

Metaphor, Metonymy & Synecdoche in Illustration

Metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche are three types of trope; “the figurative use of a word or expression - that is, intentionally using a word or expression in a different sense from its original significance” (Schirato and Webb, 2007, p.198). However, this also extends to the figurative use of image as these tropes also occur in pictures. “Metaphor occurs first of all on the level of cognition, and can manifest itself on the pictorial as well as the verbal level” (Forceville, 1996, p.108). Their significance extends “beyond literary criticism to the understanding and interpretation of nonverbal arts as well” (Hausman, 1989, p.7).

Examining the use of these tropes in a selection of illustrators’ work I aim to attempt to demonstrate how they are used visually to make meaning. The work discussed is mainly picture book illustration and editorial. I want to point out that although I will refer often to ‘the reader’ in my analysis this term is not limited to the reader of verbal text, but also the reader of pictorial text; reading the images. In *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (1996) Charles Forceville provides a theoretical framework for the analysis of pictorial metaphor based on Black’s theory (Forceville, 1996, p.108), which I will initially attempt to follow and apply to narrative illustration.

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan is a picture book without any particular narrative. It consists of ‘a series of distinct imaginary worlds as self-contained images’ (Tan, n.d.). Looking at the illustration (fig.1) at the beginning of the book, the reader is presented with a young girl who wakes to find blackened leaves falling from her bedroom ceiling. Following

Forceville's framework the reader would assume that, because the leaves are depicted in a place where they would not normally be found, these are not just leaves but suggest something other. The reader is invited to understand and perceive the leaves, not in their



sometimes the day begins
with nothing to look forward to

Figure 1: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan

usual 'literal' sense, but in terms of what they represent (Forceville, 1996, p.109). Since, 'the essence of a metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p.5), the reader can regard this as a metaphor. 'There are times when we speak literally and at other times figuratively and that many of us recognize a figurative expression' (Hausman, 1989, p.7). This can also be applied to reading images.

Forceville explains that a metaphor consists of two "things: a 'literal' primary subject and a 'figurative' secondary subject" (Forceville, 1996, p.108), or as he states in *A Course in*

Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor:

One of these terms is that about which something else is said. It is the "topic" or "tenor" (Richards 1936/1965), the "primary subject" (Black 1962, 1979), or the "target" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999) of the metaphor.

(Forceville, n.d.)

He goes on to explain the second term as:

"Something else" used to convey something about the target. It is the "vehicle" (Richards 1936/1965), the "subsidiary subject" (Black, 1962), the "secondary subject" (Black, 1979) or the "source" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

(Forceville, n.d.)

Working with the three questions he sets out we can attempt to identify these: What are the two terms of the metaphor and how do we know this? Which is the metaphor's primary subject and which is the secondary subject (and how do we know)? Which features are projected from the domain of the source onto the domain of the target (how do we decide on these features). When answering these questions some contextual

details must be considered, the communicator of the metaphor and its audience

(Forceville, 1996, p.108.)

In this picture we have no suggestion of a second term so how can we identify the leaves as a metaphor? The elements of a picture are not linearly perceived as are a sequence of words. The innate nature of words is linear and the grammatical clues and linearity of verbal metaphors do not exist in pictorial metaphors, pictures “are non-linear and do not give us direct instructions about how to read them” (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p.37). It is the pictorial context within which the metaphor exists that will help establish the absent term of the metaphor (Forceville, 1996, p.109). The wider pictorial context is the girl’s bedroom, the visual text is the colour palette of dull, greys and brown, the colours of misery. The verbal context is the accompanying text that reads, “sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to” (Tan, 2001, 1st opening). This verbal “anchoring” (Barthes, 1977, p.40) elucidates further meaning. It is evident that the two terms of the visual metaphor are leaves and depression. “The similarity between the two terms of the metaphor is not necessarily pre-existent, but is often created by the metaphor itself” (Forceville, 1996, p.108).

We now have to determine what is the target and what is the source. The combination of the understanding of the wider pictorial context and any verbal context available will guide the reader to determine the primary and secondary subjects. Taking all this into consideration it can be surmised that the ‘literal’ primary subject, the target, is depression and its ‘figurative’ secondary subject, the source, is the black leaves.

According to Forceville, “Both the primary and the secondary subject of the metaphor can

be envisaged as domains of meaning elements, ranging from verifiable facts to connotations and including beliefs about and attitudes towards that subject” (1996, p.108). Forceville also writes that:

