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Exploring how author illustrator Shaun Tan explores sensitive themes and feelings of hopelessness in his picture book ‘The Red Tree’

The picture book has been around since the early ages as some of the earliest forms of visual storytelling in books originated within illustrated manuscripts from ancient Egypt, these being the earliest evidence of text and image accompanied together with related content. *The Book Of The Dead* “is modern term for a collection of magical spells that the Egyptians used to help them get into the afterlife” (Taylor, 2010), being made up of a series of papyrus scrolls that depict early Egyptians beliefs on the afterlife, combining colourful illustrated figures with hieroglyphic script to convey a narrative story. It is interesting to note that these were often sold to wealthy people, used to educate and guide the spirit of the owner into the afterlife.

Another big developmental milestone presents itself within the Illuminated Manuscripts of the mid 14th - 15th century. These were “hand-written books with painted decoration that generally includes precious metals such as gold or silver” (National Gallery of Art) that often paired illustrations and manuscripts, embellished with decorative patterns or initials. These

were used to present a variety of textual media such as religious beliefs, medical and scientific information, as well as poems, and plays.

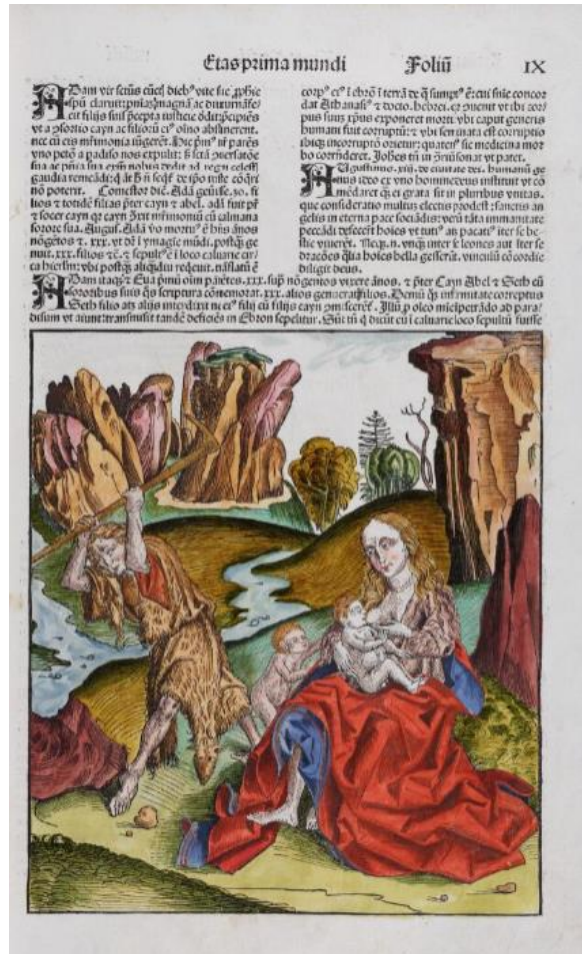


Figure 1 (left) : *The Liber Chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel

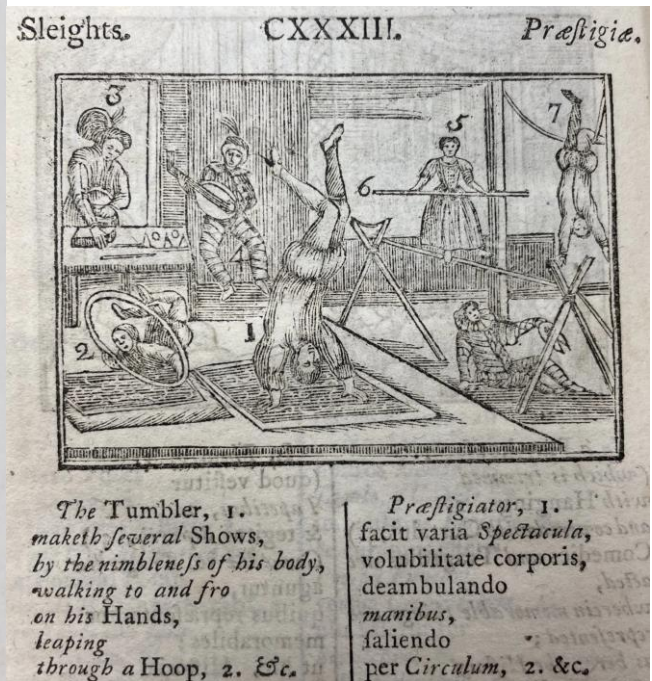


Figure 2 (right) : *Orbis sensualium pictus* by John Amos Comenius

However, the closest resemblance to the modern picture book we commonly know today is seen in the *Liber Chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel (14th century), and later in the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* by John Comenius (17th century). The *Liber Chronicarum*, often credited as

