

THE RED TREE

FICTIONALITY IMPROVES OUR HEALTH



Cristina Martín Castilla

INDEX

1. Introduction
2. Fictionality and Education
3. Reading words and images: Reading a picture book
4. Analysis of *The red tree*
5. Working with *The red tree*
6. Conclusion
7. Bibliography and Webgraphy

1. Introduction

The theoretical basis for the present work is reader response criticism, a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader and his or her experience of a literary work. According to this school of thought, the reader of a particular text is an active agent who completes the meaning of the work through interpretation. So, meaning is created by the interaction of the reader and the text.

I have chosen to work with the picture book *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan because its interpretation depends very much on the mood and sensitivity of the reader. The reading of this picture book can indeed produce effects in the reader's mind and emotions, as I shall explain.

From a thematic perspective, *The Red Tree* deals with the feelings of fear and confusion, themes not unusual in literature: A character tries to find out who he/she is and a change in his/her life ensues. Usually, it is about an internal struggle, although the character can be influenced by external circumstances, too. In this sense, the two parties are:

- The protagonist
- The society of which the protagonist is a member.

Society itself is often looked at as a single character that could be considered like an antagonistic figure.

Through *The Red Tree* children can learn how they can get over their problems. They can obtain a hopeful message and they will learn about and from their problems. It tells a wonderful story, dealing with the topics of hope and desperation. It reflects feelings such as absolute sadness or happiness for living your life. Curiously enough, the different depressing situations that appear in the story follow the actual order of the phases undergone by depressed people.

I have the purpose of working with this book in hospitals. In many hospitals, there are classrooms where children can learn and socialise. My aim is that these children do not forget their school days and they can learn in a different way. They will learn by drawing, singing songs and creating murals. So, they have a new opportunity of relation with the other children, they can work in groups and they can know between them.

2. Fictionality and education

What is the meaning of the term “Fictionality”? It can be defined as the necessary characteristic a fictional product must have. Children must be presented with fictional products to foster their artistic appreciation. They must also be able to know the differences between a real story and a fictional one.

Although fiction may be viewed as a form of entertainment, it has other uses. Working with stories and narratives in Primary Education has a number of advantages. Stories and narratives:

- Provide the opportunity to develop linguistic and discourse competence in meaningful and relaxed contexts.
- Provide linguistic input and context for linguistic interactions.
- Favour the development of all the competences involved in language learning.
- Favour the learning-by-doing approach.
- Provide a good material for meaning-centred approaches.

3. Reading words and images: Reading a picturebook

In the sixties and seventies of the past century writers started to research new methods to attract children with images. Some examples are: “Where the wild things are” by Maurice Sendak (1963) and “The very hungry caterpillar” by Eric Carle (1969). The first one explains the story through images and the second one uses different holes as part of its dynamics.

As stated by Nodelman (1988), it is obvious that children receive a high incentive through images, and children’s writers became aware of that. The connection between children and images is a success.

How does ‘reading’ occur when images are part of the text? The types of responses experienced by the consumer of the book would occur unconsciously in the same way that a fluent reader makes meaning from a written text, yet the responses are evoked by the effect of visual codes such as colour, framing, line, angle, perspective and vectors, in other words the ‘visual grammar’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Simpson, 2004; Unsworth, 2001). In interpreting meanings from images we don’t need to ‘decode the words’ as with print but we do need to be able to ‘break the visual codes’ in a different way. This involves a different type of interpreting of a different coding system. We need to be able to identify where the image-maker is using colour, position, angle, shape and so on to construct meaning. There are effects of images that

are different from words, particularly at the affective, aesthetic and imaginative levels. We can use the potential of images to facilitate the understanding of the students, and their eliciting of responses to the text.

When confronting picture books, the interaction between reader and text is different. The interaction between images and words must be taken into account. With picture books, readers have more choice and opportunity to interact.