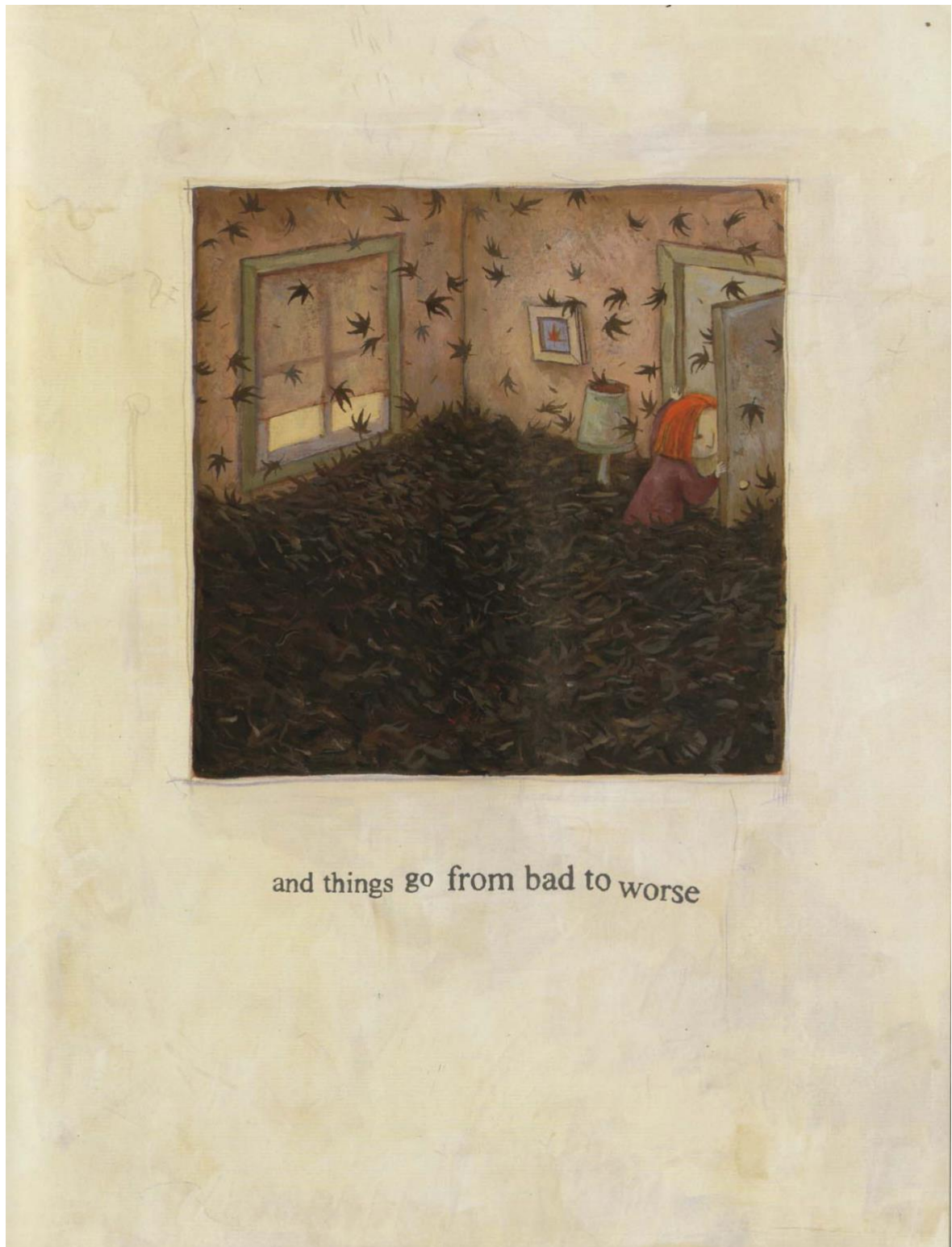
According to Black, in each metaphor one or more features of the domain of the secondary subject (the ‘source domain’) are mapped on to the domain of the primary subject (the ‘target domain’). This mapping process involves the foregrounding, adoption or modification of certain features in the primary subject.

(1996, p.108)

In this case the features from the domain of the source that are projected onto the domain of the target are the blackness of the dying leaves, and the fact that they are falling ‘down’. This also suggest a gradual process as more leaves fall and the fear of being quietly overwhelmed. “Metaphors are often a way of describing an abstract concept with accessible tools” (Orden, 2014), but the connotations will not be exactly the same for any two people.

In the next illustration (fig.2) the girl struggles to fight her way out of the bedroom door as the room fills with the dark leaves that threaten to overwhelm her. The accompanying text reads “and things go from bad to worse” (Tan, 2001, 2nd opening). The indicators are still here to carry on with the same metaphor. This and the previous illustration are small and framed on the page, providing the reader with a limited glimpse into the girl’s world, but the illustration on the next spread is much larger and almost spans the two pages, inviting the reader further into her world and her mental state (fig.3). Here the reader’s attention is drawn to a huge fish that floats above the young girl as she wanders along the street. Assuming it is not a mere whim of the illustrator, the reader is prompted to realise that because the fish, as before with the leaves, is depicted in a place where it would not

normally be found, that it is not just a fish but suggests something other. The reader is invited to understand and perceive the fish, not in its usual 'literal' sense, but in terms of what it represents and regard this as a metaphor. As is evident in this example, metaphors are often puzzling as "they are at once nonsensical and meaningful" (Hausman, 1989, p.9), and the odd position of the fish in this illustration is certainly puzzling and it can be said that "metaphor activates the reader's perception" (Petrenko and Korotchenko, 2012, p.1), employs fantastic images as visual metaphors for varying and recognizable states of mind: depression, isolation, loneliness and despair. Colour, composition and scale also play increasingly important and supportive roles in this form of symbolic communication.



and things go from bad to worse

Figure 2: *The Red Tree* By Shaun Tan

Working again with the three questions set out earlier: The two terms of the metaphor are depression and the fish. Here context and prior knowledge, because of the sequential

