

AN EXAMINATION OF LITERARY AND STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF SHAUN
TAN'S PICTUREBOOKS AND THEIR CONVEYANCE OF SOCIAL ISSUES

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way format, content and linguistic elements convey social issues portrayed in picturebooks. Drawing on David Lewis' theory of the picturebook as process, three works by Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, *The Rabbits*, and *The Red Tree*, are analyzed. These analyses illustrate how Tan uses the interplay between text and illustration to provide social commentary on immigration, colonialism, and depression respectively.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Meaghan Smith, as a partial requirement of the Master of Arts in Children's Literature Program at the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Dr. Theresa Rogers of the Department of Language and Literacy Education. Professor Judith Saltman, of the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, and Dr. Margot Filipenko of the Department of Language and Literacy Education served as the other committee members for this thesis.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Dr. Herb Wyile. Though you never convinced me to take an Atlantic Canadian Literature course, you had an enormous impact on my academic career. Driving to the middle of nowhere New Brunswick together for conferences, playing word games in the lounge, letting me run you through with a sword...and a lightsaber, and trying so hard to explain Derrida in a Tim Horton's at 7:00am, you were the exemplification of what a professor should be and your passion will live on in your students forever.

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Thank you for everything, Andrea.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation for the Study and Origins of Interest

I have always loved picturebooks. I began reading to myself at a young age and would always make up stories based on the illustrations in my books. I began writing picturebooks by the second grade and I have never given up my love for them. Whenever I enter a bookstore I head right to the children's section and start reading as many books as I can before someone catches me absorbing as many of their words as possible for free.

With this love in mind, and my admitted obsession with Harry Potter, when I entered my undergrad I was determined to take every children's literature course I could. I was the only person who presented on children's literature at my first two academic conferences. This passion has led me to some of the most extraordinary books that have ever been created. I started to discover how complex, serious, and groundbreaking the topics in picturebooks could be, and now whenever someone in my life is going through a tough time, the book I purchase is always a picturebook. *Heart in a Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers was delivered to a handful of friends after we tragically lost a friend at the end of the school year. Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* is still my number one suggestion for people suffering from mental illness. These books have the power to be whatever you need them to be. The pictures invite you to place yourself within them with much more ease than does a strictly textual narrative. The illustrations can

symbolize whatever the reader needs, and can provide a sense of understanding of one's situation.

The combination of image and text that simply conveys a complex message and allows readers entry into a story is one of the key aspects of why I love to use children's literature when broaching difficult topics. The hopeful factors that are found in most books for children, be it the small hand that can remove the heart from the bottle, or the red leaf that follows the girl throughout her difficult day, help the reader believe that there is always hope. It is with this passion that I have decided to write my thesis on picturebooks that make statements about the human condition. I have chosen books that allow people to see themselves, or perhaps to peer into the lives of others, to better understand their situations and encourage the formation of an empathy all too uncommon in today's world.

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of my thesis is to explore the ways that picturebooks convey social issues. Specifically, I want to explore the way that particular literary and structural aspects of the book contribute to its ability to convey social issues. I will also explore the affordances of a single creator in a picturebook versus a team-created picturebooks, those that include the work of both an author and an illustrator. My analysis will focus on how the format, the content, and linguistic elements convey social issues in *The Rabbits* (words by John Marsden), *The Red Tree*, and *The Arrival*, all by Shaun Tan,

1.2.1 Research question:

How do specific literary and structural aspects (format, content and linguistic elements) of three picture books by Shaun Tan serve to convey social issues?

1.2.1.1 Research Sub-Questions

1. How does a wordless picture book such as *The Arrival* convey the social issue related to the immigration experience?
2. What effect does having both an author and an illustrator have on how colonialism is conveyed in *The Rabbits*?
3. What advantages might there be in conveying depression in a picture book by a single author-illustrator, as in *The Red Tree*?

1.3 Rationale and Significance

Much of the research that has been carried out on Shaun Tan and “issue books” focuses on the responses of child readers to the works in educational settings, rather than focusing on the books themselves. The research that does focus on the content is very tightly focused, often dealing with only one aspect of a book, and tends not to engage with other studies that focus on that same book or books by the same author. In my study I take a more content-centred approach to analysis, while also engaging with each book as a piece within Tan’s work as a whole. In this way, my study addresses a gap in the current research on issue-based picturebooks.

1.4 Significant Terms¹

- Double page spread: two pages treated as one in a publication, with images or text extending across the binding ²
- Endpapers: either of two leaves at the front and back of a book pasted to the inside of the board covers and the first leaf of the book to secure the binding
- Gutter: the white space between the facing pages of an open book
 - Also: the space between two columns of type
- Hermeneutic: the science of interpretation, esp of Scripture
 - Note: in Nikolajeva and Scott's paper, and how I use it for this thesis, they discuss hermeneutic as an analysis style that focuses on the small details of both illustration and text as well as the whole and the relationship between all three in a symbiotic manner.
- Issue-based picturebook: a picturebook whose central theme explores a prominent social issue, that can be used a means to teach about the issue it portrays³
- Numbat: a small Australian marsupial
- Recto: the right-hand pages of a book, bearing the odd numbers
- Verso: the left-hand pages of a book, bearing the even numbers

¹ Definitions provided by Collins English Dictionary, 2017, n.p.

² I follow David Lewis' spelling of double page spread

³ Definition provided by author as it is not a pre-defined term

1.5 Chapter Overview

Chapter 2: Literature Review

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Picturebook Format and Classification
- 2.3 Picturebook Analysis
- 2.4 Critical and Scholarly work on Tan's Work – Reader Response
- 2.5 Critical and Scholarly work on Tan's Work – Textual Focus
- 2.6 Social Issues

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 4: Findings

- 4.1 – *The Arrival*
- 4.2 – *The Rabbits*
- 4.3 – *The Red Tree*

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I first review a selected works on picturebook theory in relation to the forms that picturebooks can take, and how picturebooks are categorized and analyzed. Second, I look at the existing criticism on the work of Shaun Tan. Third, I explore the literature and research on social issues in children's literature, such as depression, homelessness, immigration, and colonialism. Finally, I discuss what is missing from these studies and how my research will fill this gap.

2.2 Picturebook Format and Classification

Picturebook theory covers all books with illustrations, although classifications differ widely. It is extremely difficult to pin down exactly how a "picturebook" is defined, and how one can categorize these books, as opposed to "illustrated books" or "decorated books." David Lewis (2001) explains in his introduction to *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks – Picturing Text*,

This indecisiveness can even be sensed in the way that the metalanguage ... is still relatively unstable. How should you spell 'picturebook,' for example? Is it a compound word (picturebook), a hyphenated word (picture-book), or two distinct words (picture book)? (p. xiv)

In this thesis I will use the compound word "picturebook" as I am working with books that, under any categorization system, one sees through a combined lens, looking at both the text and illustrations as equal partners. This is because in

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, *The Red Tree* and *The Rabbits* (words by John Marsden) neither the text nor the illustrations is the key. To truly understand these books you need the combination of text and pictures to create a whole, or complete, book.

The difference and relationship between words and pictures are core factors of categorization and analysis for most scholars. Joseph Schwarcz (1982) argues,

Language discloses its contents in time; written language, ever since alphabets were invented, adds to this fixed direction: we comprehend as we read along lines whose meaning we decipher in linear progression.

The picture, on the other hand, confronts the viewer all at once, as a surface, an expanse; we see its contents simultaneously, as an immediate whole. (p. 9)

These are the types of differences in communication that authors and illustrators call upon to create books that are able to move beyond the type of expression that only words or pictures achieve alone. The relationship between the two and how they react to each other is as much a part of the book as the words or pictures separately. When the reader takes in both mediums at once, the interplay encourages the reader to participate more deeply in deciphering the story. This is further explained by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2001): "If words and images fill each other's gaps wholly, there is nothing left for the reader's imagination, and the reader remains somewhat passive. The same is

true if the gaps are identical in the words and images (or if there are no gaps at all)” (p. 17). A book that solicits the reader's engagement can provide opportunities for many interpretations. Tan leaves large gaps within his narratives, which can serve to invite the reader into the story to explore and think critically. Lawrence Sipe (1998) describes books that create this fine balance between words and pictures as having “synergy.”

Some theorists argue that the weight of achieving synergy falls largely to the illustrations. For instance, Deborah Stevenson (2008) claims “Despite its primacy, the text is often the downtrodden partner in the picture book form. A picture book can, after all, be a picture book without a text; it cannot be one without pictures” (p. 93). She goes on to note that there is a lack of famous picturebook writers, because most of the weight and recognisability lies in the illustrations (p. 93). For instance, I would argue that in John Marsden’s and Shaun Tan's *The Rabbits*, the aesthetic of the illustrations aligns the book with Shaun Tan’s other works, whereas the subject matter and style do not align the book with Marsden’s other works. In fact, the book is only listed on Tan’s website and not on that of Marsden.

2.3 Picturebook Analysis

Picturebook theory is quite divided on the issue of *how* to read and analyze a picturebook. The reading of a single page can range, depending on the critical lens or the critic, from complex systems which dissect the angles, gaze, and placement of a subject on the page (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), to

more straightforward systems which posit that a simple “close reading” (Nodelman, 2008) is sufficient to build an analysis, as the reader is able to take in all of the aspects required without focusing on predetermined types of details to form analysis. A close reading allows for the analysis of a single page or the book as a whole and, depending on the reader, it may take in paratextual evidence as well, which is not included in all guided analyses. Most proposed reading systems, (close reading vs. Kress and van Leuwen’s prescribed element reading, etc.) focus on the relationship between words and pictures on a single page and do not address other factors that enhance the reading of a book, such as page turns, gutters, textual placement, or changes in colour or style. In contrast with Kress and van Leuwen whose approach focuses on specific elements, Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) describe a more agglomerate approach:

Hermeneutic analysis starts with the whole, proceeds to look at details, goes back to the whole with a better understanding, and so on, in an eternal circle known as the hermeneutic circle as well. Whichever we start with, the verbal or the visual, it creates expectations. The reader turns from verbal to visual and back again, in an ever-expanding concatenation of understanding. Each new rereading of either words or pictures creates better prerequisites for an adequate interpretation of the whole.

Presumably, children know this by intuition when they demand that the same book be read aloud to them over and over again. Actually, they do

not read the same book; they go more and more deeply into its meaning.

(p. 2)

When one uses hermeneutic analysis, one deals with the relationship between the words and pictures as well as the page's role in the book. Every detail is taken into consideration and the reader can make observations not only about the words and pictures as separate, but also concerning the way that they interact, and the importance of each in its ability to tell the story, and the ways in which the relationships change over multiple readings. This openness and all-encompassing strategy is why I have chosen to use a hermeneutic analysis for this thesis.

Analysis of the relationship between text and pictures is facilitated by a specific analytical approach or critical lens. Scholars like JoAnne Golden (1990) have created extensive categories in which to view these relationships. She argues that picture/word relations can be symmetrical (making the illustrations redundant), that the text depends on the illustration for further clarification (important details, such as the species of a main character, are usually revealed in these relationships), that the illustration can enhance or elaborate the text (smaller details are added to the story to explain sentiments given in the text), that text can carry the primary narrative while illustration is selective (often used in fairy tale adaptations in which large portions of text are represented by single illustrations which may not relate directly to what is happening in the text. This can be seen as decorative), and finally that illustration carries the primary

narrative and the text is selective (text is simple and possibly knowingly misleading, letting the illustration do the bulk of the undertaking in portraying the actual narrative) (p. 105-17). Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) have expanded upon this system to look at books where the relationship between pictures and words is enhancing or where the illustrations do the undertaking of portrayal of meaning and have also hypothesized a system in which illustrations and words can either enhance or counterpoint each other. Their explanation of enhance is similar to that used by Golden, but they create an extensive list of types of counterpoints that one can examine as a way to shape a reading: in address (to the child or the adult), in style (level of humour or irony), in genre or modality, by juxtaposition (dual stories), in perspective (who is speaking vs. who is seeing), in characterization, in metafictional nature, and finally in space and time (showing/illustration vs. telling/narration) (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001, p. 24-6).