When you are reading a book you are associating text with images, you are working with the verbal speech and the visual speech. Images bear the weight of (support of) visual speech. These images are joined with verbal speech for narrating the same story. So, this story has references, denotations, representations, and meanings.

In picturebooks, the importance of illustrations and written text is the same. In this sense, they are totally different from traditional books. Picturebooks transmit relevant information for developing stories. So, it is very important for professional illustrators to achieve different aims with the images. It is important to emphasise how visual speech complete words, illustrations and designs. Each part, the cover, title page, typography and images have relation and they are essential for understanding the book.

Picture books work with real and different topics. There is a difference in how picture books tell the stories. Picture books can introduce topics that are not associated with children, they can be complex and they can require a previous knowledge or adult cultural experience for understanding the implicit information and cultural aspects. Authors play with the indeterminacy; they do not specify the entire book's sense. They give a lot of freedom to the reader for her/him to think about himself/herself.

While traditional illustrated books were designed for a young, inexpert and passive audience, picture books request an active reader able to think about the text and images, and to build his/her own meanings and enjoy the designs (Lewis, 2001).

The relation between texts and images has different perspectives:

- Mutual translation (the written text is reflected in the images and vice versa).
- Illustrations change the words meaning.
- They are two meanings separated, but no opposed.

Sipe (1998) says that relation between narrative and illustrations produces effects in the other, which are going to change when we advance the pages in our book.

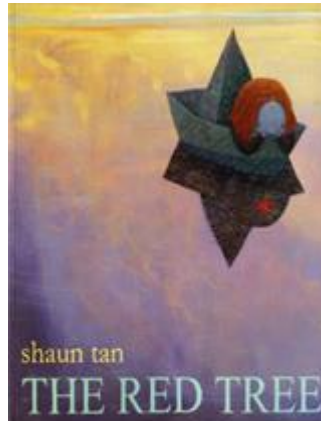
Lewis (2001) metaphorically uses the term “ecology” for understanding how a picture book works. Words come alive in the illustrations environment. They act like a little and complex ecosystem, that involves relation between each one of their components.

Pantaleo (2012) has investigated how using *The Red Tree* with students, even older students, can augment their reading motivation and extend their understanding of visual elements of art and design, as well as develop their literacy, language, and thinking skills, since this picturebook’s metaphorical images reflect emotional landscapes. The scholar has worked with middle-year native students. However, I concentrate specifically on children who are in hospital, and in their specific needs.

4. Analysis of *The Red Tree*

In my study of this picturebook, I follow The Danish scholar Martin Blok Johansen (2014), who has studied “The Red Tree” from a philosophical perspective, using some of the central concepts of existentialism developed by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard argued that being a person entails a coming-to-be, and for the person this coming-to-be manifests itself as a task. The task is to become oneself, which involves working through despair and becoming concrete. According to his analysis, *The Red Tree* demonstrates this process, with both the verbal and visual text depicting how despair can manifest itself through a process of splitting, in which the girl experiences separation, and a sense of doubleness. Ultimately, though, this girl achieves a growing-together; she experiences a sense of concretion as she becomes the one she is, as symbolised by the magnificently sprouting red tree. I find his analysis most helpful in order to explore issues such as despair and hope with sick children. Johansen works in a project dealing with philosophy in children’s literature. I have interviewed him, and his comments have been very enriching.

This story has sophisticated ideas that invite the readers’ own immersion and reflection. This book will ask more questions than provide answers. It does not explain everything, allowing to think in different possibilities.



In *The Red Tree*, apart from the three words of the title, the picture of the cover itself conveys meaning. The cover shows the words of the title, “The Red Three”. Then, at the top of the cover there is a paper ship with the protagonist on board. Some light is reflected on the child’s face. The frame is surrounded by a blue, purple, and yellow sea. The child’s facial expression is sad. Curiously she has the same colour face that the river where she sails.

“Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look to forward to”



The first illustration shows a girl staying in a field with grass. Behind her there are several paths under an illuminated mountain. The girl is standing with a loudspeaker. There are letters going out of the megaphone. She doesn’t speak an all in the story but seems that her internal words are not heard.

“And things go from bad to worse”... “Darkness overcomes you”...



The story begins with a negative feeling: The child's bedroom is full of black leaves. She left her bedroom because she did not feel well there. Black leaves are fallen, this represents sadness.

The story continues with the expression "Darkness overcomes you". This is my favourite part of the picture book, considering that the accuracy of the image is perfect: a big fish that follows you all day. This fish casts a huge shadow that follows you too. When you are sad, you can understand this situation perfectly because you think that there is something bad that are following you.

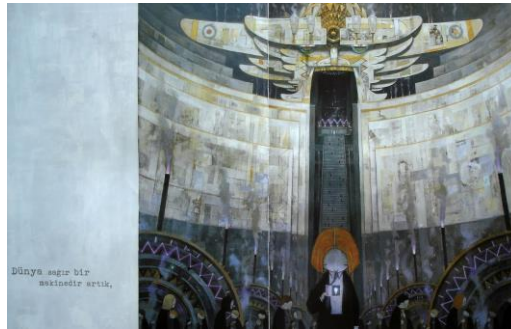
"Nobody understands"...



Furthermore, we find an image in which the child is inside a bottle. This is a typical feeling of sadness.

The girl is inaccessible. She is sitting on the beach; she is enclosed in a bottle and besides she is wearing a diver's helmet. "Nobody understands". The girl is enclosed in her own self; she does not want to communicate with anyone because there is no one that understands her.

“The world is a deaf machine...”



There is another passage in which a heart is compared to a deaf machine. Your own heart doesn't understand you. It is a deaf machine because feelings usually are associated with the heart. This muscle moves all your body, it is essential for our life and however, the child doesn't hear her heart.

“Without sense or reason”



This image shows an abstract illustration. So, the own image don't have sense or reason itself.

This is the same feeling that child has. She feels lost. Nothing around her has sense, all appears uncommon and without understanding.

Most of people have felt anxiety. A necessary feeling of knowing that is passing around us and why we are not able to understand it.

"Sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait but nothing ever happens..."



The illustration contains the protagonist crossing out lines that symbolise the days that are passing. All bad thinking goes in a spiral form. When you are sad your days seem eternal. You wish that the days go fast.

She must get to know herself as the person she is. There are several feelings like anxiety, instability; being sad, pleasant, disturbing, intriguing, comforting, unsettling...that inspires pity through the main character.

"Then all your problems come at once..."



The transition to becoming herself does not happen in one continuous. There are new difficulties and problems that always appear.

This transition from one state to another takes place as the result of a radical break with what preceded it.

“Wonderful things are passing you by...”



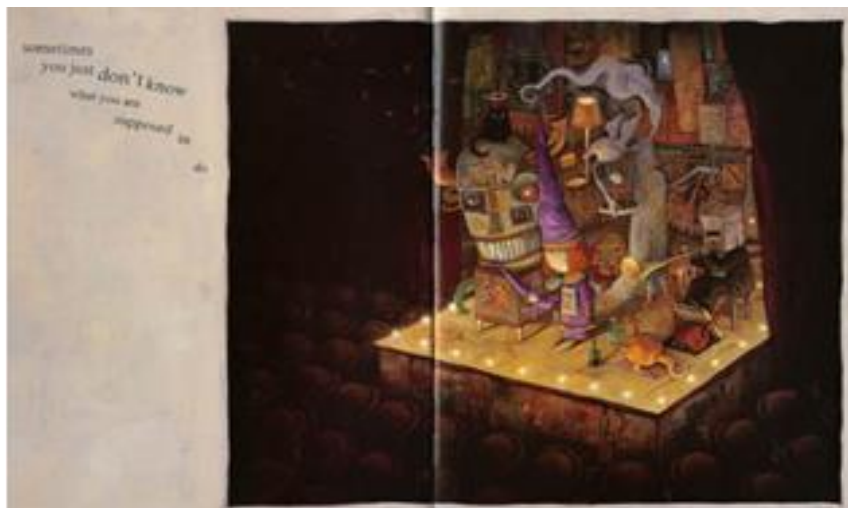
There is a mixture of good and bad things, but when you are hopeless, you are not aware of the good things. You are enclosed in yourself and you are not able to understand good opportunities that are passing in your life every moment. You don't see these good opportunities like something positive.