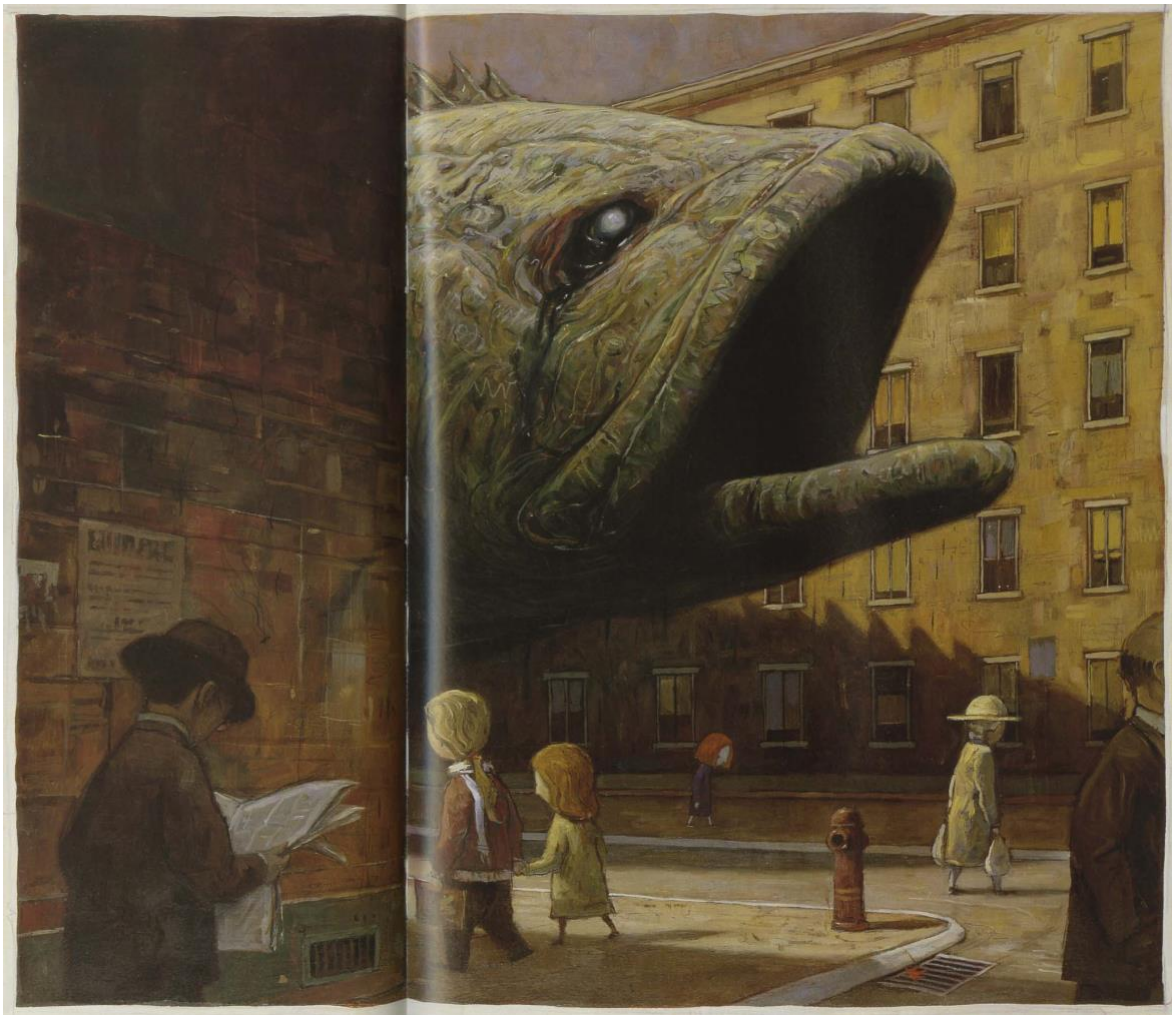


Figure 3: *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan 'Darkness overcomes you'

nature of the picture book, of any previous illustrations help inform the reader. We know from the previous illustrations and text that this is a story about misery and despair. The telling accompanying text reads, "darkness overcomes you" (Tan, 2001, 3rd opening). Its target again is depression and its source is the fish, in place of the well-known and obvious metaphor of having a dark cloud over one's head.

The features from the domain of the source that are projected onto the domain of the target are that the fish is big, cold and dead with unseeing eyes, casting a huge dark