These systems, much like the extensive system of Gunter Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, may possibly limit the analysis of the page as the reader is busy searching for specific relationships and not taking in the page as a whole. David Lewis (2001) states:

I argued ... against pigeonholing of picturebooks into categories according to how the words and pictures are related or how they appear to interact.

The main reason for rejecting this approach is that it does not seem to do justice to the facts. When I look at picturebooks I find in them the most extraordinary displays of creativity and formal invention. What I do not see

are examples of symmetry, deviation or counterpoint. I could if I tried, but I know that in doing so I would be distorting and representing rather poorly, if not misrepresenting, how the books appear to me. (p. 61)

Instead, Lewis (2001) describes an ecological system in which picturebooks can function. He states: "in claiming that picturebooks possess an internal ecology we are not claiming the exact same relationship of word and image for each and every picturebook" (pg. 47). Lewis examines each book past the symmetry and deviation described by other scholars, and explores each book as an organism where each aspect of the picturebook has its own part to play.

Lewis furthers the construction of his ecological framework through discussion of the way one can analyze each page using the "process" framework. As he explains, it allows for a close reading style of analysis with a bit more structure than a close reading:

We must remember that this is no simple process of reflection or parallelism: words and pictures are always and everywhere at work upon each other. Even the simplest picturebook version of fairy-tales have an inflection, an accent, an angle that would be missing were the pictures not present ... The picturebook is therefore just as much a process as it is a form of text. We might refer to this process as 'picturing.'

(p. 66-67)

The process framework respects the format of a picturebook rather than making assumptions based on association of pictures and texts as in the contrasts and

similarities system of Golden (1990), or Nikolajeva and Scott (2001). Instead, using the process framework allows for analysis of differing formats and the ways in which a format can speak to the subject matter of a book, because it hypothesizes that the illustrator (in my case, Tan) is “picturing” the topic at hand. In doing so, Tan chooses the most appropriate style and format to portray the subject of the picturebook, all of which change the way the subject is broached and can enhance or detract from the subject of the book. I will use this theory in a technically wordless picturebook, a traditional picturebook, and a picturebook by an author/illustrator team to see how these variations change the way subject matter is pictured.

2.4 Critical and scholarly work on Shaun Tan’s books – reader response

Much criticism has been written about Shaun Tan’s work, as he is one of the most innovative author-illustrators currently producing picturebooks. His complex style lends itself to many approaches of analysis. Due to the complexity of his work, much of the research has studied the ways in which one reads his books, and less research has focused on the content of his works. There have been many reader response studies, as well as studies that look at the language and symbolism of the books, their visual aspects, and how they are read.

Reader response studies using Tan’s books mainly argue that readers can interpret a single page in many different ways. Scholars who have focused on *The Arrival* have explored the responses of immigrant children (Farrell, Arzipe, and McAdam (2010), Bellorin and Silva-Diaz (2011), and Martinez and

Newcomber (2011). Maureen Farrell, Evelyn Arzipe, and Julie McAdam (2010), participating in the Visual Journeys project, selected a group of students divided approximately in half between immigrant and non-immigrant children in Glasgow, Scotland, and used a list of categories (*experiential*: who, what, when, and where; *interpersonal*: relationships; *compositional*: textual; *interpretive*: why; *other* (p.202) to track the way their participants responded to *The Arrival*. They asked students to annotate the book as a way to view the level of response. They found that most of the children's reactions to the book took place at the experiential level. They also found that the main difference in the children's responses was that the immigrant children needed more help with their written responses, but the types of responses they offered were the same (p. 206).

Brenda Bellowín and María Cecilia Silva-Díaz (2011), participating in the same project as Farrell, Arzipe, and McAdam, gathered a group of mostly immigrant children in Barcelona Spain, to evaluate the mental processes that children use to read visual narratives, and to see if the children could glean the intention of the protagonist without reading verbal clues. They used the categories of “perceiving,” “remembering,” “thinking,” “longing,” and “feeling,” to test the ability of their students. Their main conclusion was that the students were able to follow the story well, but the story yielded many different hypotheses of what the protagonist's intention was. The children became “co-authors” in the texts narrating what they thought was happening in the pictures (Bellowín and Silva-Díaz, 2011, p. 225). Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán and Sarah Newcomber (2011),

also participating in Visual Journeys, gathered a group of immigrant children to discuss *The Arrival*, but ensured that there was someone who spoke the mother tongue of the participants. The children in this group co-constructed a narrative and hypothesized together. Martinez-Roldàn and Newcomber (2011) found that the inclusion of a Spanish speaker greatly improved the confidence of the participants as well as the participation level. All three studies found that the wordless nature of the picturebook allowed the immigrant students to participate and understand the story better than if they had used a book with English words. While these studies allowed students to touch on the linguistic elements and style of the book, they did not push the students to make interpretations based on these factors. Instead, they focused on the comprehension/interpretation of the book and literary aspects of the study.

The Red Tree is also used for reader response studies because of its dense nature. Sylvia Pantaleo has conducted two studies that use *The Red Tree* in reader response groups. In 2011, Pantaleo gathered a group of Grade 7 students to study the way these readers approach metafictional devices in literature. Pantaleo found that students used collaboration as a means to discuss the book, but noted the importance of providing the right language as a tool to help the students understand what they are reading. Pantaleo used *The Red Tree* again in 2012 with another group of Grade 7 students. She tracked the number of responses she received (based on word count) and the popularity of certain double page spreads (more visually dense spreads were selected by

students as favourites), as well as students' enthusiasm in finding the red leaf on each page. Pantaleo found that most students responded aesthetically to the book, and they reviewed pages looking for small clues to help them discover new meaning in the story (2012, p. 68).

Due to Tan's willingness to experiment with new styles, researchers have also conducted many studies looking at the literacy skills required to read Tan's works. Pantaleo (2013), this time using *The Arrival*, asked Grade 4 students to respond to the text and analyzed their responses through the lens of Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading, which posits that the reader and author have an equal partnership in the construction of the meaning of a text (p. 14). Pantaleo uses Rosenblatt's theory to further her research into the role of the teacher in providing adequate language and instruction as a way to ensure students develop better visual literacy. She found that through teacher intervention in the partnership between reader and text, the teacher was able to equip students with the skills needed to heighten the connection of said partnership. In a similar vein, Georgina Barton and Len Unsworth (2014) focus on multimodality's role in the comprehension of readers using Tan's works. Barton and Unsworth look at the translation of *The Lost Thing* into animated film and discuss the way that music is used to influence the viewer. They found that the translation into the (Academy Award-winning) film was done quite faithfully to the book. Their study focuses on the music of the film, which they argue played a significant role in helping the viewer interpret what was happening on screen.

When reading the book, one is able to linger over pages to gather a greater sense of each page and its implication, whereas in the film, the music is needed to help guide the view because this slow perusal is not afforded by the film format. They argue that music gives subconscious clues to the viewer that explain details that are only seen quickly on screen; music also helps guide emotional response as well as the story's tone.

Golnar Nabizadeh (2014) focuses heavily on the visual aspects of *The Arrival*. She explores the mixed style of photographic surrealism that Tan employs. She argues that this mixed element style displays the vast differences in immigrant stories. The photographic reality of the illustration makes the reader understand that these stories could be true, while the surreal factors drive home the terror and confusion that someone entering a new country feels.

Reader Response studies provide insight into the literacy aspects of reading non-linear or less straightforward picturebooks. These studies allow the readers, often children, to think critically about what each page means. However, these studies are more focused on the act of reading, and less on an analysis of how the interplay of literary and structural elements convey social content. That is, the descriptions of pages are related to how they are understood by readers to exhibit their comprehension of the page, and less analysis is focused on how the format, content and linguistic elements work together in the books.

2.5 Critical and scholarly work on Shaun Tan's books – textual focus

Critics have also conducted research on the content and themes of Tan's books, and examined them through theoretical lenses. Martin Blok Johansen (2015) takes *The Red Tree* out of the educational, linguistic, and literary disciplines that are home to most picturebook analysis, and examines how the book depicts Kierkegaard's concept of existentialism. The narrator of *The Red Tree* goes through the process of becoming herself throughout the book. Blok Johansen notes that Kierkegaard's concept helps to better understand Tan's book, but the picturebook itself allows for easier understanding of the complex and abstract concept of depression. Dianne McGlasson (2013) also elevates *The Rabbits* by exploring it through the lens of post-colonialism and Kristeva's theory of abjection. McGlasson argues, much like Blok Johansen and *The Red Tree*, that *The Rabbits* is able to explain and demonstrate complex theoretical ideas through its storytelling methods. Bidisha Banerjee (2013) also explores *The Rabbits* through a postcolonial lens and argues that the pages themselves act as "contact zones" (a social space where cultures who are at odds with each other must meet, combat and find their place). Banerjee pays close attention to the page and the tension that is created between the text and illustration, but stops short of looking at the space between the words and pictures and the ironies that lie between. Banerjee instead focuses solely on how the words and illustrations oppose each other and how this opposition morphs throughout the book. Banerjee also contends that Tan's artwork completely alters the picturebook and

takes it in a very strange direction, giving a lot of the power of the storytelling to Tan instead of Marsden who wrote the words of the book. Lien Devos (2011) examines Tan's entire body of work to focus on the idea of "postmodernity" in the work. Devos takes Lewis' indicators of a postmodernity, "indeterminacy, fragmentation, hybridization, decanonation, and an extreme sense of irony," and challenges the idea that everything abnormal can be seen as postmodern by using Tan's surreal drawings (2011, p. 18). These three studies point to the complexity within the content of Tan's picturebooks, and provide arguments and examples of how and why Tan's work should be studied seriously and in a cross-disciplinary way.

Tan's *The Lost Thing* is the text that has been examined primarily by literary scholars. The more traditional picturebook format – full sentence narration with framed illustrations that depict the story – offers readings that can easily lend themselves to literary theoretical analysis. Nicole Markotić (2014) argues that the book is a tale of disability. Not only is the titular Thing a disabled being, but Markotić also reviews the way in which the government of the story wishes to handle "things." She reads the story as a tale that asks its readers to think about the treatment of disabled persons. David Rudd (2010) views the story in a similar vein, using the idea of "belonging" in the text. The search for Utopia in the text is the search for a place where the Thing belongs. Debra Dudek (2005) focuses on the idea (and actual location of) Utopia in the text. She dives deeper into Utopian theory and looks at complex ideas such as the hybrid body, which becomes a

metaphor for the book itself, mixing words and pictures. These studies, while insightful, focus on a single text and a single way to read each text. A different approach, and the one undertaken in this thesis, is to examine a story's literary and structural elements (content, format and linguistic elements) and how the stories lend themselves to multiple readings, as well as complex analysis and comparison between the texts.

Rosemary Ross Johnston shifts the focus of the study of *The Arrival* from the visual to the linguistic elements. The article explores the dense history of language, the power of pictures, and Bakhtinian theory to produce chronotope as a semiotic tool of analysis of the immigrant's experience. Ross Johnston displays some of the most groundbreaking work on *The Arrival* as most scholars skate over the linguistic elements, as it is technically a wordless picturebook. She remarks on language's ability to be exclusive as one of the most important things the reader can take from the book, which draws them nearer to the immigrant protagonist at the centre of the story.

While all of these critics do explore some of the literary aspects of the books that they studied, none have gone into in-depth examination of the formats employed by Tan, the way that the words and pictures interact, or the way in which the book acts as a whole.

While significant work has already been done on Tan, much of the work can be slotted into three categories: focus on the reader (response and engagement), focus on the metalinguistic (using the texts to explore language

itself), and focus on the content (text and illustration). These are quite dense categories of course, and one can delve deeply into any single one. However, this study will explore each book as a whole, investigating what the format brings to the table, how that interacts with the content, and what literary aspects Tan uses to tell his story in order to allow for the widest range of interpretation. When dealing with and exploring the social issues at the core of *The Red Tree*, *The Arrival*, and *The Rabbits*, I argue that it is important to see the way that all three of these aspects work together to create the book as a whole, and how they express their social message to the reader.

