Picture this…

By xxxxxxxxx

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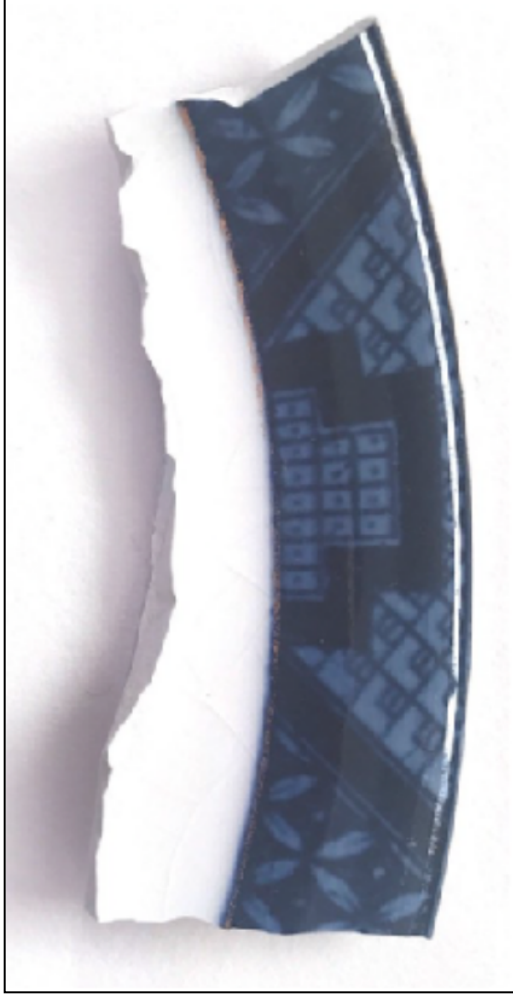
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Summary of Topic:

The aim of this extended essay is to gain an understanding of how picturebooks work, and how they communicate concepts and meanings both on a visual and verbal level. The essay will research theories of picturebooks, literary and visual devices such as symbolism, metaphors and metonymy. Through the analysis of Shaun Tan's, The Red Tree (2001), and Dave McKean's graphic novel, Black Dog (2016), an appreciation and understanding of how these devices have been used to explore mental health issues, express abstract themes, communicate emotions and convey meanings; thus informing the development of a personal narrative based on depression.



Introduction



“Pictures have always been used to tell stories and visual storytelling is an ancient form of communication dating back to the first cave paintings” (Wigan, 2006, p. 92). In this independent project the focus will be upon visual storytelling in picturebooks, with an aim to understand what makes picturebooks work, and the transaction and interplay that takes place between text and image. Picturebooks are, “an artform … based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal” (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p 1). To fully understand how picturebooks function, it will be important to look at how these modes of communication work in tandem, and at how the reader becomes the active meaning-maker, synthesising the texts.

On a pictorial level we will look at how a reader must attend, “to everything that presents itself to the eye” (Doonan, 1993, p.8.). This refers to the visual components used in creating the illustrations. Components such as the colour palette, the quality of lines, shapes, texture, tonal values, and other compositional devices. By considering the component parts of an illustration along with the words, the reader discerns meaning by applying their knowledge of a vocabulary of signs, symbols, and meanings accrued through their experiences:

> To get a ‘deeper meaning’… involves us emotionally and cognitively. Since… [the illustrator] cannot tell us directly exactly what their signs mean, pictures present something of a puzzle… every mark displayed in a picture is a potential carrier of meaning.
>
> (Doonan, 1993, p. 12)

This essay will analyse two picturebooks: Shaun Tan’s, *The Red Tree*, (2001) and Dave McKean’s graphic novel, *Black Dog*, (2016). The intention behind selecting these books relates to the practice component of the project. Both texts deal with

aspects of mental health, which is the subject of *Little Boy Blue*, the picturebook developed alongside this essay. Through the analysis of these texts an appreciation and understanding will be achieved of the ways in which these author-illustrators developed a visual language, using literary devices to convey narratives based on the difficult topic of depression. As Tan and McKean are both author and illustrator of their books, they have had ultimate control over the visual storytelling of their narratives. As a result, a greater authenticity can be ascribed to the illustrations in these picturebooks, as the illustrations are as the author intended. This is recognised by Nicholas Tucker, renowned educational psychologist and lecturer in children's literature, in his book, *The Child and the Book*,

> …the most successful picturebooks have often been produced by author-illustrators, where text and picture have the greatest chance of working together in harmony, under the controlling imagination of a single creator.
>
> (Tucker, 1981, p.48)

The appreciation and understanding gained from studying these texts will augment the development of the narrative, *Little Boy Blue*. The aim is that understanding the principles underpinning these picturebooks will inform the development of an illustrative lexicon of metaphors, signs and symbols, designed to convey the ideas and meanings in this narrative.

