the bedroom. In the next page, an initial scene introduces a new unexpected element through the illustration—a sapling of a red tree—that leads the story to its culmination in the last peak. The red tree stands in the middle of the room as reassurance: after all the troubles the girl goes through, she is also able to summon beauty and hopefulness from within her.

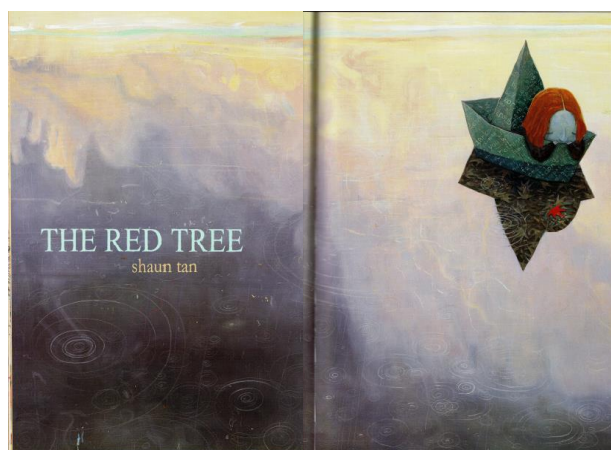
This final plot twist contributes to strengthen the thesis that *The Red Tree* does have a plot, traditional or otherwise. Furthermore, it implies that the narrative led the reader successfully through the phases of the arc in a way that allowed the reader to make connections between the scenes and create acceptable meaning (Rosenblatt 1978, in Bellorín and Sílvia-Díaz 2010), engaging in a play of anticipations that support the solidity of the narrative:

We believe that the way we anticipate endings affects how we read the present: we allow ourselves to add anticipated meaning to our “now” that the

expected “then” will give meaning to the plot ... In creating such narratives structures we expect coherence between the beginning, the middle and the end, because the first two elements are reshaped by the last. (Bellorín and Sílvia-Díaz 2010: 114)

The image of the growing red tree justifies the presence of the red leaf that had accompanied the girl in every page without her noticing and makes it meaningful. As a result, it cohesively ends the cycle of the narrative and encourages its restart, by promoting the re-reading of the story in order to revise the clues that anticipated the ending.

2.2. An Introspective Journey

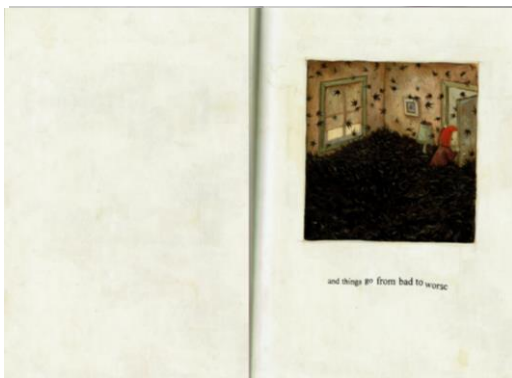


Cover art

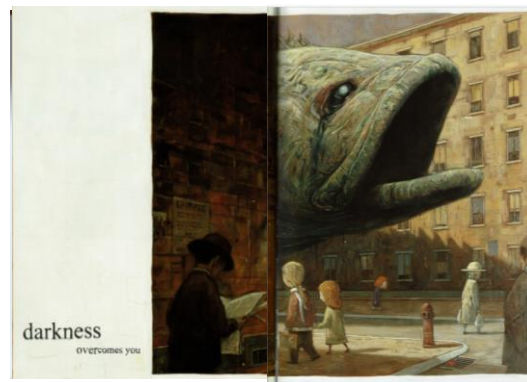
The proposed reading of the picturebook’s plot associates it with the common motif of the story as a journey in children’s literature and contextualises its position in the tradition. The cover of the book already anticipates this, introducing the protagonist while sailing dejectedly in a paper boat. The reader immediately establishes a connection between the boat and travelling, anticipating the narrative even before it has started. However, the trip that the protagonist undertakes is rather particular, considering it is built upon emotional experiences rather than actions and adventures. Paradoxically, the setting supports this through a myriad of fantastic landscapes and views, impregnated with metaphorical

language (Tan 2011), creating impressions comparable to those in adventure-based books.