2.6 Social Issues

Certain topics can be very difficult to broach with children. When dealing with death, war, depression, or even same sex or single parent families, scholars have long been studying the way in which picturebooks can potentially affect children's learning in relation to these topics. While this study does not focus on readers, the importance of social issue picturebooks does lie with the child reader and how they can engage with these books. I will not focus on how a child reads, but how the content engages the imagined child reader. I argue the importance of this engagement in this section. One of the most significant concepts to explain why this literature is important is the mirror/window theory. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990/2015) explains,

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass

doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (n.p.)

Young students are limited to their own experiences, which are limited to their social world. The school a child attends, the diversity of one's family, and the openness of one's parents can all either restrict or open up opportunities for young children to broaden their perspectives. When a book is complex and well made, it can serve as either a mirror, showing one's place in society, or a window, expanding the reader's understanding of the rest of the world.

Books based on serious topics can also play this window/mirror role. Susie Bargiel et al (1997) calls these books "issue books" (p. 483) and argues that picturebooks help teachers guide students through difficult topics. While it is possible for children to grasp these concepts on their own, the enrichment brought by the guidance of a teacher is a running theme through all of the articles in the studies discussed below.

Many academics have studied the way that children understand and approach "issue books". Kay Chick (2008) explores the way in which the developmental stages shape understanding of these books for children. She

suggests that when selecting books for children under five years of age, one must base the selection on the child's current developmental stage in order to ensure the best level of comprehension (p.17). Nikolajeva (2012) expands upon these ideas by looking at cognitive factors in play when children approach a text. She argues that words have the power to describe feelings that children may not have experienced yet (p. 280). Illustrations give access to emotions and situations that children may not have experienced, giving them the subject of the illustration as their focal point to try and empathize with. In extension of this I argue that many issue books deal with concepts that are new to children, so allowing the child reader a place to enter the text through illustration ensures a greater chance of understanding.

Historical fiction is often studied as a separate genre of issue books, but shares many of the same concerns of scholars and outcomes from readers. Frank Serafini and Suzette Youngs (2011) and Youngs (2012) discuss the way historical fiction can assist children's learning process. They argue that it is not only important to learn about the past, but also that historical fiction helps develop a series of skills in child readers starting with noticing (within the pictures), followed by interpreting those things that they have noticed, and finally critical thinking about what is happening in the book (p. 117-122). They argue that historical fiction allows children access, through language and empathy, to difficult topics such as war, the holocaust and internment camps.

Most interestingly and useful for this thesis, Kathleen O'Neil (2010) argues that children's literature acts as cultural reproduction and that postmodern picturebooks in particular expose readers to alternate points of view, which in turn makes them think about stereotypes and shows how they are hurtful, and gives children the ability to change the way they view the world, and hopefully how the world views others (p. 44-50). In short, it could be argued that postmodern, issue-based picturebooks can encourage readers to be more socially conscious and better world citizens. Such books have the potential to help readers understand the way that others live and empathize with them. Again, this study will primarily focus on the content of these books and their potential to engage readers rather than focusing on the readers themselves.

2.7 Purpose of this study

Gaps remain in the scholarship on Shaun Tan's books as postmodern, issue-based picturebooks. Shaun Tan is an author who has been well studied, but the study of his work has not fully taken into account the way in which the format, content and linguistic elements in his books afford effective representation of complex social issues. Tan changes his style of storytelling in almost every book, and the choices that he makes in format are just as important as, and informed by, the subject of his books. Much of the research on both "issue books" and on Shaun Tan's work focus on the reader response aspect – primarily addressing his books in the hands of young readers. However, Shaun Tan's work and the topics he discusses transcend a specific audience. I argue

for examining a number of interrelated aspects that Tan uses in a single text, while understanding the way that each text relates to, and is different from, his other work.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Book Selection Criteria

I knew that for this study I wanted to study an author/illustrator who has not only worked alone, but also with another author. It was important that whomever I studied was the illustrator of all of the books I chose, as the illustrations will be the main focus of my analysis (due to a heavy focus on Lewis' "picturing" (2001, p.66), along with how they interact with the text and format. It was important to find someone who had a good sense of all aspects of the page. I also wanted to choose an illustrator who uses a wide array of styles so that I could choose at least three books that are each different in format and style. Finally the chosen author would need to be someone who broaches complex social issues in their work. With all of these criteria in mind, I selected Shaun Tan. I have been a fan of Tan's work for a number of years, ever since I was given a copy of *The Red Tree*.

Tan has illustrated eleven works.. Narrowing the selection of titles from Tan's publications for this thesis has been difficult, but in order to meet all of my criteria I have selected: *The Rabbits*, a collaboration between Tan and John Marsden that explores colonialism in Australia; *The Red Tree*, a high concept picturebook that discusses depression; and *The Arrival*, a wordless graphic novel that shows the reality and difficulties of immigration.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Four frameworks guide my close readings of the three selected Tan titles. I use David Lewis' (2001) "Picturebooks as Process" theory in order to read each page that I have selected for close reading, and Lewis' "ecological" (2001) framework to discuss the books as a whole. While other critical lenses that are available are of significant value in picturebook scholarship, Lewis' process and ecological perspective allow for more flexibility when discussing the book as a whole, which is needed in this study. The "process" method pushes past the ideas of symmetry (words and pictures are the same), deviation (words and pictures are different), and counterpoint (words and pictures tell different stories) and explores the page as a whole without looking to fit it into a specific category. It is built upon the foundation of his ecological theory, which also eschews categorization. The ecological framework builds upon the book as a whole whereas the process framework helps in analyzing each page. Lewis (2001) says,

a picturebook does not always maintain the same relationship between word and image throughout. This is why it is, in the end, hard to fit picturebooks into simple, formal categories with any degree of certainty or accuracy. From the point of view of the picturebook as ecosystem, it simply means that the relationship between organisms and environment, word and image, has momentarily shifted. (pg. 49)

The openness of this framework is helpful when dealing with books that change as much from page to page as those by Shaun Tan; however, it is not as useful when looking directly at the page for “close reading” (e.g., Nodelman). For that reason, I also use a process framework to guide my analysis of the page.

I find that when using a method of analysis that includes a predetermined list of attributes to explore, it is easy to miss small details such as paratext, page design, textual art, and illustration style. Seeing the picturebook page as a process allows one to look at all of the pieces of a page and imagine the page as “picturing text.” In Lewis’ words: “the very presence of pictures appears to loosen generic constraints and open up the text to alternative ways of looking and thinking” (Lewis, 2001, p. 66). This “picturing” of a page places the words of the page as a secondary partner in the equation, but allows for more playfulness and freedom when looking at illustrations. The picture takes on the role of enhancing the words. The text is not completely ignored, however, in the process framework, and use of “double orientation” allows me to think about words and illustrations together:

one of the reasons why pictorialization – the promiscuous mixing together of words and images – is able to shake loose generic bonds and derail expectations, is that it enables the picturebook to look in two directions at once and sometimes permits picturebook makers to play off one perspective or view against the other. (Lewis, 2001, p. 68)

Unlike “picturing” which places the emphasis on the illustration, double orientation looks at both aspects at the same time in order to explore their relationship and see what is only identifiable when read together. Lewis suggests moving away from using categories such as symmetry and deviation when discussing picturebooks. He admits that the irony between pictures and texts exists, but, he believes, due to the ever-changing nature of the picturebook, there is no way to limit the number of defined types of interactions between words and image. Double orientation also looks at what is unsaid in words, which is especially important in complex books like those of Tan, where so much of the story happens somewhere between the illustrations and the words. This open approach to analysis is useful when examining the format of a picturebook because many aspects come into play on the page that can have an effect on the issue being discussed. It also allows the content to breathe and the reader to analyze without a prescribed set of clues to look for. Instead, the reader can focus on the process of picturing on the page, which gives way to looking at the role that linguistic elements play on the page. Rather than drawing pre-described conclusions based on the relationships between the pictures and words, my use of the process approach allows me to focus on the features of each page that are pertinent to this study.

Secondly, I will use Kathleen O’Neil’s (2010) theory that postmodern picturebooks potentially expand the reader’s sense of social justice. This theory rests upon the window/mirror theory developed by Sims Bishop (1990), and

explores what occurs in the child reader when reading a book that introduces completely new concepts (a window book). I will mostly be considering the ways in which Tan's books speak to the outsider, since so much of the research that has been done on Tan, and especially on *The Arrival*, appears to focus on the insider (a mirror book) – one who approaches a social issue from a perspective of personal experience. These books present complex topics, and a person who is aware of, or experiencing, depression will possibly approach *The Red Tree* differently than a person who has no experience with mental illness – an outsider. For these readers, I will then look at the ways in which the format of the book potentially guides “outsiders” (or those who would view the ideas through Sims Bishop's (1990) “window”), and how content and linguistic elements introduce alternate points of view, and suggest particular interpretations, related to complex social issues.

The findings chapter consists of three sections per book: Format, Content, and Linguistic Elements. The “format” analysis looks at aspects of structure of the individual page, such as comic book style, framed illustration, word placement as well as other structural aspects of the book as a whole, and structural aspects of pages in relation to the rest of the book. The “content” analysis delves into the story itself. This section will cover the progression of the character's journey and other narrative aspects of the story that help address the social issue at the core of each book. Finally, the “linguistic elements” analysis takes examples of both Lewis' “picturing” and “double orientation” to examine the ways in which these

aspects are used in each of the books studied. The “linguistic elements” section touches on both format and content, but focuses mainly on the ways in which Tan manipulates common picturebook practices to accomplish his goals. Each book has a very different combination of style, content, and structure that speaks to the social issue being addressed within the book, and each aspect of format, content, and linguistic elements plays a major role in the communication of those social issues.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 *The Arrival*

4.1.1 Introduction

The Arrival tells the story of an unnamed adult protagonist who leaves his family and home country to find a better life in what feels like a completely new world. In this wordless book, Tan tells the protagonist's story of immigration without the use of readable language, and instead employs symbols as an unknowable alphabet and language to place readers in the shoes of the protagonist, disorienting them in the same ways that the protagonist is disoriented by his surroundings. The illustrations are drawn in sepia pencil sketches and arranged in a mostly comic book form, which has the effect of making the story feel like a tale emanating from an old family photo album. The book uses chapter progressions to show the protagonist's progress in his new country as he struggles to understand his new surroundings, find food, a home and work, and even friends who make him feel more at home. Eventually he is able to send for his family to join him in his new country and the story ends with the protagonist's daughter helping another newly arrived girl. Although Tan is world renowned, he is very popular in western countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and The United States of America, countries to which more people immigrate than emigrate from. This book is a means of showing a western audience why one would immigrate, what immigrants are looking for, and what it costs to do so.

Tan tells the protagonist's deeply emotional and trying story through realistic illustrations of extremely surreal surroundings, which invite the reader to feel just as at odds and lost within the new location as the protagonist. He peppers the story with different flashbacks from characters that the protagonist meets that explain the reasons and genesis behind their arrival in this shared new country. Each story is equally as tragic and terrifying as the protagonist's own story, and all are allegories for real historical and contemporary events taking place within the world, including war, starvation and genocide. Tan also uses slight variations on universally recognizable landmarks, such as the statue of liberty (2011, p. 12) to help orient the reader, but never gives them a completely straightforward context. Although *The Arrival* has no readable language, the book has a complex visual ecosystem, as described by Lewis, that allows the reader to walk in the shoes of the protagonist on his journey through his new world. Without the anchor of text, *The Arrival* asks the reader to pay attention to every detail on the page, in order to understand exactly what is going on. The book also invites the reader to slow down in order to decode what is happening in each chapter. Because it is a "wordless" picturebook⁴, the ecology that is found within is quite different from picturebooks that have text and illustrations. I will limit my analysis to three main double page spreads in order to give detailed analysis.

⁴ I will continue to call *The Arrival* a wordless picturebook, even though there is an alien language in it, as it is an invented and unreadable language. For the purpose of study it is seen as a wordless book as the words serve mainly as symbols of unknowability instead of text that can be analyzed as part of the story.