Chapter 1:

The Red Tree

by Shaun Tan



As the aim in the practice component of the project is to develop a picturebook based around experiences with depression, *The Red Tree*, by Shaun Tan was selected for close analysis.

> [Tan] originally conceived it as a book of illustrations depicting different emotional states, such as joy, fear and confusion… after exploring this idea for a while, he found that the darker emotions were more interesting, both visually and in terms of an emerging theme; so the book ended up being about misery and despair.
>
> (Johansen, 2014, p.50)

Due to its theme therefore, both the text, and the content of the illustrations of *The Red Tree* convey emotions associated with depression, making it highly relevant to the aim of the independent project.

> *The Red Tree* is a postmodern visual narrative … which celebrates the floating of meanings, the boundary-breaking indeterminacy and the counterpointing relationship between the text and the illustrations… unlike traditional picture-books, [it] does not seek to deliver a specific meaning, but rather provides the child reader with an experience of exploring an array of possible meanings.
>
> (Essam Eldin Fahmi, 2020)

The indeterminacy Essam Eldin Fahmi mentions above can be seen in both Tan's writing and his illustrations. Tan has attempted to overcome culturally specific, limiting interpretations; making the experiences he describes in his illustrations and text as inclusive and accessible as possible. We do not learn the protagonist's

name at any time throughout the picturebook, and the text does not specifically ascribe the protagonists' experiences as her experiences, and hers alone. From the onset Tan writes without possessive pronouns, he also writes in the present tense. As seen in the opening illustration, shown below, in figure 1, Tan writes, "sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to" (Tan, 2001, p. 8), not, on that autumn day, she felt as if the day began with nothing to look forward to. The writing in *The Red Tree*, follows this unspecific, open, inclusive format throughout. Tan has created a blank canvas, a space for the audience to project their own experiences onto. As stated by Johansen (2014, p.39), "Tan's books contain sophisticated ideas and are by no means straightforward in their expression, laden with ambiguities … [he invites] … readers' own immersion and reflection".

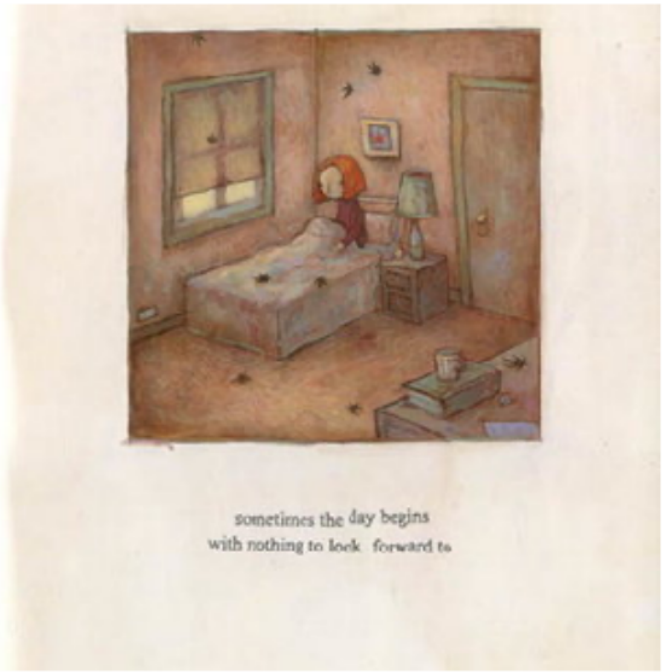


Figure 1: Tan, 2001, p. 8

The cover, (see figure 2), a single wrap-around illustration, encompasses both front, and rear covers. On the front we are introduced to the main protagonist, a young female figure, with red hair. She sits in a paper boat, leaning over its edge, peering into the motionless sea, on which she is adrift. Her eyes are downcast, staring down at the single red leaf that floats on the surface, in the boat's shadow. The shadow is composed of brown leaves.