The girl is presumably wandering in the vast sea without a particular direction, as suggested by the water and sky blending in an imperceptible horizon and the lack of any referential landmark for orientation. She looks small in comparison to the background, just as the boat seems flimsy and unfit for its job. The parallel between the boat and the girl strengthens the bond between the narrative, the journey and the girl and its experience of the world. Thus, it encourages the reading of the journey as an introspective adventure of self-reflection.



Scene 2. “and things go from bad to worse”



Scene 3. “darkness overcomes you”

This point is further proved by analysing the correspondence between the different settings of the scenes and the psychological state of the protagonist. There is a clear distinction in the layout of interior scenes, more specifically, the bedroom, and the exterior. The illustrations of the outside world are bigger and invasive of neighbouring pages, making her look inferior and intimidating her, whereas her bedroom is portrayed as a close space, clearly delimited and not even occupying the entire page. This contrast reflects her introversion and her different attitude towards the world and the room:

That the book begins with Tan's protagonist literally "awakening" in her bedroom to another "mechanical life" and then moving through a series of extreme settings, helps to emphasise that she is undergoing a process of self-explication: a journey that would perhaps be less plausible and significant if it were to commence without any clear "awakening," or to take place only within her bedroom. (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001: 70 in Phillips 2018: 7)

Similarly, the characterization of time is instrumental in reinforcing the passivity of the protagonist in the face of the upsetting and disturbing elements and situations. Its pointless movement, the lack of progress and the slowness of it confer it a passive and disinterested disposition that aggravate the frustration of the girl, who also seems to be drifting along the pages. Because the narrative is concerned with her outlook on a chaotic reality and her experience of her own mental state, the text continuously treats as a patient of her own perceptions—"darkness overcomes you"—or simply does not openly acknowledge her—"nobody understands," "terrible fates are inevitable." In other words, even in her own story she has no control or agency. As a result, she mirrors the deceptive spiralling movement characteristic of the narrative, trapping herself in it.

Due to their role in the success of the synergy between text and image, the reader is invited to embark on this journey alongside the girl and accompany her in the self-analysing process. The reader is free to experiment her emotions and use them as a starting point to examine theirs in contrast. With the basic premise of reader-response in mind, it is safe to assume that by filling gaps with their own experiences, the reader is unconsciously becoming a participant of the story and persuaded to assemble their own. The use of "you" in the text also fosters this engagement, as it can be understood as a projection of the protagonist, a generalisation or a deliberate positioning of one in the same spot as the protagonist to coax them to empathise.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

This dissertation has proposed an alternative reading of *The Red Tree* that challenges the author's perception of his own work. It offers a new perspective in regards to the narrative potential that had been overlooked. The dissertation attempts to construct a plot with the resources that the picturebook offers, hence the initial examination of the role of text and image in the process of framing the narrative and building connections that hold the illustrations together as a piece rather than acting independently. Both mediums provide their own valuable input that converges through the interpretative skills of the reader, who is responsible for piecing them together in order to reach a holistic understanding of the picturebook and its story.

Due to the rich complexity of the synergy between text and image, there is a multitude of possible interpretations that can affect the narrative structure of the story. Thus, a previous analysis of the most important elements was required, mainly regarding their implications in the construction of time and the spiralling motif that outlines the narrative. Two possible approaches to the plot resulted from these considerations. On the one hand, the story can be seen as an instance of a reiterative uneventful sequence that repeats itself unchanged after every ending. On the other, the resulting plot follows a more traditional structure, albeit it is characterised by a slow rhythm and actionless peaks.

This last potential plot, positions the picturebook within a literary tradition in children's literature characterised by the motif of the journey. The protagonist would undergo a process of meditation and self-observation, abandoning the concept of the journey as a trip filled with action or adventures in favour of becoming introspective. The active participation of the reader invites them to

share this journey with the protagonist and undergo a similar process as the protagonist.

This dissertation has focused mainly on formal aspects and interpretative processes. Due to the limitations of the format, there has been no opportunity to explore the repercussions that this reading could have in the approach of the picturebook as a postmodernist work or a comparative evaluation with others of its kind. Furthermore, the non-authoritarian stance of the book and its readiness to welcome individual and personal readings would make an interesting case of study in regards to the balance of power within the event of reading picturebooks and the performance of meaning.

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