“the most extensively illustrated book of the 15th century” (Nuvoloni), offers a “universal history of the Christian world from the beginning of times to the early 1490s” (Nuvoloni) printed with woodcut block illustrations depicting biblical and historical events. However, the beginning of the more commercial and widely used picture book is often closely connected to the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, a book made solely with the intention of “introducing boys to the knowledge of things as well as of Latin Terms, and furnishing their minds with a stock of useful ideas” (Collections, 2023). These are just some examples of the earliest forms of picture books being used to educate and inform children, and adults, of sensitive and important life topics through the visual language of image and word.

It’s important to note that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe in” (Berger, 1972), and therefore our historical development has influenced our abilities to navigate these sensitive themes through semiotics and visual metaphors. We are reminded of our abilities as a reader to put our own meaning to the message in the picture book in Jane Doonan's *Looking At Pictures In Picture Books*;

“Pictures, through their expressive powers, enable the book to function as an art object: something which gives form to ideas and to which we can attach our ideas”

(Doonan, J.1993).

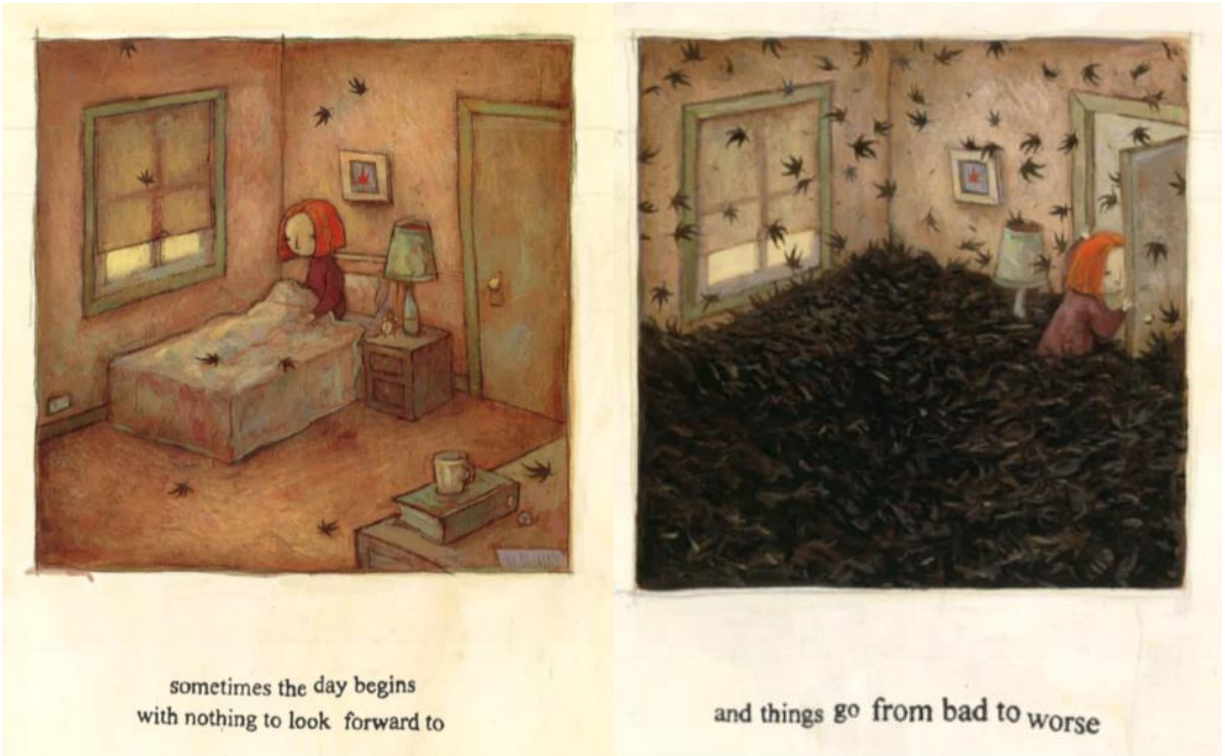
The relationship between text and image creates “a synergy of meaning, where both verbal and visual narratives contribute to the reader’s experience” (Nikolajeva, M. and Scott,