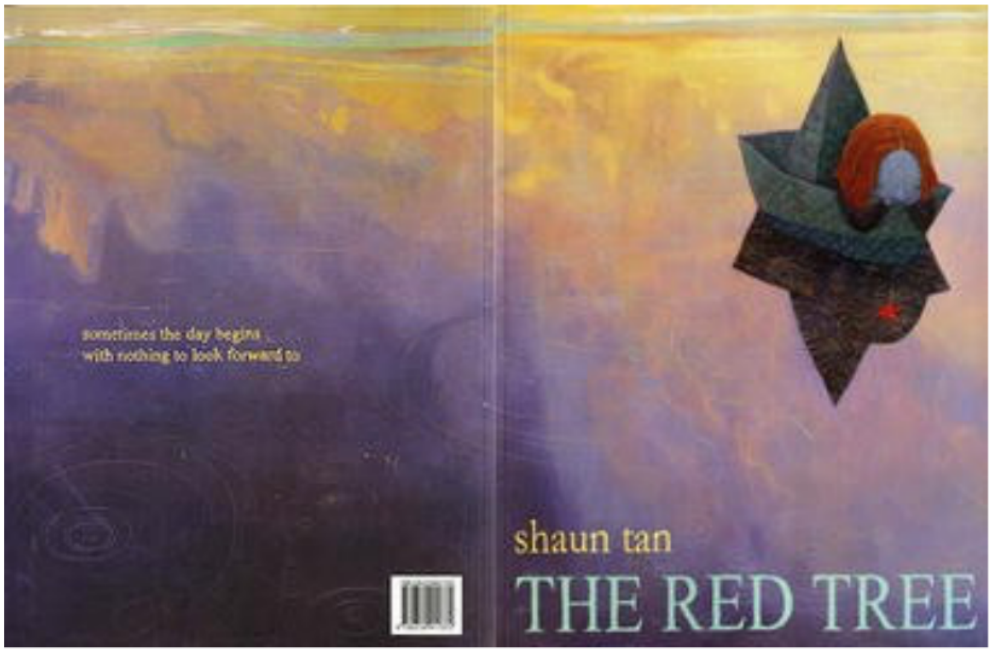


Figure 2: Tan, 2001, p.1, p3

The leaf motifs are repeated throughout the picturebook, with the red leaf signifying the tree in the title. It accompanies the protagonist on her fragmented encounters, through dark, oppressive, overpowering cityscapes and landscapes. It represents the protagonist's transformation, with the blossoming tree at the picturebook's

conclusion, signifying her self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943); the realisation of her true potential, and by extension, our true potential.

In the cover illustration the light source is behind the figure, placing her face in shadow, whereas behind her, the sea, and the distant lands beyond are bathed in sunlight. As she drifts aimlessly towards us, the motionless sea in the foreground becomes increasingly peppered with the concentric circles left by raindrops, and the purple reflection of the gloomy weather overhead intensifies, indicating a change of weather. This is an illustrative form of the literary device: pathetic fallacy, with the oncoming storm representing the mood of the protagonist, and the journey she is about to traverse.

> The term 'pathetic fallacy …may be defined as the expression in [literary] terms of a …vivid illusion induced by mood or emotion in the mind of the … character [being depicted] that the inanimate world is sentient
>
> (Copley, 1937, p.194)

On the folded paper boat, we begin to see partial words and sentences: "Things are bad", "all your troubles…", "worse", "darkness comes", "you wait, nothing happe [sic]", "nobody -nderst [sic]", "fate", "ometimes you ust don't kn…[sic]", (Tan, 2001, pp.1). These indicate the tone and content of the picturebook, as does the gradual change of weather in the illustration. These partial words and phrases, like the red leaf motif, are precursors to the text that follows.

A clever use of diagonal lines can be seen in the shape of the paper boat, which combined with its shadow creates a star. The boat becomes a star drifting over the night's sky, a metaphor for the protagonist's journey in the picturebook, drifting through the different settings of her universe, searching for that elusive 'thing' that evades her. Complementary colours can also be seen on the boat, the green hue of the folded paper boat, counterpointing the red hair of the protagonist, and red leaf. These all serve to bring our attention to the main subjects of the book.

On the end papers we see the repetition of the leaf motif from the cover. T98he second set of pages (see figure 3), reintroduces our protagonist, and the small red leaf; this time tucked away behind some blades of grass, near the feet of her stool. The illustration is set within a central panel, framed with an off-white edge. The figure stands on a white stool, in an empty field. Fragmented words spill from the megaphone that she holds to her lips, echoing the fragmented words on the origami boat. They tumble out of the illustration, on to the frame around it, arranged intentionally, collecting in the bottom right corner of the page, leading our eye onto the next set of end papers. The protagonist's facial expression is grey, and dismayed. The meaning here is clear, her words and her feelings are not heard or understood. She feels alone and unheard. The jumbled letters continue onto the frontispiece and title page, one of which features another illustration, set again, in a framed panel, whilst the second features the title, paratextual details, and dates. On these pages the letters are intermixed with occasional symbols, they gravitate towards each other, reforming words, creating a metafiction. The picturebook title

appears highlighted in red, and we can make out the author's name. Both the cover illustration, end papers, and paratextual pages show that Tan is not following the traditional form of a picturebook. Tan is leading us into the story by introducing us to the main character, to important motifs, as well as setting the tone and atmosphere of the narrative. This is an identifying feature of the post-modern picturebook, "The narrative can indeed start on the cover, and it can go beyond the last page on to the back cover" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p.241).