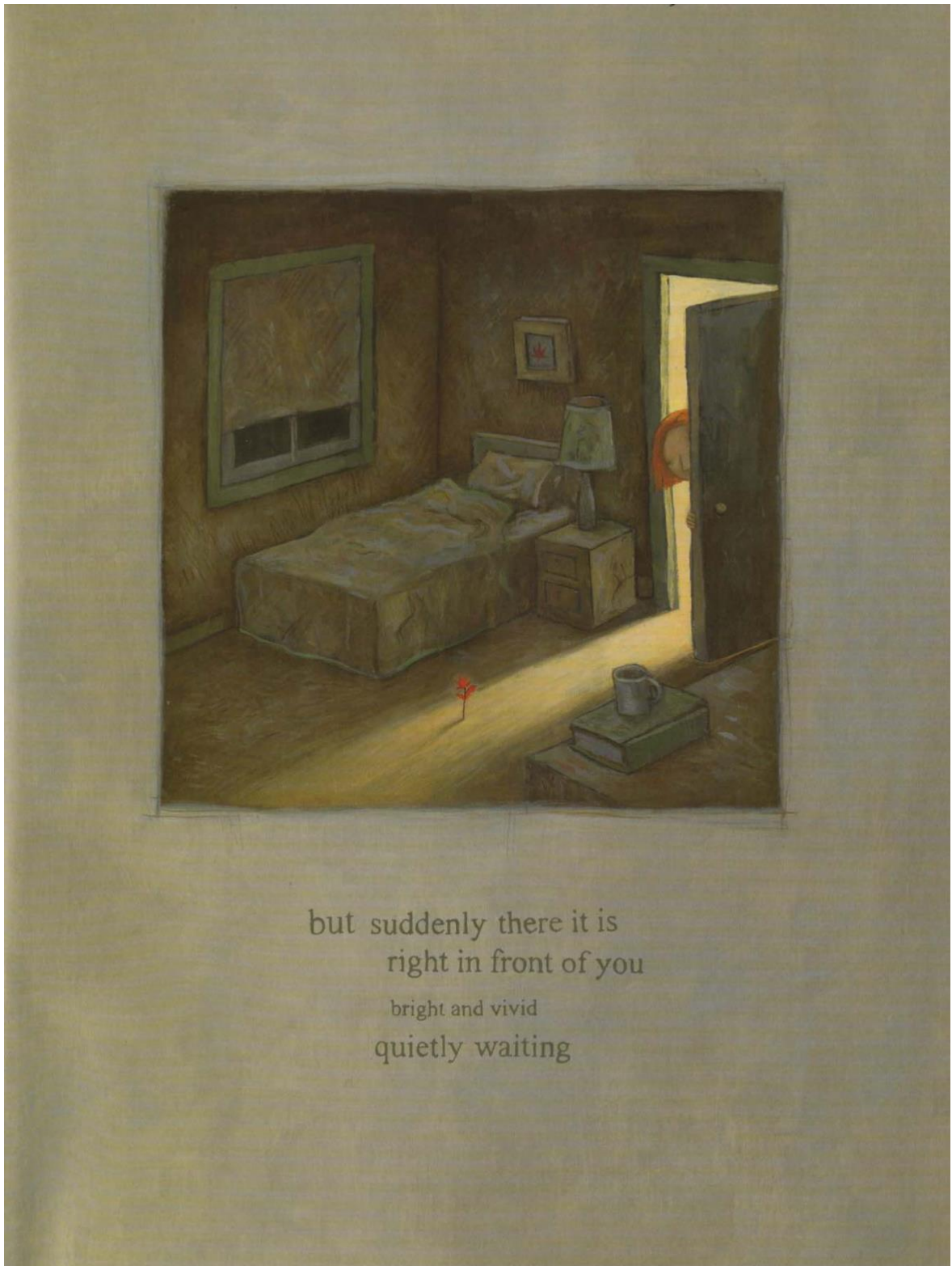
shadow over the young girl as she wanders down the street. The windows of the building in the picture with their blinds pulled down can also be seen as metaphors. Alluding to, and adding to a feeling of loneliness. No one can see her; no one can see how she feels. The gaze of the other people in the picture are turned away from the girl, this is reinforced by the window with the blinds pulled down, like closed eyes. Others are blind to her distress. Two figures to her left of the girl are holding hands, reinforcing her isolation. In the foreground of the dark image is a single red leaf: another metaphor, but this time signifying hope. A single red leaf appears in each illustration. This poetic image forms an extended metaphor that subtly dominates the whole story.

Now it has been demonstrated that Forceville's framework can be used to develop an account of pictorial metaphor in picture book illustration, the analysis can continue without a step-by-step guide. In the next illustration the girl imagines herself trapped in a bottle washed up on a desolate shore or, perhaps, lost in a strange landscape (Fig.4). Accompanied by the short text that reads "nobody understands"(Tan, 2001, 4th opening). This limited text together with the intriguing image becomes a catalyst for deeper thought and the understanding of a complex emotion. The amount of information contained in the image for the reader to decode slows them down to process the meaning of the image and absorb every detail. Details such as the water in the bottle making her cold and vulnerable, the diver's helmet the girl is wearing to further prevent anyone hearing her cries, the snail on the left side of the bottle signifying that she has been feeling like this for some time, and the ever present single red leaf behind the bottle.



Figure 4: *The Red Tree* by Anthony Browne 'Nobody Understands'

At the end of the book, the girl returns to her bedroom and finds a tiny red seedling growing in the middle of the floor (Fig.5). It quickly grows into a vivid red tree that fills her room with warm light. The red tree is obviously a metaphor and represents the conquest of depression. Of course, each image remains open to various interpretations in the absence of any verbal description. What minimal 'story' there is reminds the reader that just as bad feelings are sometimes inevitable, there is always hope. However, any apparent meaning indicated by the metaphor of the bright red tree is still laced with uncertainty. The red tree is blooming, but it will also die, so nothing is definite.