C.2006). This allows the picture book to work as combination of narrative and visual meanings through both picture and text provide the reader with multiple opportunities to explore their own personal interpretation of the meaning. Nikolajeva and Scott also explain that “the pictures and words interact in a way that enhances meaning beyond the capability of either medium alone” (Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C.2006), furthering the point that both the visual and textural ways of storytelling combine to give the reader a more personal and interactive experience as they navigate through the picture book. Visual metaphors within these books also play a big role in allowing the reader to understand the more metaphysical concepts through their own personal interpretation. Picture books create this relationship through, a term coined by the authors Nikolajeva and Scott, the ‘iconotext’, where image and text complement each other and allow a deeper meaning to form in a way that both mediums on their own could not. This provides the picture book with the ability to explore difficult and sensitive topics in a more accessible way for the reader, broadening the possibilities of what authors and illustrators could bring awareness to within their work.

Australian author and illustrator, Shaun Tan, provides us with some great examples of the picture book medium being used to cover a variety of abstract themes throughout his work. The work he produces is very universal in the way it allows a range of readers from all ages to find their own interpretive meaning of the story through his use of minimal text, along with surreal and immersive illustrations. Featuring topics such as; loneliness, alienation, displacement, depression and self-identity, Tan is able to bring a sense of comfort and

knowingness to a lot of readers that may be struggling or going through similar emotions, providing a safe space for those who may need it and educating the growing generations with a new style of storytelling that tackles these sensitive themes. Tan's picture book *The Arrival* explores themes of migration, emotional as well as cultural struggles through a wordless picture book containing detailed and dream-like colourless illustrations, which convey dark and heavy feelings of hopelessness and loss. His book titled *Eric* is another example of using this lack of colour to present feelings of loneliness and anxiety through the illustrations, as we follow exchange student, 'Eric', through his journey as he comes to visit a Surburban family during his travels and the struggles that come along with this.

As we dive into Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*, it is apparent that he has some overrunning themes of alienation, loneliness, depression and elements of dealing with complex emotions. *The Red Tree* is by far the most universally relatable picture book of his, due to the sparseness of the text, nonverbal and unnamed main character, as well as the surreal and imaginative imagery throughout the book. It allows the reader to connect with the character and story through the readers own interpretation of the narrative and metaphysical meanings behind the illustrations, as well as his use of 'iconotext' and the relationship between the text and image.



sometimes the day begins
with nothing to look forward to

and things go from bad to worse

Figure 3 (left) : *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 6-7)

Figure 4 (right) : *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 8-9)

The Red Tree begins with an immediate depressing tone (fig. 3 and fig.4), as we are introduced to the main character feeling hopeless and as if there was 'nothing to look forward to'. We are not given any indication to the characters identity, name or gender as we open the book, it is simply as if we are an outsider looking in. The text is minimal, but effective in setting the tone of hopelessness and despair within our main character, who seems to be isolated in their room through the closed window and door. There is a reoccurring motif with the dark black leaves, as we can further see in the next page that states 'and things go from bad to worse' indicating that these black leaves are becoming unbearable and overwhelming,

eventually consuming the characters room and forcing them to leave the situation. Themes of depression and darkness are portrayed with these black leaves to convey a negative feeling along with the 'synergy', as addressed by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, which helps convey a deeper meaning through the illustration and text combined. It's important to note that the framed painting of the red leaf remains above the characters head, signifying that there is something unique about it.