“Terrible fates are inevitable”

People are not conscious that terrible fates are inevitable. When you are in a bad phase it is caused by horrible fates. You only must be prepared for these bad moments. I think the only situation can't be solution is dead, so, we should be happy for live our life in each moment.

And if dead comes us, we must confront it and understand that forms part of our life.

“Sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do...”



This scene remembered me when you feel without sense of humour and you must show the world you are happy and anything bad is coming: "The show must go on". You need to represent a role that you are not feeling. You feel like an actor/actress in a theatre. You play a role for the rest of the world. Then, this is the worst thing you can do because you are lying yourself.

"Or who you are meant to be"



You don't know what is happening passing around you. You don't know who you want to be. You don't know who you are. You don't feel identified with your body, with your life or with any part of yourself.

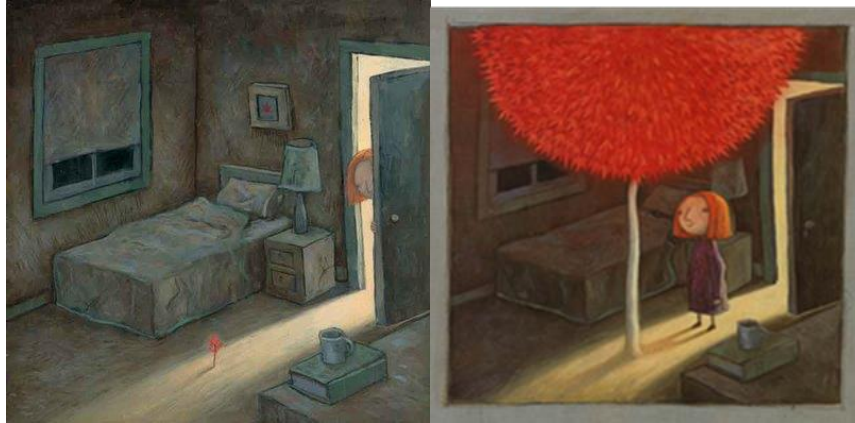
"Or where you are"

You feel that your home is not safe. People don't understand you and you are not comfortable anywhere. You don't find your site in the world. You are not associated with any place or any site. You only want to disappear.

"And the day seems to end the way it began"

"But suddenly there it is right in front of you bright and vivid quietly waiting"

"Just as you imagined it would be"



The day seems to end the way it began, it is another hopeless message that represents the low self-esteem of the child. The day ends as bad as it begins.

Suddenly a little beam gets inside the bedroom like rays of hope and there is a huge red tree, when the child sees the tree, a big smile appears in her face, "it is just as you imagined it would be". The child changes her expression because her mouth does not exist at the beginning.

The girl's shadow is part of the context; the tree and her have grown together. There is a connection with the girl's red hair, which is the same colour as the red leaves of the tree.

Finally, the child feels hopeful and she is able to change her expression and improve her self-esteem.

There is a final good comparative form among the hours of sadness in a cuckoo clock, being the sad hours in black and the positive hours in red, like the red tree.

Furthermore the sad hours are represented with black leaves. At the beginning the bedroom's child was full of these leaves. Leaves were representing her low self-esteem.

A tree is a powerful symbol of life and growth, trees appear in a lot of myths and religions. For example: the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge.