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

Figure 5: *The Red Tree* by Anthony Browne

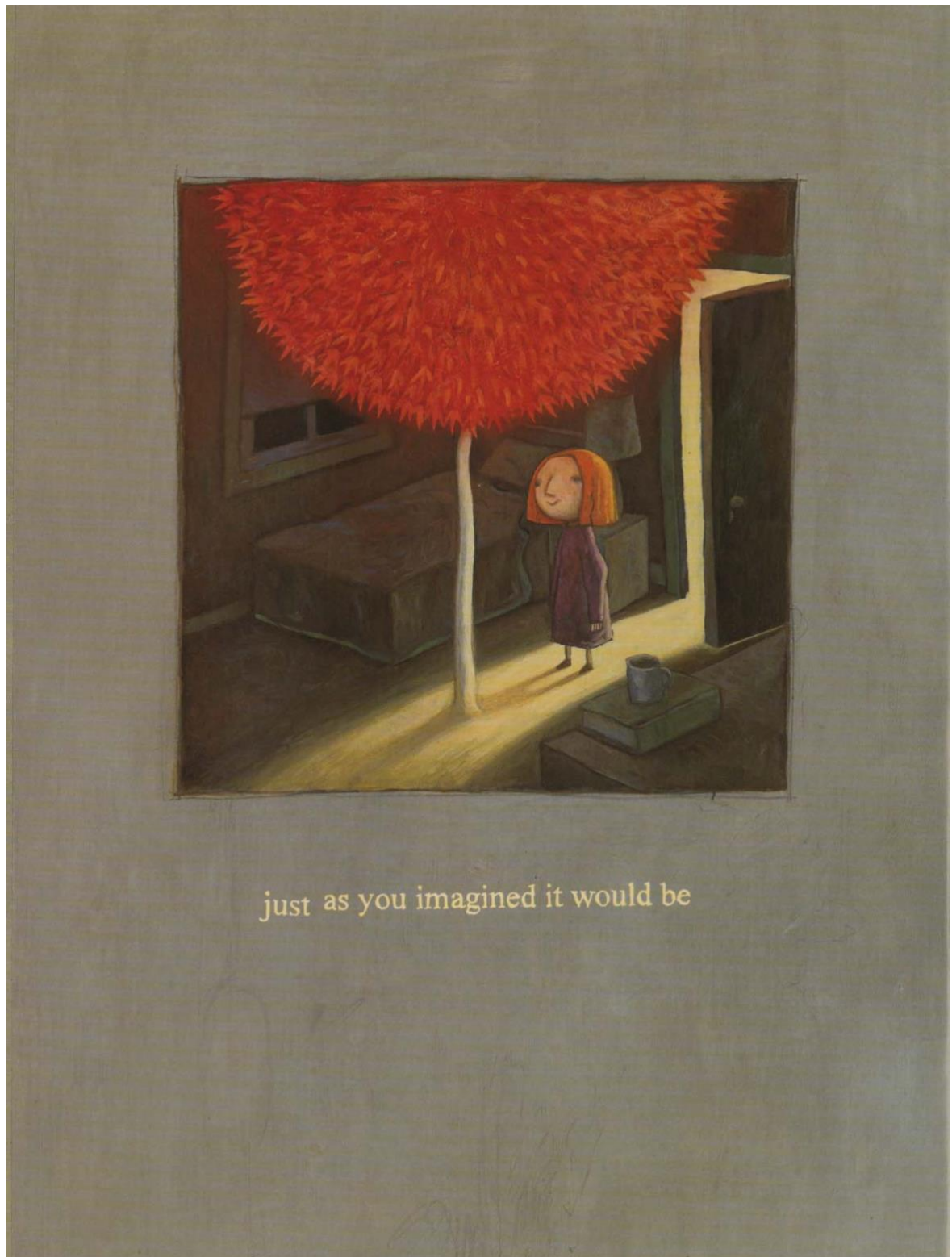


Figure 6: *The Red Tree* by Anthony Browne

Throughout the book the girl is represented without a mouth, until the very last picture. She cannot put her feelings into words and she cannot be heard. This distortion of the body is very subtle and can be easily missed on first reading, particularly as the representation is stylised. The complex and detailed nature of the illustrations invites further attention where more visual information is decoded at each subsequent reading. This subcategory of visual metaphor, involving some violation of physical reality is a common convention in conceptual illustration, particularly in the editorial field.

However, Tan's approach is gentle and subtle in contrast to figure 7. This violation of reality attracts the attention of the reader of the newspaper or magazine, and intrigues. The intent being that this will stop the turning of the page as the reader, with interest piqued, wants to find out what the article is about; firstly, through the verbal anchoring of the headline and then, hopefully, actually reading the article. The metaphorical dimension of the image will also result in an emotional response (Messaris, 1997, p.13). Unfortunately this image has to be analysed out of context as no information is available. The hands morphing out of the face to cover the mouth of the woman portrayed suggests some sort of gagging of women or females not having a voice. If the context was political, it could add further meaning. This demonstrates how important context is when trying to comprehend a metaphor, and the verbal anchorage, as in editorial illustration both the headline and illustration work together to make meaning. Anita Kunz's work appears on the covers of many American magazines, such as *The New Yorker* and *Time* magazine.



Figure 7: Anita Kunz (title unknown)

The Tunnel, written and illustrated by Anthony Browne, is about the relationship between a brother and sister. The little girl is a dreamer and likes reading, while her brother plays outside with his friends. He is louder and more boisterous. The two always fight and argue. One morning the mother, growing impatient, sends them out to play. Although the mother is mentioned in the verbal text she never appears in the pictorial text, apart from this illustration (fig.8) where we see her pointing arm thrusting into the picture. This is a visual synecdoche where her arm (the part) represents the whole (the mother).



One morning their mother grew impatient with them.
 "Out you go together," she said, "and try to be nice to each other just for once. And be back in time for lunch." But the boy didn't want his little sister with him.

Figure 8: *The Tunnel* by Anthony Browne

In the same illustration there is a literal pictorial representation of a verbal metaphor as the little girl walks in her brother's shadow. The verbal metaphor does not appear in the text and is quite subtly conveyed in the illustration and may only be seen and decoded on further readings of the book. It conveys the power and superiority of the brother.