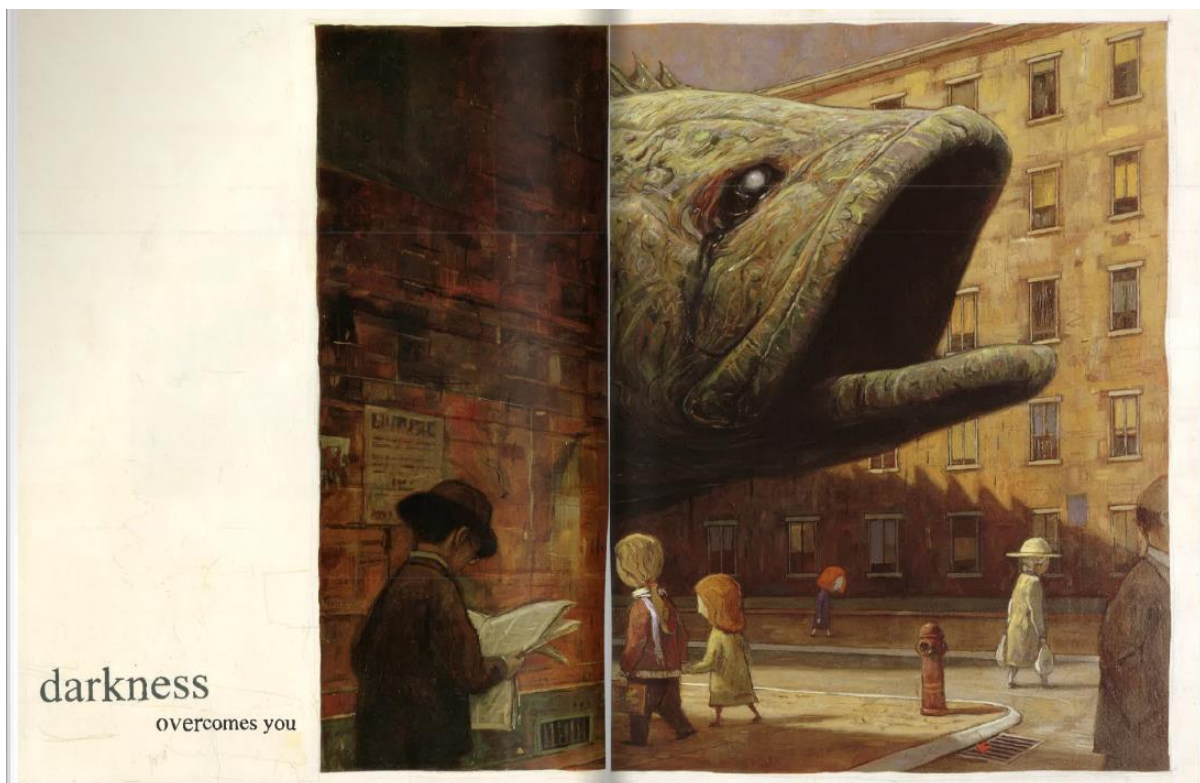


Figure 5: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 10-11)

This double page spread (fig.5) perfectly illustrates the feeling of despair and overwhelm as the 'darkness overcomes you', with our main character being cast in the shadow of this large and uncomfortable rotting fish. Tan's use of surrealism allows us to understand the uncomfortable nature of the dark feeling of dread and hopelessness in an exaugurated visual

form and connects us to these feelings of hopelessness as seen by our slumped over character, who is isolated and ignored by the crowd. The reader can "externalize the internal" (Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C.2006) through the emphasized rotting fish being a metaphor for this negative and dreadful feeling, showing the extensity of this usually invisible emotion.



Figure 6: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 14-15)

This image (fig. 6) suggests that 'the world is a deaf machine', which in the context of the image, explains that nobody is willing to listen or hear what the character is saying, and that these background characters lack empathy. It is interesting to note that the character lacks a mouth, implying that they cannot speak about the feelings that they are having, but the

reader is able to decipher the meaning through the 'iconotext' and an emotional connection is established between our outsider view of the character and their struggles. The colors are very cold, and an industrial pattern is seen behind the character who is opening their chest to reveal a lightbulb hidden beneath the surface, which could be a metaphor for having a light inside of you that has not gone out.

