



THE RED TREE

Shaun Tan

Teacher's Notes

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INTRODUCTION

The Red Tree is a fascinating and thought provoking book which has been carefully considered in every detail. The book needs to be presented to young children in a secure and caring atmosphere where they can safely explore the many feelings and emotions it portrays. Read the story and elicit different children's responses to *The Red Tree*. Allow children to give their own version of the story. Read the story to a group and ask them to make a list of words that come to mind when they look at a particular image. Ask children to paint pictures and images to express their own feelings. Talk with children about the human condition – that everybody has times they feel down or discouraged, but there is always something to look forward to. Look at the style of the text – the words are minimal and simple, yet have underlying complexity and allow the individual to imagine, empathise or identify with a range of emotions that are part of the human condition.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Where does the book get its name from?

How does the red tree appear? What is the significance of the red tree? What does it stand for?

Look at the way in which Shaun Tan uses circular images and text and how *The Red Tree* comes full circle.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Working in pairs, students can take a page of their choice and write new words for it.

Similarly, they can take the words from one page and develop their own drawings to accompany them, thus recording their own individual responses.

Look at the use of metaphors. We all use similes and metaphors to express how we feel more graphically.

Together with the class, compile a list of these which reflect how we feel, such as: *I feel as sick as a dog, out like a light, feeling blue, sunshine of her smile, I'm so hot I'm melting.*

Look through both the words and illustrations to find things that make connections and threads throughout the book; for example, the image of the little girl and the image of the snail. On the other hand the story can be taken one page or an image at a time. Discuss what each spread adds to the overall concept of the book.

SYMBOLS

There are very good examples of objects representing something else. Talk about one thing standing for another, or meaning something else to us, by association or relationship, for instance the dice and the hourglass in the story.

Activity: *Allow the group to find objects or things that recur for a reason, for instance the red leaf on every page. Talk about why these are there and what their meaning is.*

Make a list of what things represent happiness, sadness, hope and fate.

Activity: *Make up your own symbols – in drawings and words – explain what these stand for.*

SCALE

The juxtaposition of large and small, monstrous and tiny has an effect on the way we interpret things and the way we feel. Look at the relationship of objects to one another and what affect this has.

Activity: *List some examples from the book.*

SCOPE

The way we see things is very personal and dependent on how we feel. *The Red Tree* is full of opportunities for unhampered thought or development. Explore this concept further by getting the group's different views on parts of the story. We have the ability to go anywhere in our minds.

Activity: *Discuss the idea of hope. The class can contribute their own examples.*

VOCABULARY

Activity: Make a list of happy words. Make a list of words that express sadness or confusion. Find some words that remind you of something hard. Find more words that go with different feelings and emotions.

MUSIC

Look at the place of sound in *The Red Tree*. What images remind you of different noises and sounds?

Activity: Have children devise in pairs some music that is happy or sad. If they are able to play an instrument they can choose a piece to play to the rest of the class. Otherwise they can bring a recorded version of something they have chosen. There is also the possibility of having the class experiment with a range of instruments to make their own sounds – percussion with tins and drums, clapping sticks, lager phones, home-made stringed instruments such as tea chest basses, combs and tissue paper and so on.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

There are innumerable subjects that arise from this book that can be discussed further.

Activity: Talk about

- *Life and its ups and downs*
- *The impact of positive thought and the influence of negative thought.*
- *The power of the imagination*
- *Attitude and interpretation*
- *Degrees of feeling*
- *Positive thought to override depression.*
- *What a smile means, and other facial expressions*

Perspective plays an important part in Shaun Tan's work. The reading of a work of art often depends on the reader's perspective. What perspective does the child have on looking out the window, for instance?

Talk about this further with the class. The word ‘perspective’ can be looked at both from the point of view of how we interpret things and the artist’s point of view. For example, we see the snail both close up and from afar.

Activity: *Have children look up quotations about, or references to, hope in books in the library – pool these and then discuss the effects of using such terminology.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

Look at Shaun Tan’s illustrations in detail and allow children to make their own comments and talk about their individual reactions to the images.

Let them read the pictures and find the ray of hope on every page.

What part does colour play in Shaun Tan’s work? Look at how he has used light and shade, and brightness and dark. What does the colour red do? Look at other colours and their impact. How do you interpret different colours? Do we all have the same responses to particular colours?

Look particularly at the use of shapes – circles, rounded shapes and what feelings these elicit. What about angular and severe shapes? How do we feel when we look at these?

Allow the children to volunteer comments and make their own suggestions after looking closely at particular pictures.

DESIGN

Look at the way the images are placed on the page and the way they are varied. Talk about what effect this has on the overall book.

Question: *Look particularly at the images around the border and examine these in detail. Discuss why Shaun Tan has chosen to put them there.*

Look at the way the words are placed on the page and make comments and draw conclusions as to why they are like this.

Activity: Have children make up their own story about how they feel and design a format for a book.

WRITING

Activity: Tell the story in your own words.

Activity: Write a poem about hope.