In the next illustration (fig.9) they end up together in a vacant lot. The piece of lead piping on the ground between the brother and sister is a metaphor for the hostility between them, a hard line of demarcation that keeps their worlds apart. After a scary tunnel is



Figure 9: *The Tunnel* by Anthony Browne

discovered that acts as a portal for adventure to ensue, the children's differences are reconciled when the girl rescues her brother. In the final endpaper (fig.10) the ball (which represents the older brother) and the book (which represents his sister) are positioned together, representing a new harmony between the fighting siblings. These objects are

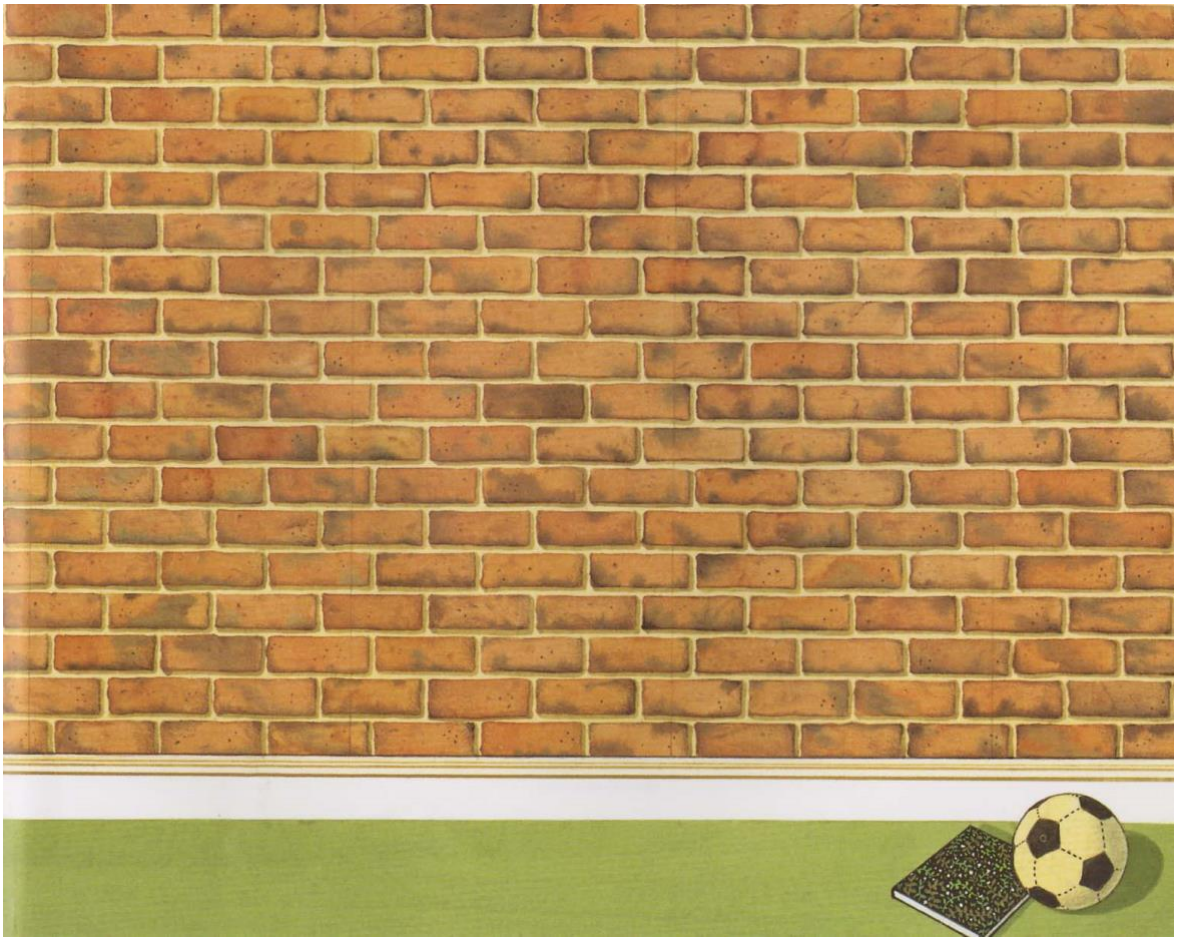


Figure 10: *The Tunnel* by Anthony Browne

metonymic. Visual metonymy works differently from verbal metonymy: no names are given to objects, only the connection between them remains, for example the boy who was playing with the ball and the girl who was reading the book. Thus, the image denotes a retrospective focus of the story. The reader seeing the book and the ball can visualise the story about the children.



Figure 1: *Into the Forest* by Anthony Browne

Anthony Browne's picture book, *Into the Forest*, takes the reader on a deeply metaphorical journey through a fairy-tale forest to Grandma's house. Here the extended metaphor of the scary forest represents a little boy's anxiety. The story begins with a little boy in his bed woken by a lightening storm outside his window (fig.11). The accompanying text reads "One night I was woken up by a terrible sound." The lightening is evident in the illustration and the words lead the reader to assume that the terrible noise is the thunder. However, there is some ambivalence here. The next morning he finds his father has left home. Could the terrible noise have been his parent's arguing and

the slamming of the door? In which case is the lightening a metaphor for the argument?

A one-legged toy soldier in the opening panel hints at a military absence, although the reason for the father's disappearance is never stated. It could, of course, refer to a wounded little soldier who has stormed off after an argument.

With a clear intertextual reference to *Little Red Riding Hood* the boy is asked by his mother to take a cake to his Grandma who is ill. In the image the mother is seen handing him the typical Red Riding Hood wicker basket. The accompanying text includes a warning from her not to go into the forest, he predictably ignores this and takes the short cut through the forest.