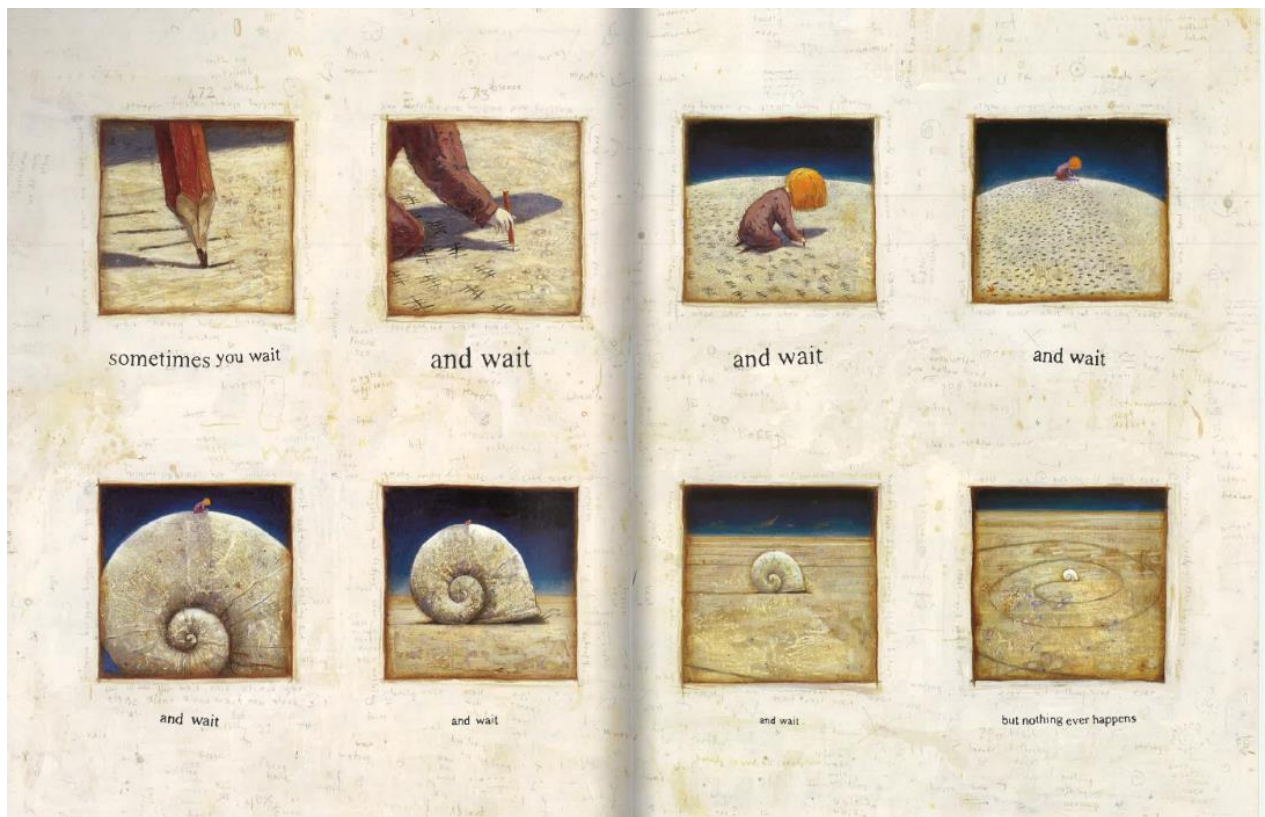


Figure 7: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 18-19)

These pages (fig. 7) immediately strike us with this empty feeling through the use of white space and window-like boxed illustrations of our character becoming smaller and further out of frame. The snail shell is an embodiment of our character feeling small and insignificant in the world. The pencil marks encapsulate the frustration and anticipation of waiting for the

feeling to pass or for something good to happen. This image is a powerful example of how Shaun Tan uses the text along with image to add to deeper meaning to the work, as the combination of the zoomed-out perspective plays well with the decreasing size of the text.



Figure 8: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 22-23)

This vibrant illustration (fig. 8) depicts our character stuck behind a locked window with reflections of 'wonderful things' passing them by. This is the most colorful page we have seen so far, as the use of vibrant colors contrasts with the muted colors we are used to seeing in our main character, which is another reference to the feelings of darkness and depression. We see the reoccurring motif of the red leaf against the outside of the window, giving the

impression that the leaf is a speck of light during this dark time that our character is trying to chase. It is a colorful glimmer of hope in a bleak and muted world.