4.1.2 Format

As explained previously, *The Arrival* uses comic book panel style and sepia colouring. The mix of these two aspects, as well as the endpapers, gives it the overall feeling of a family photo album. The endpapers show small portraits of people of many cultures, similar to passport photos showing close ups of subjects unsmiling faces. These aspects speak to the core themes of the book: family and immigration. These style choices evoke the immigrant experience, and allow entrance into the mind of an immigrant, which many readers may either know personally, or they may know someone who has had this experience. *The Arrival* uses this format quite deftly to guide the reader to empathize with the protagonist in the story by keeping a very focused point of view.

The majority of the illustrations present the protagonist's point of view to the reader, following his actions, memories, or observations. This allows the reader to see not only what the protagonist is engaged in, but what he is seeing and focusing on, providing insight into his feelings. For instance, on page 23⁵ the protagonist has finally made his way through the bureaucracy of entering a new country, and has found shelter. The verso⁶ of the double page spread is made up of a series of framed illustrations that depict small actions. He has already encountered a small pet-like creature whose actions resemble that of a dog while its physical attributes are completely surreal. The protagonist brings the small

⁵ Because the pages of this book are unnumbered, I began counting double page spreads beginning with the page marked "I" as the first spread. I will be mostly discussing double page spreads, so I am numbering them as such one would for a standard picturebook.

⁶ The left-hand page of a double page spread

companion with him to his room and opens his suitcase. Inside, instead of his clothes, he sees his most prominent thought: his daughter and wife sitting at the table with the imposing monster of his home country lurking visibly in the window behind them. His first act in his new room is to place the picture of his family on the wall. He does not have any tools or supplies, so he uses his shoe to nail the picture into the wall. On the recto⁷, however, the panels showcase his fear and contemplation. The top three panels are close-ups of both his wife's and daughter's faces from the small photograph, and then his memory of his final moment with them. These pictorial vignettes serve to provide insight into the innermost desire and sadness of the protagonist, as well as his intentions. Everything that he is undertaking is for his family, though in doing so he has forced himself into solitary conditions where he can only depend on himself.

The remainder of the panels on this page depict the protagonist's solemn position on his bed. Each succeeding panel continues to zoom out as the reader sees the protagonist sit motionless, staring at his photo while his new pet stares at him. The final panel of this page has zoomed out far enough that the reader can see the entire apartment building and realize that there are many people in the protagonist's building trying to make better lives for themselves. The verso's small panels capture nine different small moments that make up the protagonist's first evening in his new home. This focus on small moments in the comic book format reveals the intentions and thoughts of the protagonist, and shows the

⁷ The right-hand page of a double page spread

tragic reality of being completely alone and isolated in a new place while still surrounded by other people, due to the protagonist's inability to connect with his neighbours, which is either self-imposed or more problematic, such as language barriers. The only thing that the protagonist has in this new world is himself, his strength and his memories of his family. He must build on these to create his new life so that he can finally reunite with his loved ones. The wordlessness and surreal setting of *The Arrival* calls for full attention to every panel to discern every action and learn the new world's system along with the protagonist. These multiple panels effectively invoke the feeling of being lost and the overwhelming experience of a new society.

The wordless nature of the book positions the reader as an outsider, along with the protagonist. Everything in the world of the protagonist, in both his old country and new, is surreal. Simple tasks such as purchasing bread, putting up posters, and even the foods he eats are as alien to the protagonist as they are to the reader. This wordless format functions as an issue book because it invites readers to take the perspective of the protagonist who has made the difficult choice to uproot his life, and to understand what has motivated him to do so.

4.1.3 Content

Because there are no words in *The Arrival*, all of the story's content and expression is conveyed through illustration. Tan walks a fine line between portraying the complete unknown to invoke the feeling of displacement that the

protagonist feels throughout, and providing more familiar markers that help the reader have some sort of inkling as to what is going on in each panel.

If Tan were to make every visual feature in each panel unknowable throughout the book, it would be more difficult for readers to orient themselves in the story. Typically, words would act as anchors for the reader, but instead, Tan uses small, recognizable symbols throughout the book to give a sense of real-world associations through familiar iconography. When entering the new country on the boat, the protagonist sees a large statue— suggestive of the Statue of Liberty—welcoming newly immigrated citizens to a place that evokes Ellis Island (Tan, 2011, p.12). This sense of hope and wonder for a new life echoes Western society’s mythology of the United States of America as the “land of opportunity.” The protagonist also arrives by boat, giving the story a slightly older or historical atmosphere.

The Arrival taps into the hope and wonder of the early turn of the twentieth century immigrant, as well as the multitudes of challenges that they may have faced. The book also focuses solely on the story of immigrants and their former lives to show what they are leaving behind and what it costs them to do so. The story has three other flashbacks to show the previous lives of three immigrants that the protagonist meets in his journey. Each story is different, but the emotions of hopelessness and fear are shared among them. Each of these stories shows the different reasons behind each person’s decision to come to the new country, and what they left behind. The illustrations of the protagonist's old country show

different but equally upsetting dangers. One striking linguistic aspect that will be discussed further in the next section is the different levels of urgency that each tale communicates. The protagonist was able to leave his home and take the time to set up a new one, whereas one couple had to escape in the dead of night, and one old man came back from war to find literally nothing left for him. Each character had a strong motivation to make a change in their lives, but the levels of urgency with which they decided to do so are completely different. The beautiful part of each of the tales, however, is that all of these immigrants come with one shared emotion and goal, which is the hope for a better life.

Tan also uses an organized set of symbols and familiar tasks as a way to show the organization of the society in the new country. When the protagonist first arrives, he undergoes a barrage of medical tests. Although none of the procedures are recognizable as real procedures in medicine, it is easy to tell by the poking and prodding of a beyond the page official that they are checking the protagonist medically. The idea of being examined by doctors is a universal symbol that helps bring the reader closer to the protagonist. The invasion of privacy and the seemingly unending number of tests emphasize how uncomfortable these procedures are for the protagonist. They also help reveal what type of society the man is entering. He has joined a bureaucratic society, which is conveyed by the market scene where numerous small doors are covered with small symbols. These symbols act as the alphabet in the new country, but do not co-relate to anything. As discussed earlier, it is up to the

protagonist to draw replicas of the things that he desires, because he is unable to decode the written language of his new country. These unknown symbols are another method to guide the reader outside the narrative. It is easy to decipher that what one is seeing is in fact a symbol, but it is a foreign language, and one that doesn't even share the Roman alphabet that so many readers are used to seeing. This leaves the reader and the protagonist at a similar disadvantage when trying to decode the messages left everywhere by this bureaucratic society. Perhaps if language weren't such an important factor within this society, then the protagonist and the reader wouldn't be pushed so far outside it. However, everything in this new world runs on its written language, and it is up to protagonist to steer through these murky waters to try and find comfort, and meaning in his new life.

By using more recognizable aspects or tropes of the immigration experience, Tan creates the possibility for readers to sympathize with the protagonist. For instance, the protagonist has one suitcase for the bulk of the story, though he does start to amass belongings when he becomes more at home in his new country. He initially lives with only the clothes in his bag and his one item of comfort -- the small photograph of his family. The other comfort items that appear, though in new forms, throughout the book are pets. Many different characters in this world have different types of animals who act as companions or pets. This pet/owner relationship is extremely familiar to most readers, who will understand the type of companionship one may find with a dog-

like creature. The protagonist is greeted with what at first seems like a pest popping out of one of his food jars, but the creature becomes his main companion until his family arrives near the end of the story. The dog creature follows the protagonist throughout the story and the creature even begins performing dog-like duties for him, such as fetching his hat in the morning. Eventually, the reader sees that this relationship with the dog creature is shared by the protagonist's daughter as well, as the dog creature fetches her toque, and it accompanies her at the end of the book much like it did earlier for the protagonist.

The final chapter of the book illustrates a child's ability to adapt to new surroundings as expressed through the perspective of the protagonist's daughter. The brief final chapter follows the daughter's mission to get food from the market. Paralleling and contrasting her father's disastrous early attempts to purchase the right foods and navigate the confusing marketplace, the daughter skillfully navigates to find exactly what she needs. At her feet is her dog-creature companion, who has also found a new friend in the daughter. Their relationship mirrors that of the father and the creature, a comparison that the reader sees in a panel in which the creature passes the daughter her hat. Instead of showing panel after panel of the daughter struggling, Tan instead includes one brief chapter illustrating her complete ease in the new country. Not only does this approach comment on children's ability to easily adapt, but it expresses how assimilated the family has become in their new country. The length of time since

the mother and child's arrival is ambiguous, but the story closes with images that assure the reader that the protagonist's family is well. The final page of the book is a full-page depiction of the daughter in new clothes, holding the strange food that she has retrieved from the market, with her pet at her feet, pointing a newly arrived girl with a suitcase and a map in the correct direction. The family's story has come full circle, as she is now one of the people who would have earlier in the story been helping her own father. The story ends with images of love and hope for the family, which is what each of the families coming to the new country had set out to find.

4.1.4 Linguistic Elements

Because *The Arrival* is a wordless picturebook, the linguistic elements of picturing and double orientation at play are difficult to identify. There is symbolism throughout the story, but the symbols, as previously discussed, are meant to represent objects from the real world in order to give the reader some sense of orientation. The "process" theory is difficult to enact in this book, as there is no text from which to build the pictorialization and double orientation. The elements of pictorialization and double orientation are used differently than when illustrations are matched with words. In *The Arrival* these elements are used to show different viewpoints of the picturebook and to round out the story of the protagonist.

4.1.4.1 Picturing

Tan's challenge when "picturing" (Lewis, 2001, p. 67) *The Arrival* is the lack of readable language. Instead of picturing the language, he uses elements of "picturing" to differentiate between the voice of the protagonist and that of others whom he meets along the way. These wordless voices and the stories they tell are what Tan "pictures" instead of the text of the story. He "pictures" each voice differently to show a differentiation between speakers in the book. Even though the book mainly focuses on a single character, the protagonist, there are many different stories that are told to and around him. By paying close attention, the reader can spot differences in the illustrative style that indicate certain events are taking place as almost short stories within the main narrative. The bulk of these short stories are memories told to the protagonist by people he meets in the new country.

Like the protagonist, many of the people that he meets along his journey have terrifying stories of the situations in their home countries that caused them to leave. One of the longer stories starts in sepia tone, and as each page-turn occurs, the story fades closer to black and white as the chances of the storyteller and his wife's survival darken (Tan, 2007, pg. 36). The gutters are filled in with black to show a differentiation from the main narrative, and the style of the illustrated buildings changes completely. The storyteller's tale shows him and his wife as they hide from the giant masked men who are sucking up citizens off the street. In the most interesting double page spread of their tale on page 36 and

37, the reader follows the storyteller and his wife as they find hope in the form of a man with a lantern. The story and visual sensibility becomes progressively lighter and their tale ends with their daring escape, accompanied by a return to sepia tones. When picturing this tale, Tan has carefully chosen narrative moments in order to tell the story effectively in terms of length, tone, and clarity to show that this segment is a memory told to the protagonist, and not a part of the protagonist's journey like the rest of the book. The picturing of these smaller tales is mostly conveyed in actions and does not reflect the various narrators' feelings during their telling, but the reader is often shown exactly what the storyteller was seeing. Because Tan uses many horror elements in these vignettes, such as giant men scanning the city, and the daring escape (Tan, 2007, pg.36), it is easier to discern how the storytellers are feeling without panels dedicated to internal thoughts and memories like those nested within the protagonist's main narrative.