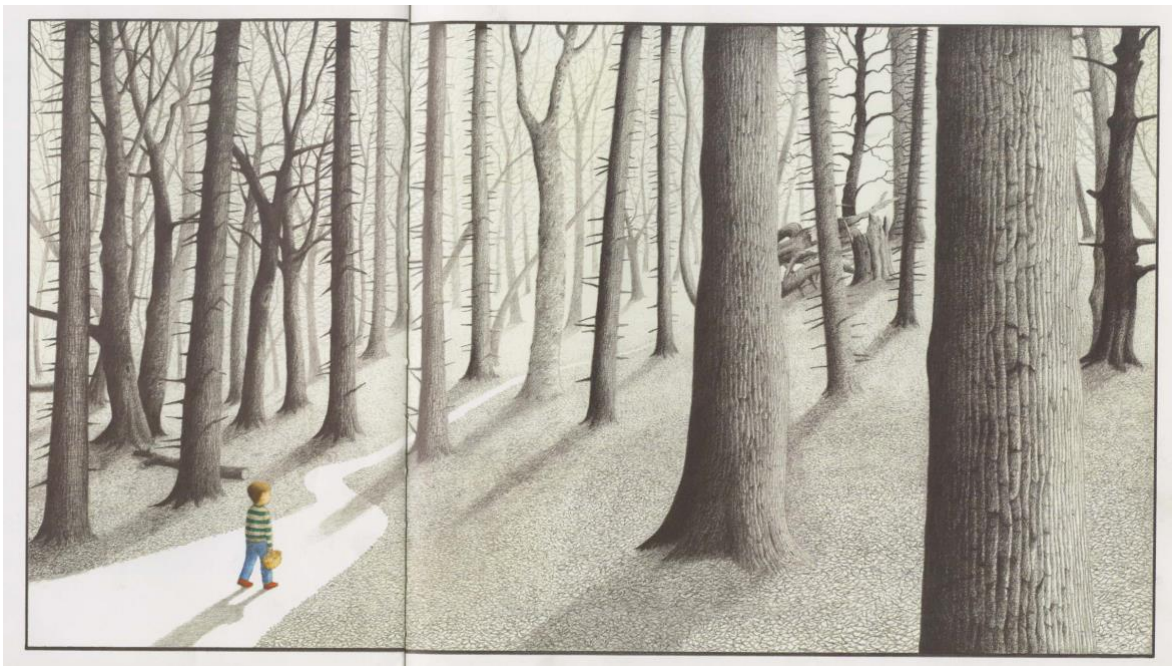


Figure 12: *Into the Forest* by Anthony Browne

As the story moves from the concrete to the symbolic and he ventures deeper into the forest and deeper into his anxiety and imagination, the images become monochrome, the only area of colour is the boy himself. The trees are drawn in graphite pencil with pointed

spikey branches (fig.12) and as he ventures further into the black-and-white forest the twisted trees become frightening faces and gnarled, knotted hands and limbs reminiscent of Arthur Rackham's magical and foreboding forests.

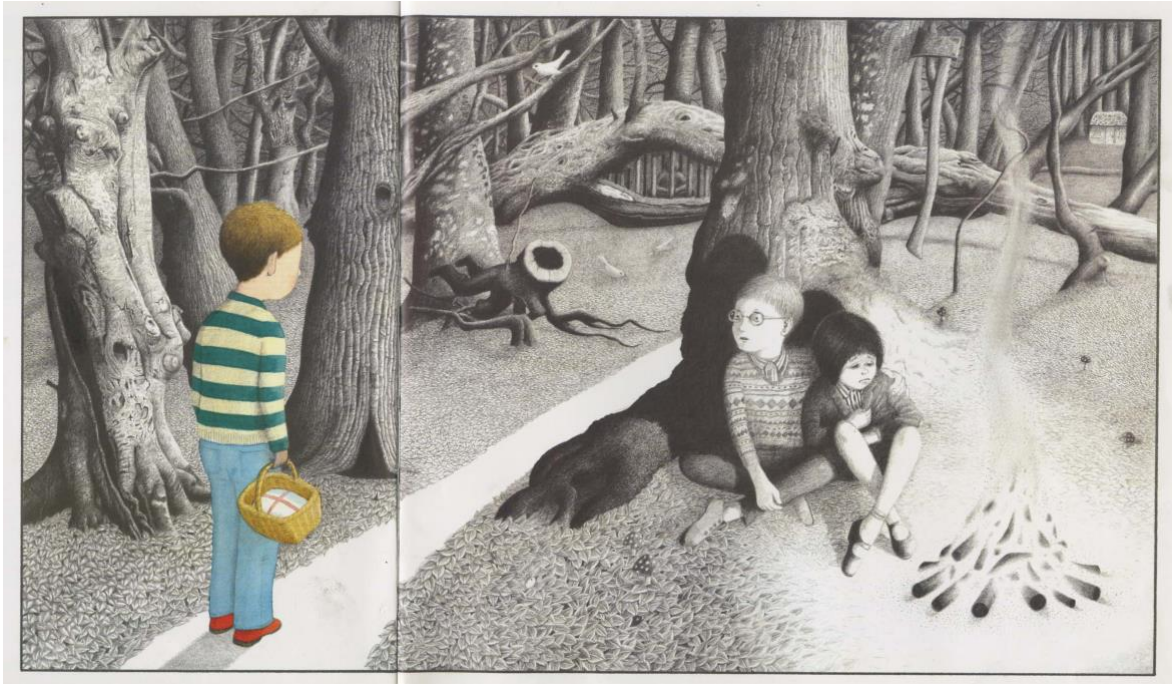


Figure 13: *Into the Forest* by Anthony Browne

On his way, he meets a boy selling a cow, a hungry yellow-haired girl, and two lost children. In this illustration (fig.13) Hansel and Gretel are a metaphor of parental abandonment, reinforcing his anxiety. Prior knowledge of the fairy tale intertexts helps decode the pictures and provide meaning. The pumpkin from *Cinderella*, Sleeping Beauty's spinning wheel, Rapunzel's tower and Jack's beanstalk, for example, appear as visual metonyms hidden within the landscape of the forest (fig.14).