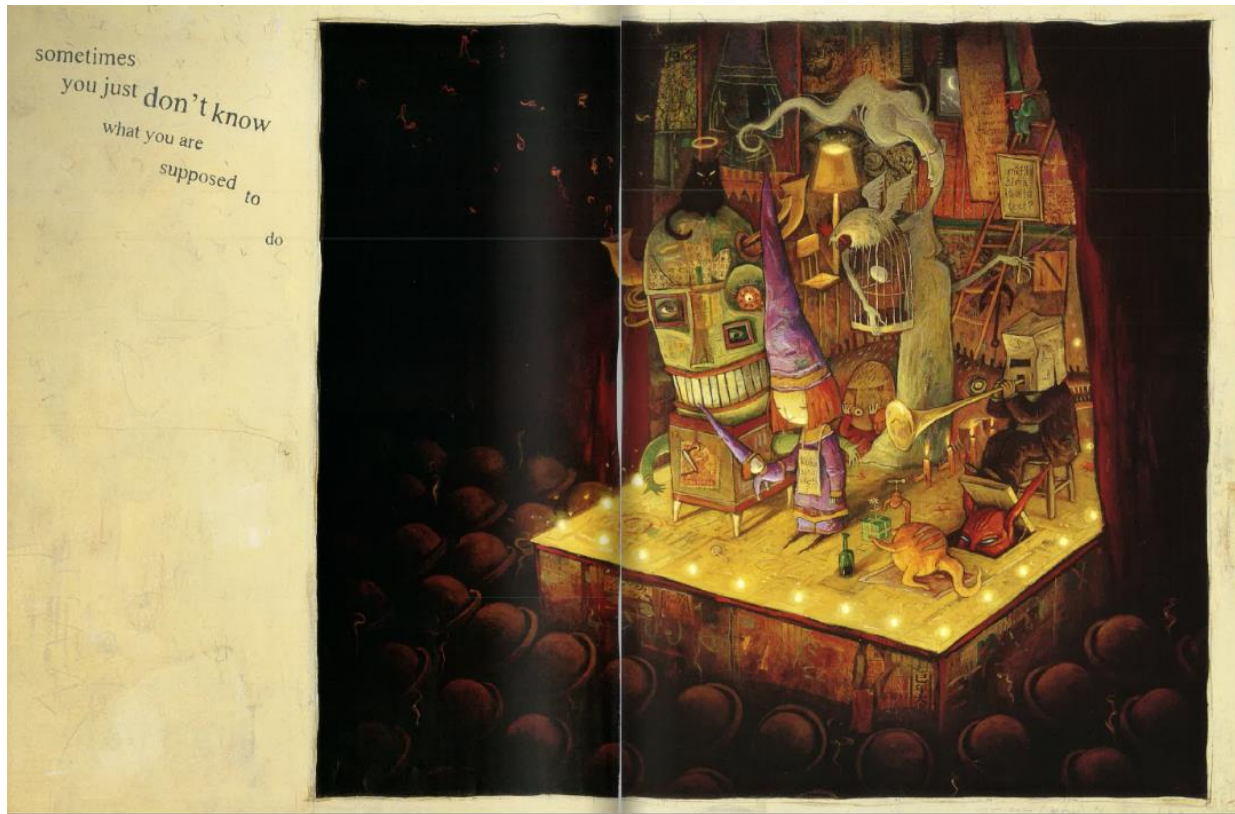


Figure 9: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 26-27)

Our main character is placed on a stage to perform (fig. 9), with lighting playing an important role in the significance of the character that stands before a crowd of people in bowler hats, smoking cigarettes, which seems very ignorant and provides us with even more evidence of our character feeling alienated by the people around them. The text that states 'sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do' pairs well with the illustration of the character looking out of place and confused as the stage lights up on a strange scene where the character is holding out a puppet of themselves, on a stage that is occupied by

nonsensical creatures. It represents the feeling of having to put on a brave face and perform for the audience, which in the case of depression would be having to seem stable and happy on the outside but having all this overwhelming darkness that is consuming you on the inside. The characters skin tone has changed to a peachier and healthier color while they are performing, which could further this point of trying to be perceived as normal on the outside.