Figure 3: Tan, 2001, pp.12, 13

Tan employs a central panelled illustration format for the opening pages of the narrative and again on the closing pages. These panels, formally framed with plain chalky white, are accompanied by a simple lower-case font, coloured in grey. This format changes towards the middle of the narrative, where the panels increase in size, sometimes filling the double page spread. These provide the reader with an entirely different experience, see figures 4 and 21. In these larger format

illustrations, both the protagonist, and the reader feel insignificant, as they encounter disturbing gigantic creatures, and overwhelming surreal landscapes.

One particular metaphor that reflected imagery developed for the narrative of *Little Boy Blue*, can be seen in the double paged illustration, “Sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to do” (Tan, 2001), figure 5. In this illustration we see the protagonist, with a troupe of quirky performers, standing on a stage. In *Little Boy Blue,* the title character walks into a blue willow pattern landscape, shown in the form of a stage set. In the narrative the theatre motif, is somewhat akin to Tan’s surreal landscapes. It represents the character’s detachment from reality, as though he were performing in a play. This idea was inspired by Terry Gilliam’s stage set scenes in, *The Adventures of Baron von Munchausen*, where the Baron acts out scenes of his life on stage, in a theatrical performance, which then transform to live action scenes.

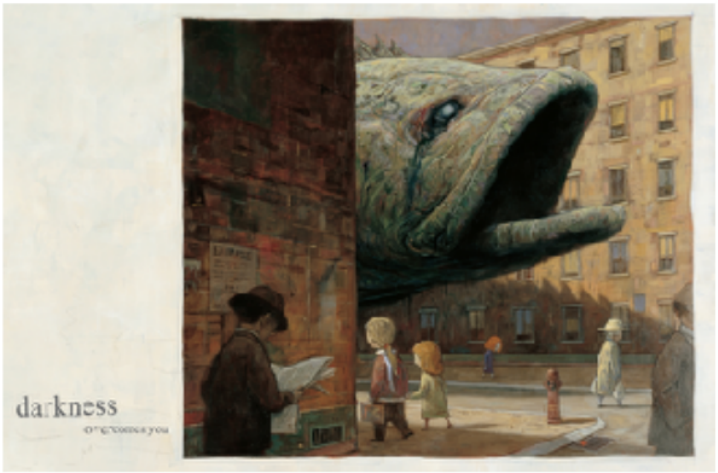


Figure 4: Tan, 2001, pp.12,13

Further parallels between the illustrations in *The Red Tree*, and those in *Little Boy Blue* will be discussed more fully in chapter three. The analysis of an alternative narrative portraying depression will be considered in the next chapter, Dave McKean's graphic novel, *Black Dog*.



Figure 5: Tan, 2001, p.29

Chapter 2:

Black Dog: The Dreams of Paul Nash

by Dave McKean





Figure 6: McKean (2016) front cover

Dave Mc Kean's work, *Black Dog: The Dreams of Paul Nash*, is a moving book based on the life of official First World War artist, Paul Nash. The project, co-commissioned by The Lakes International Comic Art Festival, and 14-18 NOW, formed part of the First World War centenary commemorations. It is both a graphic novel and a performance spanning many different media. This chapter will focus on analysing the book, and its imagery. Throughout *Black Dog*, Dave McKean employs traditionally comic, and graphic novel storytelling devices, such as sequential panels.



Figure 7: Nash, 1918, *We are making a New World*

The narrative is told through a series of abstract, non-linear dream sequences and interpretations of Nash's real-life experiences inspired by Nash's memoirs, and in response to the powerful artworks he created, capturing the apocalyptic scenes

and the horrors of war. The title, *Black Dog*, encapsulates the metaphor McKean uses for depression throughout the book, making it highly relevant to the aim of the project. The figure of the black dog is shown on the front cover illustration, stood atop a tree stump in the war-torn landscape of No Man's Land, see figure 6. The undulating bomb-cratered earth, the burnt remains of the distant trees, as well as the colour palette are all modelled after Nash's own paintings of No Man's Land, seen in works such as, *We are making a New World*, painted in 1918, figure 7.



Figure 8: McKean, 2016, pp.10-11

The figure of black dog has the numinous quality of a dream-like figure, intangible, and in a process of transformation, its form and features are interwoven with Nash's portrait, and figure. The dog fixes its gaze upon us. It is a lone wolf, standing in a desolate landscape that is the dreamscape of its existence.

From the onset of the narrative, the dog accompanies Nash in the first of the dream sequences; representing how the artist's life was haunted and dogged by depression. However, there are other, more subtle visual devices that McKean employs in the book to convey depression. In the opening dream, the artist recalls his burgeoning awareness of his mother's depression, as a young boy. In this sequence, shown in figure 8, Nash, Black dog, and the viewer tentatively approach the isolated, distant figure of his mother, sequestered on a lonely hill. We begin to sense something is amiss with this figure on our approach, as a small blot of red ink begins to bleed from the hat of the figure. Over the next sequence of panels, the blot gradually fills the sky oppressively, darkening and staining the landscape and figures below. The facial expression of the mother conveys her melancholy, her blackened hollow eyes expressing her exhaustion from her mental torment and suffering. McKean used a milky, ghost like colour palette for the mother, she is like a stone monument, detached, and separate from the other figure, both in colour and expression; lacking any expression of love, and warmth towards her son, and the dog, who is metonymic of Nash.