Figure 14: *Into the Forest* by Anthony Browne

In Browne's modern telling of *Hansel and Gretel* there is further evidence of the use of visual synecdoche as the stepmother prepares to wake the children (fig.15). The picture features several black triangular motifs; the gap in the curtain, the roof in the framed picture on the wall, the mouse's hole in the skirting board, a shadow cast by something on top of the chest of drawers and what looks like the bottom of a hat on top of the wardrobe bleeding out of the illustration frame. These black triangles are obviously references to a witch's hat, a part of a whole: a witch. In the same illustration there is a visual metaphor where two objects combine to making new meaning; as the stepmother

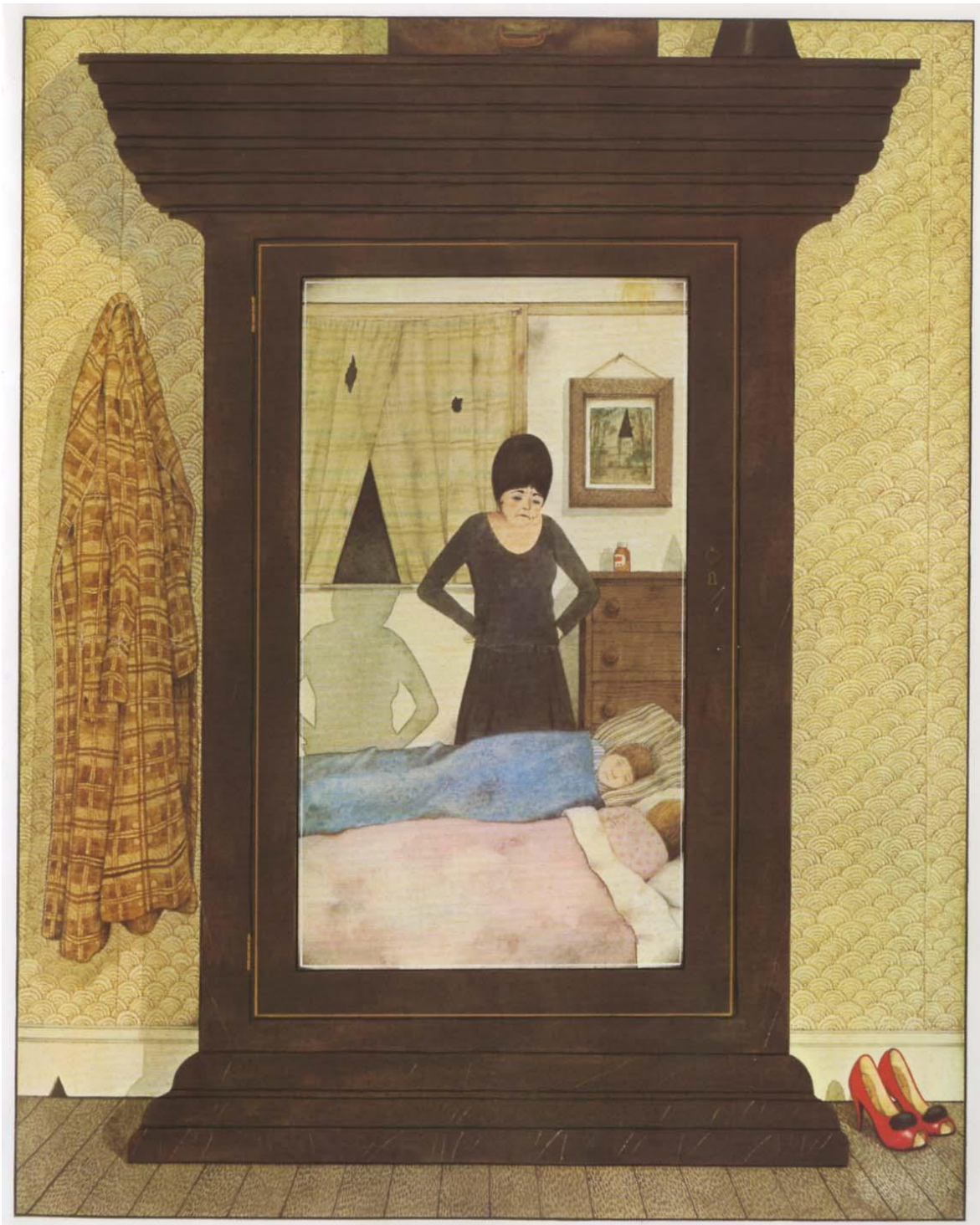


Figure 14: *Hansel and Gretel* by Anthony Browne

casts a shadow across the wall the gap in the curtains makes it look as if she is wearing a pointed hat, making the reader think of her as a wicked witch.

The illustrations discussed and analysed demonstrate the lively and intelligent use of the three visual tropes to make meaning and convey emotion and communicate complex, abstract notions. When applied to the discipline of illustration, this form of imagery is termed conceptual. We live in an increasingly visual culture and Illustrators have long had to present the viewer/reader (including children) with enigmatic and ambiguous images that invite deeper reading. These visual tropes allow room for a breadth of interpretation as “we each see things according to our own vision and state of mind and mood, making our own sets of associations” (O’Toole, 2011, p.10). As Joseph Schwarcz succinctly expresses in *The Ways of an Illustrator*, “Figurative language is one of the basic modes of human expression and communication” (1982, p.34), and as such is a powerful tool of visual communication.

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