Figure 10: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 28-29)

Here we see a double page spread illustration (fig. 10) of our character trying to work out who they are 'meant to be' and making the effort to get out of the dark and come into the light, as we can see in the change of color from a muted pallet to a more vibrant and warm pallet. The skin tone is also very warm in color as opposed to the previous grey blue in the earlier

illustrations. This is symbolizing the change had through our characters journey, they are expressing their emotions through the medium of drawing and painting on the wall, which signifies that our character has found an outlet to express these very overwhelming and dark emotions. This change is extremely important in suggesting to the reader that these difficult emotions and feelings are not something we should deal with on the inside, inviting the reader to open up and express them, similarly to our character.

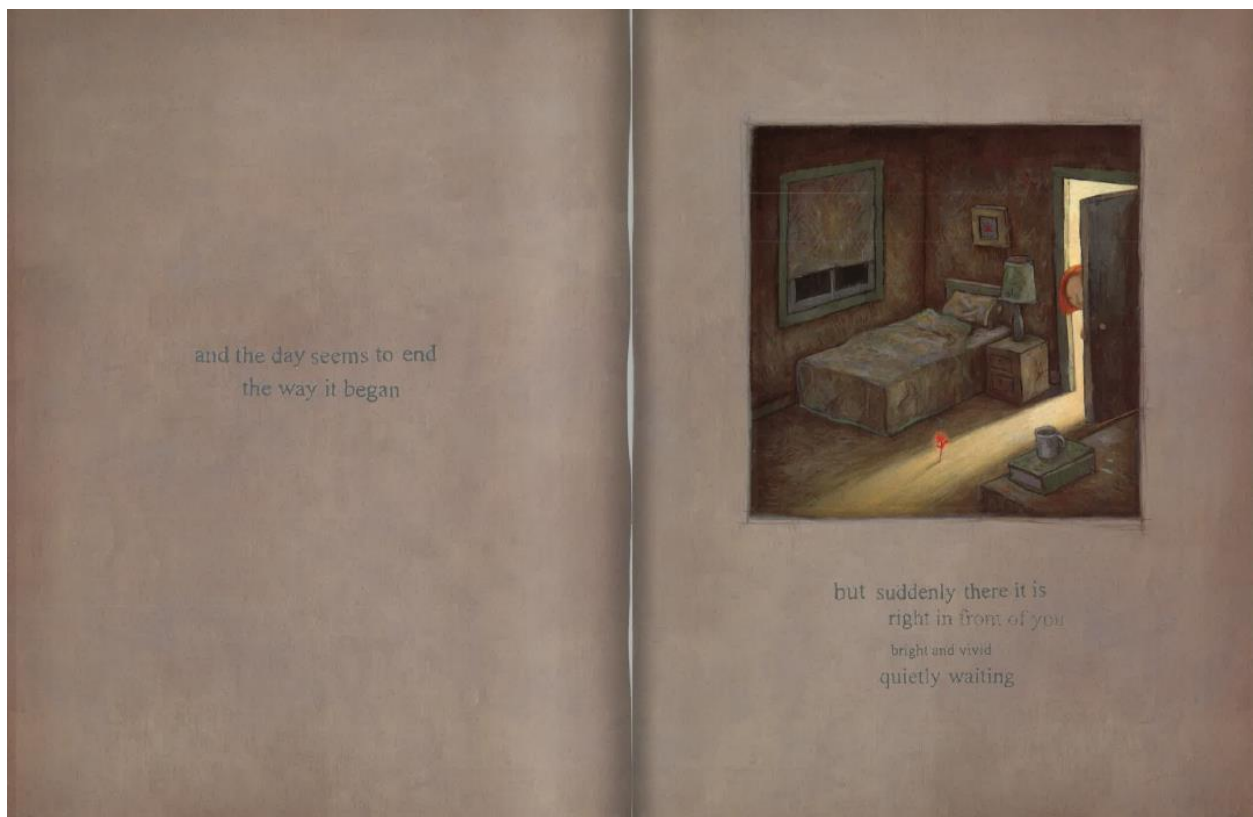


Figure 11: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 32-33)

As we approach the end of the book, we witness the consistent feelings of depression and hopelessness as our character expects the day to 'end the way it began', but to the reader and characters surprise; something has changed. Our once cold and muted colored character

approaches their room to find that the red leaf has followed them all the way through their journey and back to where they began, sprouting a small tree in the floorboards of the dark room as a light in the dark, 'bright and vivid'.