> Metonymy is … where an expression is used to refer to something that falls outside its conventional denotation, with a clear associative relation linking the conventional denotation and the contextually determined, metonymic one.
>
> (Falkum, Recasens and Clark, 2017, p.87)

The dog's facial expression and posture, changes dramatically over this sequence. Initially he bounds up to her, full of eagerness and anticipation. But the mother's rejection of his friendly gestures is shown clearly, through the dog's lowered ears,

and frightened eyes. Cowering as he pulls away from the mother, he communicates fear; and vicariously through Black dog, Nash and the viewer sense her mental ill health. The sequence concludes with a withdrawal from the mother, leaving her ever smaller, diminutive figure, dominated by the oppressive sky, now flooded with blood red ink.



Figure 9: McKean, 2016, Commander Littlejohns, pp. 44 - 45

In this sequence McKean creates a link between the mother's suffering and the colour red. McKean exploits the device of the colour red, using it dramatically throughout the book. Red has been employed jarringly, in several of the monochrome sequential illustrations, appearing like a wound or a splatter of blood. McKean uses red to convey the boiling rage of his schoolmaster, Commander Littlejohns, seen in figure 9, whose scythe like hand leaves a trail of victims in its

wake, cut down for their incompetence. It is the colour of the forest of thorns symbolising the chaos and nightmare of Pachendale, that he hears from his room in The Swedish Hospital, see figure 10.



Figure 10: McKean, 2016, The Swedish Hospital, pp. 71 - 72

Red is used most powerfully in chapter 15, in a dream sequence about Nash's time at Queen's Square Hospital for Nervous Diseases. This largely monochrome sequence is punctuated with visions shown in red. The monochrome panels repetitively emphasise the images of an overhead light, and corridors, conveying Nash's passage through the hospital. Nash the soldier, wearing his hard hat and uniform appears suddenly, lying in a blood-red crater in No Man's Land, contrasting the monochrome, dull hospital corridors. Next, we see Nash as he would have looked during this time, becoming black dog, with a haunting fixed stare, see figure



Figure 11: McKean, D. (2016) Black Dog.Queen's Square Hospital, p. 114 - 115

11. This sequence of illustrations, along with the text of Nash's thoughts, "Excavating layers…An autopsy of all the strange occurrences and memories… Digging in the labyrinthine dark and lonely places…beneath the sanity and civility is my mother" (McKean 2016), all serve to communicate a mental, and an emotional unravelling. This leads to a powerful sequence, see figure 12. Nash is shown, prizing black dog's teeth apart, struggling and fighting his way out from inside black dog, to be reborn. The metaphor here is of a journey of healing, and an emergence from depression.

One interesting aspect relating directly to mental health that McKean employs throughout the book, is a full-page illustration prefacing each chapter, see figures 13 and 14. He refers to the significance and meaning behind these illustrations in his interview with Rachel Cooke, and Richard Slocombe, for *14-18 Now* (2016). These illustrations show a close-up of an everyday object, such as the decorative



Figure 12: McKean, 2016, Queen's Square Hospital, p. 117

bracket of railings, or a patch of moss glistening with droplets of dew. These chapter illustrations can be seen as a visual device having an effect akin to

mindfulness based cognitive therapy, a type of therapy that can help treat depression.“Present moment awareness is the cornerstone of mindfulness…and is indicative of a reduction of the frequency and intensity of depressive and anxious symptomology” (McCabe and Day, 2021).



Figure 13 and 14: McKean, 2016 Chapter 2 , Chapter 13 illustration, pp. 16, 90

In the interview mentioned above, McKean reveals that these chapter illustrations, are based upon one of Nash’s letters, where Nash explained, “that looking at the details of life” (McKean, D. 2016), helped him get through his traumatic experiences in the war.

> It’s the distractions… an artist’s eye, no matter where you are can’t help but notice that bit of texture, or that colour combination over there or those compositional lines…those kinds of distractions are there all the time, you

> can't help but think that way…so I started every chapter with a tiny detail, of a little bit of moss growing, or the way liquid falls in the mud.
>
> (McKean, *14-18 Now*, 2016).

Some parallels can be made to the storytelling devices employed by McKean in *Black Dog*, and devices used in the narrative of *Little Boy Blue*. Blue, as with McKean's use of red, features throughout the narrative, and is used to symbolise sadness and depression. Another parallel can be seen in reference to mindfulness, and healing. These occur in the *Little Boy Blue* narrative, often explicitly, using imagery such as a broken shattered heart being remade from the shards of a broken mirror. These, and other aspects of the project narrative will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 3:

Little Boy Blue.