The most interesting facet of the narration on page 36 is that it does not skim over the negative aspects of leaving his home country. He includes his and his wife's incredible fear, and their complete isolation once they returned from hiding underground. When they finally found another person, they did not receive immediate compassion, but instead that person asked for a price to help them escape. This man takes their last possession and gives them a map and a ladder. The storyteller and his wife have no idea if this person is truly helping them, but due to their desperation, they have to believe that it is better than what

is behind them. They give the man the wife's necklace leaving them with just the clothes on their backs for when they hopefully arrive in their new country, and take off into the shadows of the final panel of the double page spread. This portrayal of an illegal escape from a country in turmoil gives the reader a sense of what is actually at stake in a threatening crisis when one is forced to make the difficult decision to leave one's home. The couple in the tale, completely dishevelled by extreme amounts of travel, find themselves at the end of the man's map on pg. 37 and leave in a small rowboat into the water with nothing but clouds in sight. The manner in which Tan draws or "pictures" the storyteller's tale shows the couple's extreme desperation. It is a slightly similar but much more high-pressure situation than that of the protagonist. In this tale, the couple had no ability to wait or save: they had to urgently escape their home country or face death. Tan reveals many different aspects of their story through small visual clues. There is something different about the man who is willing to stay and make money to help others escape as he has a complete plan to get out of the country but instead decides to lurk in the shadows. Tan doesn't draw the couple and the man as racially different, but lighting expresses the ominousness of the man selling the map. Shadowing on his face hints that perhaps he cannot be trusted. The extreme devastation and how quickly the giants were able to destroy the storyteller's town also suggest the urgency with which the storyteller and his wife needed to leave.

After the couple's tale ends, Tan then takes the next few double page spreads to show the parallels between their and the protagonist's new life. On page 37r the protagonist takes a boat (across the page from the storyteller and his wife) with the storyteller and his son to their new home and new life. The rest of the chapter is spent with this family in warm sepia tones. All of their remaining panels are brightly lit and rich with joy. All of the characters are laughing, celebrating and even playing music. Tan uses side-by-side comparison to show the ways in which their lives have changed, but does not allow the reader to forget the origins of the storyteller and his wife. On Page 38r the storyteller uses a cooking mechanism that looks quite a bit like the same machine that he and his wife were running from just pages earlier. The trauma of their old life is almost completely forgotten as they share a meal and joke with their new friend.

4.1.4.2 Double Orientation

Due to the comic book format and the book's wordless nature, double orientation functions through characters on the page instead of through words and illustrations. The protagonist's journey through his new country is the primary story of *The Arrival*, but the people he meets along the way are just as significant to the story. Tan uses double orientation to evoke the way that the protagonist and the surrounding characters experience the same moment.

At the outset the protagonist runs into many problems stemming from misunderstandings; as the narrative progresses, though, he is able to find other immigrants who understand his feeling of confusion and help him along his way.

Page 31r shows the protagonist moving about a market looking at different shops. He doesn't recognize the system through which the people of the market purchase foods. There are shelves that line the market and the inhabitants of the new society pull out drawers of goods based on what the symbol of each drawer. Of course, because the protagonist doesn't speak the new language, he is unable to easily navigate the market. He uses his notebook to translate the symbols and uses pictures to show himself what each word means. This small detail, along with his system of communication with his daughter through origami swans, suggests that the man may not be literate, which creates new problems in his new society. The verso side of page 38 shows the complementary, mirrored orientation. A small boy and his father see the man's confusion when he finds a strawberry-like piece of fruit instead of the bread for which he is desperately searching. The father and boy, immigrants themselves, show the protagonist around and introduce him to the bread of this new country. The boy then gives the protagonist a basket in which to place his purchases. They speak and the recognition of shared immigrant experiences leads the father to invite the protagonist back to their house. This style of double orientation is very effective in *The Arrival* because it highlights that there are many people in the new country. While the reader is busy following the protagonist, it is sometimes easy to lose track of all of the other people that are in the same city. This double orientation allows the reader to gain insight into two different ways of experiencing the market. While the market is an extension of the confusion felt by the protagonist,

it conversely represents a happy place for the father and son. They contentedly gather their needed supplies together and are kind enough to pass on their joy of food to the protagonist. These small interactions that the protagonist has with people allow him to build a sense of home throughout the book, and it is through double orientation spreads that the reader is given insight into the feelings of the other characters in the book.

4.1.5 Summary of Findings for *The Arrival*

Tan takes up the immigrant story and gives it a depth and heart that could not be achieved without the book's surreal setting and absence of language. The fear and confusion felt by the protagonist and mirrored by the reader is a result of using images without words. The format encourages close observation. The portrayal of fear and confusion becomes palpable to readers, and tells a valuable story about not only the difficulties and challenges of immigration, but also the serious consequences of inability to flee from intolerable conditions in one's home country. Through his application of multiple perspectives, Tan also succeeds in the portrayal of the hope, love and moments of happiness that immigrants can experience along the way.

Tan uses familiar markers as a means to help guide the reader through the new land, and the book asks for careful attention in order to decode the story. Tan changes the way "picturing" and "double orientation" are used to striking effect in his tale of a man's immigration to a new country. The various aspects of this book work together to place the reader in the protagonist's shoes and show

what it is like to have and understand nothing. The book tries to produce, as best it can, empathy through a richly illustrated wordless format that portrays compelling tragic stories.

4.2 *The Rabbits*

4.2.1 Introduction

The Rabbits tells the story of the colonization of the numbats' land by the titular characters. The words of the picturebook are written by John Marsden with illustrations by Shaun Tan. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, the book fits more closely into Tan's aesthetic than Marsden's due to the style of illustration. The words and illustrations play off of each other to show the disconnection between the numbats and the rabbits on the same land. The illustrations are drawn in bright colours and in the surreal style for which Tan is known.

The book presents the rabbit's history in the country from their arrival, to their alteration of the landscape, and their eventual destruction of it. Though the story is meant as a metaphor for the colonization of Australia, and its effect through history for both Aboriginal and settler society, the book can be read as a metaphor for the experience of many colonized countries, including Canada.

Colonization has deep and lasting effects on people, especially those displaced from their homelands. The numbats, who represent the aboriginals of Australia, spend the book trying their best to understand the ways of the rabbits, who represent the British, while continuing to try and maintain their culture. This attempt at connection is one-sided, as the rabbits view the numbats as more of a

commodity than another group of people with whom to communicate and learn from.

4.2.2 Format

The Rabbits is the most conventional of the picturebooks examined in this thesis. Of the three books, this is the most like the typical (or traditional) picturebook. The text is narrative driven, the illustrations are easily correlated to the text, and there is a clear progression of a story. Tan uses these conventional means in order to further the story. Because it so closely relates to what one is used to from picturebooks, every deviation becomes commentary on the message of the book.

The book has a strong division between text and illustration. Marsden's text belongs solely to the numbats as they narrate their history. The story is told in style of an oral history story and does not dwell on emotions but states facts in a quite poetic manner. Although the illustrations also show the lives of the numbats, their representation on the page diminishes as the narrative progresses. The first two double page spreads focus primarily on the sky, representing the vastness of the world that the numbats inhabit. On the second page, a very tiny smoke stack can be seen heralding the arrival of the rabbits. The first page that actually focuses on the rabbits shifts the viewpoint entirely where the earth takes up 90% of the page and the sky only a tenth. The rabbits are interested in neither the beauty of the territory nor its history, but only in the

commodities that can be found there. There is also a long black skid mark across the pristine ground foreshadowing the way the rabbits will treat this land.

The richly colourful illustrations shift in tone to represent the more drab scientific views of the rabbits. They come bearing all sorts of gadgets with which to understand the new country, and it originally appears as if they are trying to work with the numbats. It becomes clear by the second rabbit-dominated page that the rabbits do not intend to learn anything from the numbats, but instead are going to try and find a way to fit them into the rabbit way of life. From this point forward, the numbats take up less and less space in each illustration, even though the text is still from their point of view. This is still the numbats' story, but the rabbits no longer allow them to tell it or live it as they once could.

Tan employs a number of illustrative techniques to show the impact of the rabbits. He uses an overlay on illustrations, demonstrated on the spread of page 7, to show not only what the rabbits are currently doing to the land, but the way that the land will look in the future. The three quarters of the page on the left show the rabbits as farmers, feeding livestock on the fresh grass and hauling all sorts of commodities, whereas the right quarter shows the same land in the future, completely barren with a dried up lake filled with dead fish and animal tracks over the brown dirt where grass once was. In this spread, the numbats occupy a small portion of the barren overlay. They are the ones affected by this deserted land that the rabbits have destroyed. Their traditional land no longer exists, but they also have nowhere else to turn.

Another technique employed by Tan is the re-creation of famous historical photographs. These illustrations depict a surreal version of real fights that occurred in Australia between the Aboriginals and the English. The sepia illustrations accentuate the complete disadvantage that the numbats have in their fight against the rabbits, contrasting the numbats' rocks and spears against the rabbits' machine-operated guns. The most disturbing of these photographic recreations lies alone on page 10. The spread is again dramatically with the land taking up the majority of the page. The top 10% of the page shows the innumerable flags that the rabbits have planted to demonstrate their claim to the land while the bottom 90% goes beneath the earth to reveal generations and generations of numbat bones. At the very bottom of this graveyard Tan has placed a single sepia photograph showing a rabbit auctioning off four faceless numbat slaves. This photograph is one of the best examples in the book of the tragedy of colonialism and the conflict when dealing with "claim" to land. While the book shows many atrocities perpetrated on the numbats, this page represents the rich history of the numbats, via the countless generations that have come before shown beneath the earth, and the ways in which the rabbits humiliate and dehumanize them.

The complex formatting that Tan uses to suggest the divide between the rabbits and the numbats is paramount in explaining the basics of colonialism. The division of the animals and how they think, and the attitudes of greed represented by the rabbits are clearly captured in the illustrations. The voice of

this story is given to the numbats, because in Australia, and so many colonized countries, the focus and the stories from history do not come from the “numbats” or Aboriginals/First Nations but from the “rabbits” or colonizers. This story acts as a means to rectify the silencing that started hundreds of years ago, but as is so often the case, the colonizers/rabbits take over the story as they do the land showing the complexity of colonization to the audience.

4.2.3 Content

As discussed in the previous section, Tan is working between two opposing cultures within the illustrations. While the text conveys the brunt of the disconnection felt by the numbats, the illustrations continue to showcase their lives throughout history, and the manner in which they are forced to the edges of their own land.

Tan showcases these differences primarily by presenting the seemingly simple way of the numbats compared to the overly systematic ways of the rabbits. In their first encounter, the rabbits hand a spear-carrying numbat a cog for a machine. This is possibly seen as a diplomatic gift by the rabbits, but the reader can see the single gear is quite useless to someone who does not understand machinery. The rabbits’ mechanized lifestyle mars and chips away at the numbats’ country throughout the book, and on the double page spread of page 6 Tan shows a major difference between the two species. Tan dedicates the top 10% of the page to the numbats. They explain “They didn’t live in trees like we did...they made their own houses. We couldn’t understand the way they

talked” (Tan and Marsden, 2011, pg. 6). In their section of the page, the numbats rest upon tree limbs without any additional shelter. In the rabbits’ section of the page they build large structures that look like soulless institutional structures. Their uniformity is furthered by Tan’s illustration of how they are built. Slave or lesser rabbits (as shown by the numbers on their outfits), haul puzzle pieces up onto the building similar to the slaves building the pyramids of Egypt, without the grandiose beauty of the final structure. The plans for these buildings are shown on a large bordered board with wheels that have crushed a lizard. This lizard seems like a small piece, but is indicative of the entire rabbit way of life, without even trying or noticing, this large-scale project destroys yet another piece of the numbat country.

The social structure of the rabbits is also built around an extreme level of detail. Each rabbit on page 6 is assigned a number. Based on the number, one is able to tell that rabbit’s place in society. On a single page there are prisoners, those with higher numbers like 24 and 18, an unnumbered soldier and communications officer who is covered in numbers and relays messages from the executive rabbits 1 and 2. The higher a rabbit’s number the more mechanized they become. The prisoners work with heavy equipment, and the soldier holds his gun while the communications officer is connected to a telephone system that helps him discuss with the executives, although they are a few feet away. Most interestingly, however, are the executives. They are so high in this systematic

society that their feet are actually wheels. These are not the only wheeled feet that appear in the book, but it is rare to see them on rabbits and not commodities.

Eventually the rabbits' needs shift and they begin to view the numbats as commodities. As discussed in the previous sections, the numbats try to fight the rabbits and lose. The rabbits then capture the numbats for slavery. Even more horrifying on the double page spread of page 12, the rabbits sign four decrees that make up the four words of the page "and stole our children" (Tan and Marsden, 2001, pg. 12) in red ink that drips like blood. The rabbits take the forefront of the page and are the visual focal points even though there are only four of them and countless numbats on the page. The numbat children float away on kites behind blimps as their parents desperately reach towards the sky. The blue sky is dotted with hundreds of white kites and the final page of the decree displaying the word children blows away in the breeze along with an entire generation of numbats. Each page of the decree shows a loopy signature and a thumbprint. Tan hints at the difference of literacy between textual and oral cultures with the single illustration, and the imbalance of power that it creates allowing the rabbits to draft complicated documents and have the numbats sign away basic rights and land, and even their own children.