But, in this story the most important thing about the tree is that it represents the girl's finding and acknowledging of herself as being the one that she is. She grows together with the tree.

The text follows a chronological order. All the events occur in the order they happen. There are references from the past or future, however the events are written in order. The time is given by a cuckoo clock.

I attach in the Webgraphy several webs where we can appreciate these feelings and see Shaun Tan's works.

In conclusion, "The Red Tree" shows us how uncommon things can encourage us to ask questions about what we know/understand. Offering an opportunity to think some new insight through things we don't quite recognize.

It makes us ask and wonder, and offers us the opportunity to think in different points of view. This book let us think that all problems can be solved. Definitely, there are people that have problems and we don't realise it.

In that sense The Red Tree shows desperation and desolation in a distanced form, which means that these emotions are immediately at a distance from the reader him or herself. On the contrary, however, the feelings aroused when reading the picturebook do not belong to a different age, and nor are they set in a different place. They are here right now – as large as life.

5. Working with *The red tree*

First, I will read the book "The red tree" to the students. Afterwards, I will ask children their opinions about the story and whether they feel in this moment like the main character.

In second place, I will tell children to draw a mural about their life. They must draw a mural that reflects their life since they were born until the present. They can do it either drawing or collecting photos from magazines. The first option is more suitable for early years, while the second option is appropriate for all ages. Through this method we can ask them which had been their happiest moments or their worst moments in their life. They can tell about their problems and we will help them to resolve it.

After they finish their mural I will ask them:

- Which was the worst day in your life?
- Which was the happiest moment in your life?
- What would you wish in a future?
- What would you change in your life?

With this second task I can see the different types of children that I have in the class. I can see their feelings, emotions, familiar situations and how they analyse their life. This is a very important activity for them knowing more about themselves.

Shared story-writing is the third activity that I propose.

Shared story-writing comprises pieces of paper or on the contrary, an interactive whiteboard where the children can see clearly the writing progress. Adult should guide children in their reading of the book, discussing with the children and inviting them to add questions and support their ideas. So, collaborations have to include children and adults.

For example: I am going to start the story with "Once upon a time was a little child that lived in a huge castle, this castle was very beautiful, but the child was feeling alone..."

With this I expect that children create a story without relation with their real life. "Once upon a time..." is a typical beginning in story tales. I want them to see their period in the hospital like a bad time in their lives that they will overcome.

So, I can suggest answers to questions like:

-Why do you think that the child was feeling alone?

-When do you feel alone? Why?

-Would you like to be in a huge castle?

-Would you like to be in a huge castle without friends?

-What do you prefer, stay with your family watching a film in the living room or playing video games in your bedroom?

This activity could be connected with creative writing. We are going to work this concept with different tasks:

-Surprise. Write a short story about an invented character or a character you know. Firstly, you must start writing something that you think that this character can do. But, however you have to allow the character to do something completely different. Let the character wonder you.

This exercise let you recognize what is surprising and unexpected in a character. You have to make a list of the things this character usually does and another list of the kind of things this person/animal/thing would never do.

This is a good exercise for observing how stereotypes have an influence in children.

For example: Lara is a blond hair child. She is a good student. She is calm, kind and very creative. Nowadays, she has two dogs. She loves animals. But, she killed her younger cat the last week.

-Burning issue (discussion). Two people are arguing—a boy and a girl. They do not have to be a couple. Each is convinced he or she is right. You do not know who is right, but you will have sympathy for both points of view. How do men and women argue differently? Children have to discern the background of the discussion and they must give a solution.

-How are they making a discussion?

-Who is more violent?

-How would you solve the problem?

-Free play. This task needs improvisation. We can play with several people in a situation that demands improvisation. This situation also request the characters communicate and negotiate the improvisation. Safely, we see surprise, pleasure and frustration that is the result from a spontaneous scene. For example: Improvisation, a situation about one day in the city, going shopping, travelling to a foreign country, your dog's neighbour had attacked you...etc.