By Karen McRobbie



The picturebook entitled, *Little Boy Blue* (McRobbie, 2022), has a vocabulary of signs, symbols, and metaphors selected intentionally to convey the story. *Little Boy Blue*, originally a nursery rhyme, represents innocence:

> '*Little Boy Blue*'… is [a]… famous traditional nursery rhyme… published in the mid18th [sic] The poem is about a little boy who is a shepherd. Instead of looking after the cattle, he falls asleep.
>
> (Literarydevices.net)

This association creates an initial framework and a context for the character. In essence he is young, innocent, unaccustomed to ways of the world. In the narrative, the colour blue works on many levels. Blue often comes to symbolise sadness; when we feel down, we say we are, 'feeling blue'. Blues singers and music express feelings of sadness and melancholy. This reading of the colour blue aligns with the mental landscape of the main protagonist, Little Boy Blue.



Figure 15: Gilliam, T. (1989) Theatre scene from Baron von Munchausen

To represent the fragility of his mental state, the character is also made from blue willow pattern china. For a section of the narrative the character enters a setting based entirely on the designs of blue willow pattern china, and during these scenes he enters a sea, made from shards of broken blue willow pattern ware, becoming lost among the china shards, see figure 23. These are metaphors for Little Boy Blue's brokenness, depression and mental breakdown. The sea of china pieces signifies the character's loss of identity, individuality and self. The phrase, 'at sea' is also an idiom for feeling lost and confused. His mental illness makes him feel lost, disjointed from reality, and his family. This stage of the narrative is portrayed as if the character is performing on a stage. When Little Boy Blue, walks into the blue willow pattern landscape, it is portrayed in the form of a stage set. This was inspired both by Terry Gilliam's stage set in, *The Adventures of Baron von Munchausen*, and Clive Hicks-Jenkins' toy theatres and puppet inspired illustrations, see figures 15 and 16.

The opening of the narrative shows theatre curtains opening, depicting the commencement of the narrative, and the character himself is jointed like a puppet. This was to reinforce the narrative that his mental illness is affecting his behaviour; he is acting artificially, performing as it were, on the stage.

During the narrative the blue china patterns on his body swell and discolour, gradually becoming blacker, transforming into the black barred outfit he wears later in the narrative. This conveys his transformation, and onset of his depression. Storm cloud-coloured backgrounds and skies, made with bleeding inks and acrylics have been employed in some areas of the narrative. These are examples of pathetic

fallacy, where the turbulent skies come to symbolise the inner turbulence in the mind of Little Boy Blue, and the gradual change of his personality.



Figure 16: Hicks-Jenkins, (2020) Hansel and Gretel, Toy theatre

Turbulent murky colours were also used in the home setting in the narrative. The details of the hallway become lost in khaki greens and browns, reduced to simple and distant outlines. The semi-transparency of the architectural details, and his figure, shown as sections of a variety of positions convey his detachment from reality.

In addition to the colours of blue and black, symbolism can also be seen in the colour gold, used towards the end of the narrative.



Figure 17: McRobbie, K. (2022) *Little Boy Blue*. pp.32, 33

> Some four or five centuries ago in Japan, a lavish technique emerged for repairing broken ceramics. Artisans began using lacquer and gold pigment to put shattered vessels back together. This tradition, known as kintsugi, meaning “golden seams” (or kintsukuroi, “golden repair”), is still …[used today].
>
> (Lesser, 2016)

The colour gold is first shown in the sequence of illustrations of the balloon. The balloon signifies a drifting away of the personality of Little Boy Blue, and the loss of control of the mother character. The gold is shown initially as the balloon’s ribbon, gradually the ribbon motif features more heavily in the narrative, bleeding into the cracks of Little Boy Blue’s fragmented china body. This is emblematic of the process of healing and repair, which is the message of the narrative.

“Kintsugi …[which is associated] with the Japanese philosophy of wabi—[is] a historical term that dates back to the 16th century, which describes the beauty of imperfections.” (Lesser, 2016). The philosophy of Wabi embraces breakages by repairing the objects, not discarding them. It appreciates the rich history of the repaired object, seeing the breakages and repairs not as something to hide, but something to celebrate. Thus there is beauty in the brokenness, and this is one of the key messages of the narrative.



Figure 18: McRobbie, K. (2022) *Little Boy Blue*. p.25

The use of scale has also been used in the narrative. In the illustration seen above, figure 18, there is a contrast between a miniature sized mother character, and the enormous depiction of Little Boy Blue in his transformed state. This illustration attempts to communicate feelings of insignificance, being overwhelmed, feeling

ineffectual, and the powerlessness and impotence of the mother dealing with Little Boy Blue's mental illness.