The rabbits' literate society is used to hurt and trick the numbats. Because the numbats are only able to sign the rabbits' contract with a thumb print (filling in of course for an X), the rabbits are able to do or say whatever it takes in order to separate the children from their parents. This very dramatic and poetic display of

a system where the colonizer effectively kidnaps children from aboriginal groups allows the brutality of the act, without the feigned interest in a child's wellbeing to muddy the action. The rabbits are indeed signing away the lives of these numbat children as is seen in the following pages that display the modern rabbit society.

By the double page spread of page 13, the complete and total annihilation of the numbat society has occurred. The drab rabbit city marked by numerous clocks and soulless identical structures is all that can be seen through the smog. The blue sky and clouds are sucked into a large tube above the city hinting that this clean sky is used as an energy source to power the city with no colour being left in the drab city. Rabbits walk around ambivalent to their dreary surroundings, many wearing masks to hide their faces from those around them. There are small, tiny cracks in the system that can be seen. One small rabbit holding a protest sign that says "think," graffiti, and alcohol abuse stain the eerily manicured citizens of the drab rabbit society. The only place where numbats exist in this city is on the streets drinking and living in boxes. There is not a single numbat who is walking among the rabbits fitting into the new society.

The cost of the rabbit society is bleak and dramatic. Vile sludge billows out of the back of the rabbit city with one small numbat curled up to the ground, much like its ancestors looked below the ground a few pages earlier, taking in its new surroundings. Gone are the colours and the beauty of the numbat country as they are introduced at the beginning of the book. All that is left is sludge and garbage. The final page of the book is a cry for help. A young numbat and rabbit sit looking

into a small puddle of water and wonder “who will save us from the rabbits” (Tan and Marsden, 2011, pg. 16). This is a key passage because it shows that it is not just the numbats that need to be saved from the rabbits, but the rabbits themselves. They are no longer living in a way that is sustainable. When they arrived to the numbats’ land they had endless resources, but in the illustrations later in the book, these natural resources seem to have been used up. How can the rabbit city survive when there is no more blue cloud to suck up? Behind rabbit city there is no more colour of any kind, meaning no resources remain for them to plunder.

The question “who will save us from the rabbits” is an important one. Marsden doesn’t end his narrative on a pessimistic note, wondering if salvation is even possible, but instead says it is possible, but someone must first step up. Through the illustrations, the reader can intuit that Tan everyone is suffering based on the actions of the rabbits. The suggestion is that people can no longer live in their rabbit cities, but need to employ new methods of life that respect the earth and each other.

4.2.4 Linguistic Elements

4.2.4.1 Double Orientation

Many of the pages in *The Rabbits* pages use double orientation in multiple ways. Tan not only uses the style of double orientation discussed by Lewis between the words and the illustrations, but also creates multiple vignettes on a single page in order to show different double orientations that represent time and

emotion. The passage of time is shown in the dual illustrations. The primary example of this takes place on page 7. The page is split into two sections: a look at when the rabbits first arrive and what they bring with them on the verso side, and in the furthest right quadrant the illustration shows the future and the devastation that the rabbits and their ways wreak on the land. These two sections are also represented in the words. First, the text discusses the facts, describing what the rabbits are doing: "They brought new food and they brought other animals." This section of the text is written across the top of the entire left side of the page. The factual basis of the statement is paired with an illumination of what these animals mean for the numbats and the land through the illustrations on the verso page. The Ram-like creatures, who are the "animals" and possibly the food referred to on the page, work much like lawn mowers moving across the page, but instead of cutting the grass they pull it up completely by the root and leave only dirt and footprints behind them. These sheep-creatures are numbered like the rabbits, but also branded so the reader is aware that they are property and not sentient beings. The closest ram also has a quality tag attached to its ear letting the reader know that it is 100%. This could refer to the ram's fur, but it could also mean the meat, or any other number of aspects/attributes that make it a valuable commodity. But it is clear from its "quality" assessment that it is in fact primarily a commodity. Also featured on this page is the "food." There are a number of cow-like creatures that are also out in the pasture, though they are not as destructive as the sheep. Instead the

destruction of nature brought by the rabbits is done to the cows' bodies. They are marked up along lines based on the prime cuts into which their butcher will eventually use to divide them for the rabbits' consumption. While they are still wandering the field, however, they are connected at all times to a milking machine, which pulls milk from the cows' udders. Both of these animal types, as well as the machine a Rabbit drives through the background play with the theme of mechanization visible throughout the book. Even the animals that are associated with the rabbits are machine-like: they graze in straight lines, and the cows have wheels for feet. We see this separation from nature again with the lines of pollution coming from the vehicle the Rabbit drives, as well as the plumes of smoke in the distance that pockmark the beautiful pink sunset. No part of the numbats' sacred land is safe from the lifestyle of the rabbits.

The most straightforward double orientation comes from the statements of enjoyment or pleasure in the text. The narrator says, "we liked some of the food, and we liked some of the animals." Nowhere on the page does the illustration show any enjoyment from any numbat. Although the numbats outnumber the rabbits nine to three on the spread, the majority of space is taken up by Rabbit technology, and all but one numbat is hidden behind a rock or at the bottom of an illustration in the separate sections. It is obvious that although this is the numbats' land, it is the rabbits who now run it.

The last section of the double page spread is where most of the tension exists. The double orientation places the text on the right hand side against the

text in the main illustration. We see the consequences and emotional weight of the page through the conclusion of the numbats' statements. The text continues its now familiar pattern, but expresses the horrifying consequences of what the rabbits have brought. The text reads "but some of the food made us sick and some of the animals scared us." "Made us sick" is upside down representing both death and the complete upheaval of the numbat way of life. Here the illustration shows even more of the gravity of the situation. The text about food surrounds a much smaller illustration laid on top of the last quadrant showing a numbat purchasing what looks like alcohol, while another empty bottle lays discarded in the foreground. Not only does the double orientation lie between the text and illustrations, but even more so between this section and the rest of the spread. It is separated from the main illustration by its torn borders, and is overlaid onto the main illustration, indicating the passage of time. This once beautiful field is now a barren wasteland. There is no colour left in the sky, only grey. Instead of a lake there are only dead fish covered in the ram footprints. It is clear that the rabbits have completely used up every resource in this section of the land. Like the section on happiness, the animals that scare the numbats are not represented on the page, and instead the illustration shows five numbats far back holding spears and hiding behind a rock. It is up to the imagination of the reader to fill in the blanks and understand why this is so frightening that they would continue to hide even once the terrifying creatures are no longer present.

The numbats speak clearly and emotionlessly in the text and it is only through the illustration that their truly grim reality is seen. On the double page spread of page 3 this differentiation is used as foreshadowing. The elders warn the numbats to “be careful. They won’t understand the right ways” (Tan and Marsden, 2011, pg. 3). There are equal numbers of numbats and rabbits on this spread, but the rabbits are dispersed across the page, each performing a different task. One rabbit is acting as diplomat presenting the numbats with a cog as a gift, which we see later discarded on the right hand side of the page in an overlay that shows the future of the space showcased currently. The other rabbits are busy conducting experiments: collecting samples, taking notes, and discovering new coordinates of the land. The rabbits feign interest in discussing things with the numbats, but it is later revealed through the illustrations that this is just to gain access to the land to continue their quest for greed and resources. Tan places the warning from the elders in the top left-hand side of the page where the single diplomat rabbit talks with the numbats, while the foreboding “more rabbits came” (Tan and Marsden, 2011, pg. 3) sits alone ominously in the corner over the overlay showing the disused land. Tan uses the illustration to convey many warnings of the true intentions of the rabbits. While the numbats cannot see what is going to happen, this foreshadowing allows the reader to follow Tan’s portrayal of the entire process as is shown in sad and complete detail.

4.2.4.2 Picturing

Picturing is used in a very different manner from the other texts in this study, in *The Rabbits*, because the narration is from the numbats' point of view, and showcases their story, whereas the illustrations show just how much the rabbits have taken over the numbats' land and the numbats' story or history. Tan uses "picturing" to show the slow disintegration of the numbat society due to the effects of the rabbits. While this conflict between the text and the illustration is also double orientation, Tan uses this disconnect between the two very different stories taking place on the page to show the dangers of colonialism on an aboriginal society. Picturing the numbats' tale by showing the rabbits and hiding the numbats suggests their loss of self-esteem, connection, and ownership to their traditional lands. The numbats can no longer see themselves on their land or in their own story because of the rabbits' prevalence and actions upon land. Much of Tan's commentary on colonialism is expressed through this "picturing."

The key example of picturing used to takeover the numbats' story and explore the tragedy of their disappearance takes place on page 12 which reads, "and stole our children" (Tan and Marsden, 2011, pg. 12). Marsden uses extreme language by saying "stole" instead of "took," showing the severe damage that residential schooling had on the Australian Aboriginal community (Buti, 2002, n.p.), represented by the numbats in the metaphor of the book. Though the text is quite bleak, the illustration by Tan is almost whimsical. The children fly off on kites in the bright blue sky. But when inspecting the details of the page one can

see the parent numbats reaching towards the sky for their children, as well as the bloody ink upon the contract that the rabbits hold, and freshly dripping from the pen held by the rabbit in the foreground. This is one of the most tragic parts of the story for the numbats, and yet one needs to squint to see them in the illustration. The rabbits are in the foreground and take up most of the page with their bodies. This is the point in the narrative where they have effectively stamped out the numbat culture and completely stolen their story.

Tan's use of "picturing" in *The Rabbits* shows the very real differences in way of life that these two societies experienced, and how swiftly and effectively the rabbits were able to erase the numbats' history and steal their future.

4.2.5 Summary of Findings for *The Rabbits*

Tan uses a more conventional narrative-driven picturebook style to showcase the issues of colonialism in illustrating Marsden's words. The separation of the two voices, of rabbit (illustrations) and numbats (text), work well in this case, because colonialism is the forced combination of two cultures where one ultimately dominates the other. Although the text of the story belongs to the numbats throughout the story, through the power of the illustrations, Tan is able to undermine even their own story giving ownership of the book to the rabbits, showing the grim outcomes of colonialism. The oral style text by John Marsden is enhanced by Tan's unflinching illustrations.

Picturing and double orientation are clearly evident in this book, as most of the tension lies between the text and the illustrations. Tan and Marsden each

take a voice to show the tragic effects of colonization, which include silencing, domination, and genocide of a culture.

4.3 *The Red Tree*

4.3.1 Introduction

Tan's *The Red Tree* is perhaps the most complex picturebook discussed in this thesis, and also the most theoretically interesting, and seamless of the three books. Tan both wrote and illustrated the book, therefore this is the only book analyzed in this thesis in which there is an opportunity for Shaun Tan to create an interplay of words and pictures. *The Red Tree* is an unconventional picturebook that follows a young unnamed girl through a day in her world.

Although she begins and ends her day in her bedroom, the rest of the book is a strange zigzagging progression through her thoughts and tasks as she tries to tackle the world outside her room while battling mental illness. The girl, who suffers from depression, sees the world in a different way than most picturebook protagonists. The book deals with her thoughts and feelings instead of any of her actions. The "young" nature of the girl could depend on how one chooses to read her, either as an adult or a child. She is ageless in her portrayal and any age group may feel the emotions that she feels. With this book Tan takes the reader through the experiences of a person who is depressed and asks his readership to eschew predetermined judgement on the audience for picturebooks, and who can experience depression.

Tan's zigzagging narrative style throughout the girl's day speaks to the ways with which a person suffering from mental illness may approach the world. Although each sufferer of mental illness experiences things in a unique way, the feeling of unrest and complete disorientation are cornerstones of mental illness literature (Mayo Clinic, 2016, n.p.). Tan brings the story of mental illness to a place where it can be understood by a child, while leaving the story open to the interpretations of an adult or any aged mental health sufferer.