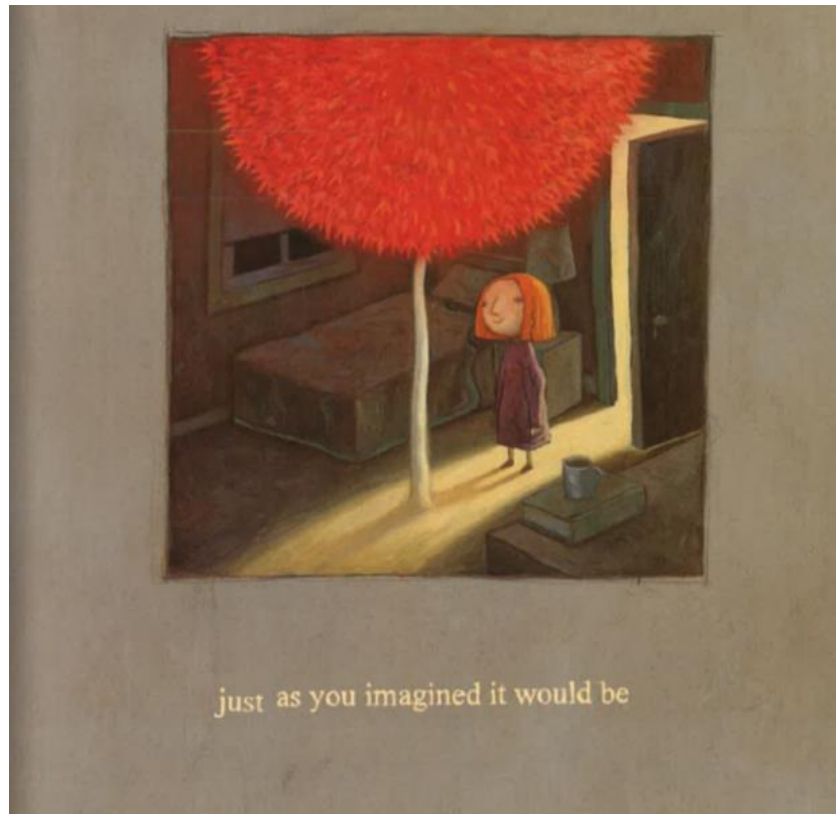


Figure 12: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Page 34-35)

The final page of the story reflects this underlying glimpse of hope in a dark world that can make you feel isolated and insignificant throughout this depressing time. The red leaf has grown into a tree, glowing and bright, similarly to the text in this image, greeting our character as they return to their room. This is also the first time we have seen our character with a mouth, and this time it is a smile, which conveys growth and acceptance as they have overcome these negative and overwhelming feelings we have followed them through on this

journey. Shaun Tan has conveyed this message through the use of color, perspective, visual lighting and paired minimal text.

This picture book guides us through the story of a character that feels hopeless and depressed and provides us with interpretive and surreal illustrations that engage us with the same feelings as the character that we grow an emotional connection to throughout their journey. Shaun Tan uses visual metaphors, color shifts, reoccurring motifs and sparse text within the book to provide us with a personalized experience of the story that leaves a lot of information up to the reader, ultimately allowing the reader to connect with the story in a way that both text and image alone could not. *The red tree* is symbolic of finding a glimpse of hope in dark times, overcoming them and not being afraid to express these emotions, which is a very modern and contemporary use of the picture book that is a crucial part of providing a space for people to talk about and understand these more sensitive and difficult topics. It provides a safe space to talk about these hard to process emotions and opens new opportunities to discuss and get to understand similar mental health conditions, which is crucial to the future development of the picture book.

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Figure 2 (right) : *Orbis sensualium pictus* by John Amos Comenius Joh.

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