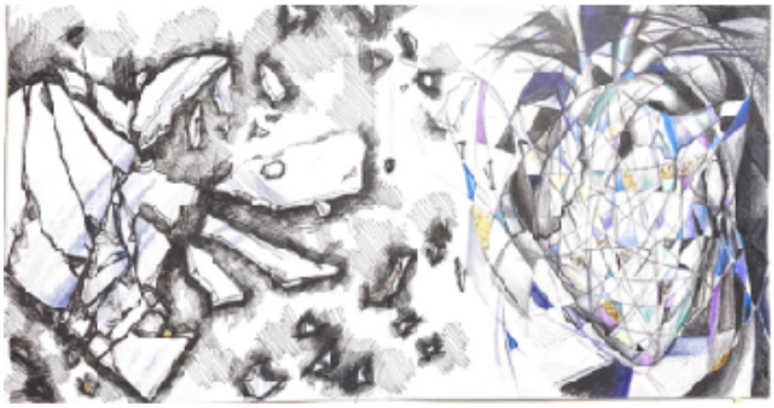


Figure 19: McRobbie, K. (2022) *Little Boy Blue*. pp.50,51

The image of the broken mirror heart seen in figure 19, is an explicit, but nonetheless appropriate metaphor for the fragile, broken-hearted sadness of the mother figure. In addition, we also see a metaphor for fragility in the illustration employing eggshells. Eggshells are easily broken, and damaged, and this illustration is a direct correlation to the idiom, 'walking on eggshells', meaning having to be mindful about one's words around another person, lest they offend or upset someone. This meaning is underscored using scale, where words become weighty three dimensional objects, that have landed haphazardly on the eggshells, crushing them.

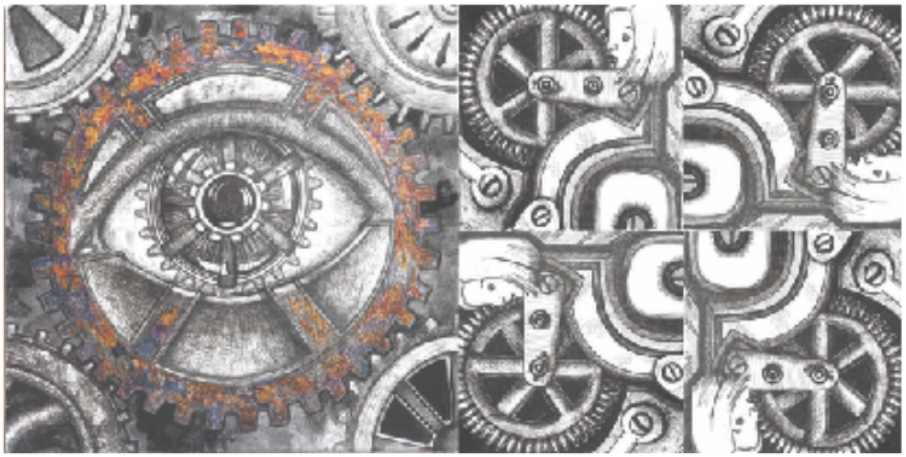


Figure 20: McRobbie, K. (2022) *Little Boy Blue*. pp. 36, 37

Another idiom used in the narrative, is that of being like a 'cog in a machine' see figure 20. This image is seen in the illustration where the mother ponders her role in the breakdown of her son. She asks, "How did we get here? Where was I looking, why didn't I see this?" (McRobbie, 2021, pp.36, 37), then answering, that she was, "…grist to someone else's mill. A cog in a machine…" (Ibid). This idiom conveys the mother's loss of identity, loss of self and focus on the family; conveying that she lost her humanity, becoming an insignificant part of a large faceless overwhelming organisation. Similar metaphors to these can be seen in *The Red Tree*, for example, in the illustration with the accompanying text, "the world is a deaf machine" (Tan, 2001, pp. 16-17), figure 21. Here Tan creates a domineering megalithic edifice, towering over the small-scaled protagonist.



Figure 21: Tan, S.. (2001) *The Red Tree*. pp. 16,17

McKean can also be seen to illustrate idioms in *Black Dog*. On pages 14 and 15, we see multiple views of Nash, as he staggers along a gradually narrowing walkway of planks above the trenches. The text, revealing Nash's thoughts, reinforces his precariousness in the image, "That is the artist's balancing act. It is easy to fall off this narrow pathway into the mud either side" (McKean, 2016). Nash is shown, literally, 'walking the plank' as he attempts to find " those glints of elemental truth within the noise" (Ibid).



Figure 22: McKean, D. (2016) Black Dog, p. 15

Conclusion:



The aim of this extended essay was to analyse and gain an appreciation of how two texts on depression communicate on a verbal and visual level, and how these modes of communication work in tandem. This conclusion will now revisit the devices employed by Tan and McKean, relating them to the narrative, *Little Boy Blue* (McRobbie, 2022).