4.3.2 Format

This is the first book discussed in this thesis that is both written and illustrated by Tan. Although *The Arrival* was completely created by Tan, there was no language with which to interact with the illustrations. *The Red Tree* uses this combination of language and illustration quite complexly, as almost every page both aspects must be inspected in order to understand what is happening. Tan is able to create a sense of disorientation through his lack of guidance in the text as readers navigate through the surreal illustrations.

The Red Tree is framed in a deceptively simple fashion. The text does not contain a plot, multiple characters, or even development of a story. While the texts frames a "story" by describing the beginning and end to the protagonist's day, the rest of the text outlines the dark thoughts that she has throughout her journey into the world. Most narrative elements are presented through the illustrations. Because Tan created both the words and illustrations, he is able to convey abstract thoughts that are not discernable through text or illustration

alone. The text acts as guide through the illustrations, and as an entrance into the girl's thoughts and emotions. Without the words, the reader would be without any orientation with which to view the surreal images, and without the illustrations there would be hardly any story progression at all, and if you eliminated the first and penultimate page's text, the narration would just contain a series of dark thoughts.

Due to the abstract nature of the story itself, Tan employs a number of methods to convey different things within in the text. Tan uses colour, text placement, and page style to help emphasize and elucidate what is happening on each page. Each spread has its own format, which helps to guide the reader better. When the young girl is in her bedroom, the layout of the page is more conventional: an illustration bordered by a single colour and the text outside of the illustration. When she enters the world outside her room, however, the illustration expands past its small section and pushes the text to one side. In some frames, the text actually appears over the top of the illustration giving the illustration the entire spread. Tan also uses text-placement changes to mirror the illustration. On page 3r, the text reads:

“darkness

overcomes you” (Tan, 2011, pg. 3r).

The word “darkness” fills in for the fish that floats atop the girl, casting a shadow onto her world. With the words in this formation, the word “darkness” casts its

4.3.3 Content

Tan fits an extraordinary number of ideas and interpretive space into this picturebook. Perhaps because mental illness is such a personal experience, Tan chooses to leave an immense amount of space between the words and illustration into which the reader can insert him or herself to understand the ideas in the picturebook. Tan tries to touch on as many thought groups as possible in the sixteen spreads of this book, while keeping the reader engaged in the girl's day.

The major theme on nearly every page of this book is the hopelessness that the girl, as a mental illness sufferer, feels in her world. Tan creates multiple situations in which she is the only one who is suffering: the fish looming over her alone (Tan, 2011, p.3); the girl drowning in a bottle on land (p.4); a giant monster at the end of a board game where the die shows six on every side (p.10). This isolation from the world is a major factor in the hopelessness portrayed in the book. Many of the situations that the girl is trapped within could be helped through others: a hand to let her out of the bottle; a person to share the darkness with; another play to slow her progression towards the monster, or even ideally someone to help her fight it. Tan focuses on the girl's feelings of isolation, even if that's not the reality of her situation. In many of the panels there are other people surrounding her, yet she cannot or does not reach out to them. She continues to live alone in her world that she deems "a deaf machine" (Tan, 2011, pg. 5r). The girl may bring on the isolation that causes so many problems for her because she

does not know how to reach out. On page 12, in a double page spread, Tan shows the girl trying to paint a portrait of herself on a wall, but even she cannot see her own face. She draws herself from behind, a continual mystery to both herself and the world around her. She has turned her back on even herself and can no longer connect to those around her.

With the exception of “when?” the narrator of the story pontificates on the five W’s of writing (who - “who you are meant to be”(Tan, 2011, pg. 13), what - “sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to do”(p. 11), where – “or where you are” (p.14), and why – “without sense or reason” (p.6)) in her own life, as a way to connect the girl back to her own story. None of these questions are answered or even asked, but instead the narrator explains that the girl does not know the answer to any of these questions about herself.

The question of “when?” in this story is interesting because it is also has a non-answer. The book portrays the girl going through a single day, but looking at the ways she feels and the types of thoughts she has, it is easy to hypothesize that the “when” is actually always. It could also be argued that the answer to “when” is always as page 7 explains that “sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait but nothing ever happens” (Tan, 2011). This is the day she has nearly every day. While not necessarily exactly identical, the feeling of disorientation and loss of self is always with her. By having “when” be the only question that can be answered, but not in a helpful manner, Tan places the reader into the cycle of depression and mental illness that feels so hopeless

and never-ending to those that suffer, as well as the confusion and listlessness of sufferers.

The girl does not know who she is, what she is doing, where she is, or why any of it is happening to her. These basic questions that children are taught early on as a way to break into a story are explored in the negative in order to push the girl out of her own story, as well as show the reader that sometimes there are no answers to these questions, and it's that feeling of being lost that is paramount in disorders like depression. Tan effectively represents the irrational ways in which mental illness works. Through the exploration of who/what/when/where/why, and the pontificating of the protagonist, the text shows that there is no set prescribed symptoms or treatments for one suffering, and in fact there isn't even a normalized way of life for that person; their most basic identity is stripped away by their mental illness. The girl is left wandering through her day untouched by the world around her. What was formally her life has just become her routine. Tartakovsky (2016) discusses "catastrophizing" the thought pattern that makes one think that everything is hopeless and creates stress and makes simple tasks into large insurmountable barriers. The girl's entire day is marred by these barriers: the fish that shadows her walk to outdoors (Tan, 2011, p. 3), the storm that batters her tiny boat on (p. 8), and the giant monster that waits for her at the end of the board game on (p. 10). Each of these barriers represents hindrances to any task that a person suffering from mental illness faces. The fish may be interpreted as her inability to enjoy the things she

once loved - the beauty of outdoors - now the fish blocks the sun and overtakes any enjoyable smells of the outdoors. Her boat with the small flag could be representative of something as innocuous as paying bills, which have overtaken her due to her distorted thought processes, and the monster at the end of the board game could be representative of a teacher or a boss who is waiting for her to complete something on a deadline. These are one set of interpretations, but the beauty of these illustrations is that they lend themselves to infinite meanings by any person suffering, as each person's barriers are singular.

That does not mean of course that there is no hope for the girl or, by extension, for sufferers of mental illness. Tan hides hope throughout the story for the keen-eyed reader to discover and take solace in. On every page of the story, a small red leaf can be found following the girl through each of her daily tasks. Even in the most difficult and overwhelming pages, the small red leaf appears. The leaf is always just out of the girl's sight. Although the hope still exists in her life, she is not yet able to find it or use it. It is left to the reader to will the leaf into her lap, to show her that all is not lost. When reading a book of this difficulty and abstractness, children need something to guide their reading. For the adult that guide comes through the text, but it is possible that, for the child reader, the leaf may act as a small piece that connects this girl to all of her scenes throughout the book, and provides a way back to the world of her bedroom, where the story begins. The red leaf rests above her bed on the first page, and floats through the book until the last two pages where it re-plants itself in her bedroom and grows

into a warm red tree that lights up the room and the girl's face into a smile. The tree can imply happiness, or comfort, and the leaf is the hope of returning to this state once again.

Unfortunately for this hopeful thought, the book begins with a dump of black dead leaves into the girl's bedroom, pushing her out into the world. For the more pessimistic reader, such as myself, these leaves could represent the death and wilting of the red tree from the night before, pushing the girl away from her sanctuary back into the cold harsh world. The girl starts everyday by being pushed out into the world that does not understand her by the nightly wilting of her solace and happiness. Each day begins with the death of her comfort of the home and finishes with her return to sanctuary and the regrowth of a brand new red tree. The text also holds no punctuation - the story does not begin with a capitalization and does not end with a period - adding to the cyclical nature of the girl's day. This cycle speaks to the reality of mental illness and how it is not static for the sufferer. It may be that Tan is envisioning this small travelling leaf as a small tether tying the girl back to her home and her room where she can feel at ease for a few short hours.

The endpages of the book point to a more optimistic reading, wherein the girl is magically cured by the end of the story. The opening endpage is grey with the solo red leaf, and the final endpage is a bright, piercing red that is full of texture and looks slightly like heart tissue. Ironically, the early pages of the book feature a beige background while the girl is feeling at her worst, and it is at the

end of the book that the background of the pages switches to grey to show the warmth of the beige text. This mixing of colour does not represent the progression of the story, but instead is used to give an immediate impression of how one should feel when entering the book. The drab grey has streaks that look like water stains moving down the pages to show the girl's dim reality at the beginning of the picturebook. The final pages show the vivacious excitement of life that the red tree brings to the girl, and may have the effect of inducing excitement and joy in the reader, reflecting the emotional high in which the girl finishes the book.

4.3.4 Linguistic Elements

Because Tan both wrote and illustrated this picturebook, the linguistic elements of every page are much more in-depth and intentional. Every aspect of the page was determined together to create the greatest cohesion.

4.3.4.1 Picturing

Like the other two books discussed in this thesis, Tan's style makes reading him through a prescribed theoretical lens difficult. The process of "picturing" the text becomes much more difficult in *The Red Tree* because neither the text nor the illustration can stand on its own. They are both relatively abstract when viewed separately, but come together to illuminate a thought or idea. While the text on each page contains a thought, it is through the illustration that each of these thoughts becomes a part of the protagonist's day. On page 10 in the double page spread Tan employs many of his techniques used in previous

picture books, but the page requires a more detailed analysis to truly see all that is happening. The illustration on this page is framed in beige, like many of the other pages, and depicts the girl staring out towards a wondrous flying machine, while the words,

“wonderful things

are

passing

you

by” (Tan, 2011, pg. 10)

are on the left-hand side within the border. Tan uses textual placement on the page to mimic the illustration, the words slowly float away to the right of the page, becoming smaller, much like an object actually floating away from the narrator. The size of the word “passing” is increased to hint at the weight of guilt or sadness that being passed elicits in the girl. The girl is locked in her room by a padlock that reads “regret,” which hints that the isolation is self-induced.

Tan employs some of the brightest and most vivid colours in the book so far on this page, and it is easy to mistake it as a happy one, until one notices that the vivid colours are separated from the girl by the window. The girl is not only being passed by the flying machine, confetti, and butterflies, but her containment in her locked space keeps her from being able to participate at all. The girl is even shut away from the blowing of the wind created by the machine in her self-

induced prison. The leaf, like always, is just out of the girl's sight, and in this case rests on the outside of the window, out of her reach as well as sight.

While this is one of the most colourful and beautiful pages, the girl's self-sabotage also makes it one of the saddest. The regret-lock places blame for the isolation on the girl and her mental illness. The lock image infers that she has created a world where she is no longer able to enjoy things because of her illness, which makes her less likely to be able to recover. Tan suggests that these paradoxical issues are experienced by a person with mental illness (Tartakovsky, 2016, n.p.), and shares these frustrating inconsistencies without appearing to judge the girl. The only judgement comes from the girl herself, as the lock reads "regret." The narrator does not pass judgement, but only states a truth, that in this case, "wonderful things are passing you by" (Tan, 2011, pg. 10).

4.3.4.2 Double Orientation

The Red Tree operates almost entirely through the use of double orientation. Each page asks that the reader take in both illustration and text simultaneously to discern what is going on in the book. One of the most complex uses of double orientation (and pictorialization) occurs on the double page spread of page 6. The text simply reads "without sense or reason" (Tan, 2011, pg. 6), and is surrounded by the busiest page discussed so far in this thesis. The entire page is a collage of other pages (from textbooks, stamps, newspapers), many of which involve text that is not meant to be read and in many different languages.