-I love you. In this activity you have to write about a person you love. You will immediately think about someone you love as a friend or a relative.

- What makes us love people?

-Who had you chosen for your narration? Why?

-How important is that person for you?

-What ending would you create for this story? With this answer I pretend that children create a different final for our story "The red tree". The final can see happier or not depends on child that writes it. But I will try that the final have a hopeful message that I pretend to transmit with this story.

-Figurative language (Rhymes with rhythm)

Children will create rhymes about their normal situation and about their life. So, I pretend to understand children's emotions, feelings, interests, tastes, favourite sports, favourite animals etc.

For example:

When I am sad

I cry with my mum

When I am happy

I play with my puppy

With these rhymes teacher can check the children's self-esteem and we can try to improve it.

6. Conclusion

I think this picture book is a good opportunity for helping children and adults that need support in their life. Those people feel anxiety, loneliness, sadness, melancholy, depression...

Anyone could feel these feelings in any time of our lives. But we must know how to get over the problems. The importance of recognizing that we can have problems and that they will pass at any moment.

With this story we can see that there are phases in which we have problems and other phases that not. There are times that we are very happy and other times in which we are not. It is part of different stages that we must deal with in a positive way.

There is a solution to everything.

"The Red Tree deals with topics like:

-Despair and coming to be

-Anxiety

-Who am I?

-The girl becomes herself

-Reflection and researching about yourself

Students, pupils, and practitioners have identified how using picturebooks students can increase their reading motivation and reach their understanding of visual elements of art and design; together with developing their literacy, language, and thinking skills.

7. Bibliography

Arizpe, Evelyn and Styles, Morag. (2003). *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts*. London: Routledge.

Beckett, Sandra. (2013). *Crossover Picture Books: A Genre for All Ages*. New York: Routledge.

Cappelørn, Niels Jørgen and Deuser, Hermann. (1997). *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1997*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Chris Horner, Vicky Ryf. 2007. *Creative Teaching English. In the early years and Primary Classroom*. Ed: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. London and New York.

De Jesús de la Vega Arias, Teresa (2012). *Las posibilidades de los niños para interpretar los libros álbum*, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro. Unpublished doctoral thesis.

Falconer, Rachel. (2009). *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and its Adult Readership*. New York: Routledge.

Kay Judith, Gelshenen Rosemary. (2001). *Discovering Fiction*. Ed. Cambridge University Press

López Téllez, Gloria (2001). *Metodología en la Enseñanza del Inglés*. Colección aulas de verano, Ed. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte

Madrid, D. McLaren, N. (2004). *TEFL in Primary Education*. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada

Martin Blok Johansen (2014), "Darkness overcomes you'. Shaun Tan and Soren Kierkegard". *Children's Literature in Education* (in press).

Nikolajeva, Maria and Scott, Carole. (2006). *How Picture Books Work*. New York: Routledge.

Pantaleo, Sylvia (2012), "Exploring Grade 7 Students' Responses to Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*", *Children's Literature in Education*, 43 (1), 51-71.

Pérez Valverde, C. and Muros, Jesús (2004). "Discourse competence in the EFL classroom", *TEFL in Primary Education*, eds. Daniel Madrid y Neil McLaren, 385-408. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada.

Pérez Valverde, C. (2014), "The invisible camera: Environmental Ethics and Ecocritical Issues through Varmint's Multimodal Narratives". *Text, image, ideology. Picturebooks as meeting places*. University of Stockholm (in press).

Webgraphy

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fictional>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrmMFFpKxgw>

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/fictionality>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiction>

<http://www.forbes.com>

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

www.literacytrust.org.uk

<http://writingexercises.co.uk/index.php>

<http://mysite.du.edu/~bkiteley/exercises.html>

Videos about Shaun Tan's works:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrmMFFpKxgw>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9NCUydoJFk>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE9riFDpZWk>