In *The Red Tree (2001),* Tan begins the narrative from the front cover illustration, and onwards through the end papers. This is seen in the depiction of the protagonist adrift at sea in a paper boat on the front cover, and in the illustration showing that her words are not heard, see figures 2 and 3. In *Little Boy Blue,* the end papers function in the same way. In the front end papers we see tiles from a tile rearranging toy floating through space. Across the end papers these tiles slowly come together, recreating the face of Little Boy Blue on the final end paper. In the same way that the black dog in McKean's work is metonymic of Paul Nash, the tiles are metonymic of Little Boy blue's journey to healing, with the tiles rearranging themselves, recreating the intact image of his face.

Another storytelling device seen both in, *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001), and *Black Dog* (McKean 2016), also seen in *Little Boy Blue* (McRobbie, 2022), was a considered application of colour. The colour red is used to dramatic effect in *Black Dog,* but is central to *The Red Tree,* as the narrative hinges upon red, as the colour of the leaf motif throughout the narrative, and the tree. In *Little Boy Blue*, the colour blue functions in a similar way to Tan's use of red. Blue works on several levels in the narrative, representing the depression of the protagonist, and as blue ware plates are fragile, conveying his fragility. In the narrative the colours of black and gold are

also key colours. Black symbolises the character's deepening depression and anger, and the gold expresses the process of healing in the narrative, emulating the Kintsugi tradition of golden repair.

The use of pathetic fallacy was seen in, *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001), on both the gathering storm on the cover illustration, and the stormy seas illustration seen on pages 22 and 23. This device has been employed in several illustrations in *Little Boy Blue* (McRobbie, 2022). The turbulent khaki coloured skies seen in the home environment, see figure 17, and the stormy weather and seas seen in figure 23 below, represent the deterioration of the character's mental health.



Figure 23 McRobbie, K. (2022) *Little Boy Blue*. p. 23

Another similarity can be seen in a sense of ambiguity that is present in all three books. Elements of *The Red Tree* are full of ambiguity, giving an episodic quality to the narrative. This is shown through the different locations, and settings that the character experiences, once she leaves the bedroom seen at the start of the book.

Each of the enigmatic locations and settings the protagonist finds herself in are strange, surreal and seem unrelated. Only the style of the short passages of text, and appearance of the protagonist remain constant. Yet, we are able to interpret these illustrations as depicting a difficult journey. Her consequent return to the bedroom setting brings the reader a sense of a conclusion; anchoring the character once again, in a familiar setting. The overwhelming and strange settings that Tan's protagonist experiences correlates to some degree to McKean's depiction of Nash's dream episodes, representing his struggles and emotional challenges. The dream sequences shown in figures, 10, 11 and 12 show Nash entering a forest of thorns, then at Queen's Square hospital, transforming into the black dog, and then resurrected from him. In *Little Boy Blue,* from the onset of the narrative, the title character is placed in settings which reinforce a detachment from reality. The character appears on a stage, against a background based upon the blue willow pattern ware landscape. Later, as seen in figure 17, the home setting loses all detail, and solidity in an illustration created on semi-transparent paper. Thin fragile white lines hint at hallways and rooms, lost in turbulent green miasmic clouds.

In conclusion, both *Little Boy Blue*, and *The Red Tree* do not relay stereotypical, idealised views of childhood. *The Red Tree,*

> …is certainly to be characterised as postmodern in its style and content… such books take as their point of departure intricate and challenging themes, and they can seldom be captured and clearly defined, but on the contrary are ambiguous
>
> (Johansen, 2014, p. 39)

The representations of depression, and mental breakdown in *Little Boy Blue* is firmly rooted in the metaphor of the title character's china body. This may be

unambiguous, however *Little Boy Blue*'s theme is certainly challenging. Both books have a resolution of sorts, although their conclusions retain an element of ambiguity, they lack trite, clichéd endings such as, '…and they all lived happily ever after'. Although Tan does not implicitly make the meaning obvious, the girl returns to her bedroom, finding a beautiful, red tree. This alludes to a realisation of true potential, a self-actualisation.

In *Little Boy Blue*, the conclusion and meaning of the book is a philosophical approach to moving forward with life; accepting the challenges of life and embracing them. This conclusion comes, to some degree from the illustrations alluding to the tradition of Kintsugi. However, even without knowledge of this tradition, the layers of visual metaphors and symbolism built into the illustrations of Little Boy Blue being remade give the reader sufficient information to comprehend the meaning of the narrative. As seen in *The Red Tree,* the journey of the character, the transformation, traversing through strange settings, followed by a return to the endearing blue ware decorated figure he is at the onset of the narrative sufficiently conveys the message of the picturebook.



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