While other pages in the book may suggest feelings akin to the experience of sufferers of mental illness, this page more directly communicates a sense of illogical, anxiety-producing reality (Tartakovsky, 2017, n.p.). This page breaks the format of the previous five spreads, and instead of employing a beige border, switches to an extremely fine-print text from a dictionary or glossary. The text of the page is nestled into the picture with the rest of the madness, instead of lying to the side like previous spreads. Each piece of the illustration (with the exception of the girl) is made by collage with paper that has printed text on it already. It is easy to spot stamps, envelopes, math homework, numerals, Asiatic languages and stamps within the cityscape depicted on the page. Nothing on this page carries any sense or reason. The girl who is normally performing some sort of discernable task is climbing a ladder to a window that leads nowhere, as the building is two-dimensional. There are planes in the sky dropping words on her as she climbs, and to the left a formation of angry robot-like men stare at her and whisper. The page is also coloured in harsh red and yellow tones, making it visually difficult to look at. The page provides so many different things to focus on, and yet none of them is more important than any other. The reader is inundated with useless information that distracts from the story and from the girl. The girl herself seems overwhelmed by the page, as she is not doing anything logical either. This is one of the only pages where it is hard to connect with the girl, because the reader cannot tell what she is doing based on her actions in the illustration. Instead, the entire illustration acts as a metaphor for the fire in her

brain as she navigates her world with her mental illness. This is an excellent example of a page using what is unsaid in an ironic fashion; that is, there are so many things conveyed on this page that they cancel each other out until nothing but the text is able to speak. The simple words “without sense or reason” act as a compass to navigate through this illustration, and it would be easy to dismiss the page as having nothing else to offer in the way of analysis or story. This lack of discernible sense is the way that the page connects with the reader and makes it easier to empathize with the girl’s mental illness in a way that none of the other pages are able to achieve as tidily. The contradictory nature of the page reflects how the girl feels when dealing with her mental illness. The reader is able to place themselves within the girl’s shoes and feel all of the contradictory forces at work. While each page asks the reader to empathize with the girl, this spread forces him or her to empathize, and may in fact drive them away from it due to its harshness and lack of logic.

The text in *The Red Tree* has the difficult task of both guiding the reader through the girl’s world of her mental illness, as well as allowing readers to empathize with the girl. However, the words can only give so much access to the girl’s world before they start to shape it. The text has to walk a very fine line between giving enough information to guide the reader, and telling the girl’s story outright. The ability to connect with the girl and her plight comes from the gaps that Tan leaves between his text and his illustration.

4.3.5 Summary of Findings for *The Red Tree*

Tan takes a risk in creating a picturebook about depression. He asks audiences to come to the book without assumptions about the subject, or who the audience should be. Both adults and children can read the picturebook format, and the material within can be understood by both as well. This can be seen as Tan's most complex book because he defies the audience and leaves gaps between the illustrations and the text for the reader to place him- or herself within. This book can also be read as more universal because everyone has had a bad day, but the cyclical nature of the text speaks to those who suffer from clinical depression: the highs and lows are ceaseless. Each page of *The Red Tree* achieves a kind of symbiosis between words and text to allow the reader entrance into the world of mental illness, but each page also leaves the story in the hands of the reader. *The Red Tree* achieves its ecology of words and text through the careful work and consideration given to each aspect of every page.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

When analyzing picturebooks, not only are the text and illustrations important components, but also the relationship between these two aspects is where researchers can focus their analyses. Shaun Tan artfully works with text and illustration in order to create his stories. He makes rich use of the format, content and linguistic elements of each book studied in this thesis to convey social issues.

Shifting the focus of research away from reader response to a close reading and analysis of form, content and linguistic elements allowed me to explore what is actually in the books instead of what people see in them. Much of the existing research on Tan focuses on the way that child readers approach his picturebooks. This raises two issues: it assumes the readership of Tan's books is limited to children, and uses the books as an example of how an issue is read instead of as an artefact that can be explored as a whole. When reviewing previous work on Shaun Tan's work, the majority of the research examined for this study was reader response studies. Although there have been studies done on the content of Tan's books, none have focused specifically on their portrayal of social issues. Because his books are complex and deal with social issues, they are excellent sources that can be used to foster dialogue between insiders and outsiders about issues related to colonization, depression and immigration. By focusing on format, content and linguistic elements, I was able to move away

from the interpretations that stem from reader response studies and instead analyze the way the books work to convey these social issues.

In order to analyze these books in an entirely new manner I approached them as a whole and not just single page interactions, guided by David Lewis' (2001) picturebook as process theory. The process approach views picturebooks as a work of art. The creator starts with words and then "pictures" them. This allows for the two mediums to express what they represent and then express more through their interactions. These interactions can also lead to "double orientation" (Lewis, 2001), instances of which allow the illustrations and words to play against each other. These Linguistic Elements were crucial to the way that I interpreted Tan's works. By viewing each page as a process, one is able to discern small clues and meanings from the pages as well as how each one fits into the rest of the book. Looking at the way each page fits into the larger whole also includes looking at the format of a page.

Lewis' (2001) ecological theory asks the reader to view each singular aspect of a book/page/illustration/sentence as part of a larger ecological system. These small aspects then work together to create the larger ecosystem that is the book. By viewing the book as a larger ecosystem, each small change from page to page becomes part of the larger analysis. Formatting styles constitute an important aspect of the analysis that I use in this thesis because I argue that these formatting changes are done in a purposeful manner by Tan in order to aid the "outside [reader]" (Sims Bishop, 1990, n.p.) in placing themselves within the

story. These readers who approach the story through this “window” (Sims Bishop, 1990, n.p.) are then better able to empathize with the very real people experiencing the issues the books discuss (O’Neil, 2010) increasing the reader’s social awareness.

5.1 Findings

Tan’s picturebooks are quite surreal in many senses, and he plays with format and content in a way that makes his style hard to place within the defined categories that Lewis gives us. For example, *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) is a completely wordless picturebook for all intents and purposes. But the book also pushes against the picturebook category due to its length and use of comic-panel-style illustration. Many scholars still consider it a wordless graphic novel and not a wordless picturebook, but that is an issue for another thesis. Due to its wordless nature it is difficult to pin down examples of “double orientation” and “picturing” (Lewis, 2001). Instead, Tan uses what I call the voices of storytellers within the book to point the reader in different directions. The linguistic elements of “picturing” and “double orientation” (Lewis, 2001) are closely related to format in *The Arrival* because that is the way Tan is able to show differences in voice and create tension between the tellers. The format and colour choices as well as the story focuses differ between each immigrant story offered in *The Arrival*. One story focuses completely on the daring escape and leaving of home, while another focuses on the desperation to return home. The aspects that each teller focuses on are completely different, which shows what is important to each teller.

Tan's choice of creating a wordless book also helps to place the reader easily into the life of the protagonist in *The Arrival*. Readers are just as lost as the protagonist when he lands, not knowing the language, alphabet, systems or mores of the new society. The reader discovers this new country in the shoes of the protagonist and experiences the same anxiety of being lost and confused that he does.

With *The Rabbits* (Tan, 2011), Tan teams up with another creator to tell the story of colonization in Australia. While the book is in itself much more conventional in its format with a deeply narrative text and illustrations on every page, the tension between the words and illustrations is extremely important to the issue at the core of the book. Tan and Marsden each take a perspective of the story being told. Marsden tells the story of the numbats through the text, detailing all of the atrocities that the rabbits perform against them, while Tan focuses on the point of view of the rabbits within the illustrations. Because the text of the story is narrated through the voice of the numbats, it would seem that the story is about them. An examination of the illustrations, however, reveals that their presence diminishes as the story progresses. This merging of stories shows the reader an interesting and truthful perspective on colonialism, especially when the colonizer invades the story and overtakes the teller. Even though the numbats tell their story, the visibility of numbats in each illustration, and the roles that they play, diminish with every page turn. The stealing of the story is indicative of the reality of Australian Colonialism, and Tan uses the tensions

between the words and illustrations to pointedly discuss the ways in which the “rabbits” silenced the “numbat” people. Focus on “picturing” and “double orientation” (Lewis, 2001) is essential in viewing the ironies inherent in the format of the text. Tan consistently leaves hints throughout his illustrations that point to the lack of attention the rabbits pay to the numbats’ way of life, and he points out the horrifying consequences of what happens when one society colonizes another.

Tan’s solo creation, both authoring and illustrating, of *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2011), made it possible for him to control the tension between both aspects and have tighter control over the book. He used this freedom to create a story in which each page relied on both the illustration and narration to guide the reader. The text begins and ends with markers that denote the beginning and end of the protagonist’s day, and the middle is a journey through the dark thoughts that are a part of the protagonist’s depression. The overwhelming despair that these thoughts demonstrate is shown entirely in the illustrations, as is the small leaf suggesting hope that follows the young girl just out of eyesight no matter how bad things seem. The power that these negative thoughts have over the protagonist shows the weight and debilitating effects of depression. Tan uses “picturing” (Lewis, 2001) to create a tension to show these effects. Even though the thoughts are somewhat typical of any bad day, through the illustration Tan shows the ways in which depression dominates every single task in a person’s day. Tan furthers this divide between an average bad day and depression by

using “double orientation” (Lewis, 2001) and creating visually dense pages that sufferers of mental illness, and all readers, can interpret in a number of ways to place themselves within the book. These multiple interpretations also speak to the idea that no two people experience mental illness in the same way. While many symptoms may be similar, one’s ability to push through or give in to changes day-to-day and person-to-person and the weight of each symptom affect everyone differently (Tartakovsky, 2016). The format of the book and its single-creator development allow for the fine balance that is required to create these openings for readers between the pictures and the text. This text begins and ends as a more traditional picturebook with framed illustration and exterior text, but every other page changes its format to better portray the chaos and confusion of mental illness expressed on the page.

Taking a more textual analytic approach instead of a reader-centred approach allows for a focus on the potential of these books to convey social issues as opposed to their effectiveness as evidenced by particular responses. The effectiveness that can be evidenced in reader-response studies depends entirely on the people running them, what they are analyzing, and who makes up their participant group. There is no such thing as a definitive reader-response study because every group will find something different. Instead I chose to focus on what the books are achieving from a more textual analytic perspective and what they could potentially bring to readers. By looking at the content, format, and linguistic elements of these books in a systematic way, I was able to pinpoint

critical moments in each text and explore the way that these aspects can potentially promote empathy in readers.

5.2 Further Research

As most of the research that I found for this study dealt with reader response studies, I want to bring my research back to this starting place and show its usefulness in guiding reader response analysis as well. Using literature to find teachable moments is definitely not a new idea. Sims Bishop (1990) gives the beautiful metaphor of a window and a mirror. We know now the importance of providing stories where children see themselves represented, and stories can also provide a safe space for readers to discover new cultures and ideas. Using post-modern picturebooks to aid in empathetic development (O'Neil, 2010) allows readers to enter the story through many openings. Tensions created between text and illustration can serve to further inspire critical thinking and help place the reader in someone else's shoes. Using books to discuss social issues allows children access to ideas they may not encounter in their everyday lives and helps to prepare them for a quickly globalising world, hopefully as more empathetic citizens.

Grounding these studies of social issue picturebooks to the physical book itself, instead of the way readers interact with it, also allows insight into the evaluation of other materials. The study of the quality of issue picturebooks in their portrayal of the issue they represent will help guide the reader response studies that permeate the field of research around social issue picturebooks.

There should be criteria in place that allows those running reader response studies to view and select their literature, and possibly what they look at to gauge differences in response based on social influences (such as race, immigration status, socio-economic group, etc). It's not hard for academics to understand the value in good books, but there is also room to build a system to be able to verbalize "the how" in book selection specifically surrounding issue picturebooks. Many of the studies that I've cited here use the books in reader-response are more focused on children's responses to particular topics and less on how those topics are conveyed in sophisticated ways through the interplay of word and pictures.

Based on the kind of analysis provided here, some questions that might guide the selection of materials in social issue picturebook studies include: What are the appropriate aspects that should be included in required response from readers? Should format be considered when discussing these texts? Does paratext actually matter in interpretation in reader-response studies?

These sorts of questions that I try to answer about Tan's books in my thesis are important to think about when discussing a book's ability to convey a social issue, and by extent foster empathy. If post-modern picturebooks are an answer to Bishop Sims' (1990) window/mirror theory, should scholars be thinking about the implications of all aspects that went into producing said book, including how many creators there are, and perhaps even the length of the book? My focus on the importance of the entirety of a book (cover to cover, creators involved

etc.), and respecting the picturebook as a whole, may serve to start a dialogue about how a picturebook is able to portray a social issue, and what makes an issue picturebook effective.

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