Sometimes when you wake up, there seems to be nothing to look forward to – the day seems to stretch before you, dull, drab and despairing. But even on days like this, there is always some glimmer of hope, some bright spot in the midst of the darkness. In Shaun Tan’s inimitable way, he uses extraordinary and detailed graphics to illustrate his simple yet profound text, utilising the repetition of a red leaf to show how hope can be seen in even the darkest of situations.

**Getting Ready for the Book**

Using the text of *The Red Tree* without the illustrations.

Read the story of *The Red Tree* without showing the students the book – this includes the front cover.

Ask the children what they think the story is about.

On A3 size paper (15 sheets will be needed) write the text on each double page spread on a single A3 piece of paper. Number the pages in the order the text is written in the book.

For example,

**Page one** would have the lines:

- *Sometimes the day begins*  
- *With nothing to look forward to*

**Page two**

- *And things go from bad to worse*

**Page three**

- *Darkness*  
- *Overcomes you*

And so on.

**Visual Arts: 2D Drawing**
Divide the students into groups of two or three. Give each group one of the fifteen A3 sheets of paper which has a segment of text written on it. Each group should have a different page.

Each group discusses what they think their piece of text means and how they might illustrate it.

Each group then illustrates their text and presents the finished page to another group or the class, explaining what their illustration means and why they chose to interpret the text that way.

The wall story of *The Red Tree* is then sequenced and displayed.

**English: Secret Writing**

The students write about and some of the things that have happened to them when they have had a bad day. They describe how they felt.

The children can share what they have written with a friend if they choose. The ‘secret writing’ is then sealed and given to the teacher to keep in a safe place.

**Innovating on the Text**

Go back to the original text still without the illustrations. As a class brainstorm ideas to create another version of the text where the day begins with many things to look forward to. A new title could also be discussed.

As class or in small groups jointly construct another version of the text using the original narrative as the model, for example:

**The original text**

*Sometimes the day begins*

*With nothing to look forward to*

**The reconstructed version**

*Often the day begins*

*With so much to look forward to*

**The original text**

*And things go from bad to worse*

**The reconstructed version**

*And things go from good to fantastic*
Visual Arts: 2D Drawing
Repeat the previous activity where a group of two or three illustrates the new version of the story and shares with others. This wall story is also sequenced and displayed.

English: Secret Writing
The students write about and some of the things that have happened to them when they have had a good day. They describe how they felt.

The children can share what they have written with a friend or the class if they choose. The ‘secret writing’ can then be sealed if the students chose to do so and given to the teacher to keep in a safe place.

Introducing the Book
Show the students the cover.

*How is the girl on the cover feeling? How do you know? Where is she? What is written on the boat? What else can you see on the cover? What colours are used for the cover? Why do you think has Shaun Tan chosen them? How do they make you feel? Why is there a leaf? What colour is it?*

Turn to the front endpapers.

*What can you see? What colour is the leaf? Why?*

Turn to the next page.

*What is happening in this illustration? Why are letters coming out of the megaphone? Why is the girl standing on a chair? Do you think the leaves are important?*

Turn to the next page.

*What type of clock can you see? Why is it in the middle of a field? What can you see on the clock? The teacher lists the children’s responses to what they can see on the clock. What can you see inside the clock? Why is there a bird on the opposite page? Where have the letters come from? Why?*

Provide a range of materials, including as many from the list as possible, for the students to create their own grandfather clock.

Read *The Red Tree* to the students and reveal the illustrations.

*Why do you think Shaun Tan wrote The Red Tree? Is The Red Tree a sad story? Discuss. Do you think the leaves are important? Do the leaves change? How?*
Illustrations

'... darkness overcomes you ...'

What is unusual about the illustration on this page? Why is the word 'darkness' written in larger print?

Visual Arts: Art Movement: Surrealism

The surreal means beyond or above reality. The Surrealists aimed to link the world of dreams and real life to create what they regarded as an absolute reality. To do this, they used unusual techniques. Some Surrealist works are strange and frightening such as a groper in the street, while others are more bizarre, bringing unlikely objects together.

Famous Surrealist paintings:

Max Ernst, *Oedipus Rex*, 1922.

The children draw something familiar, such as their house, their street, a city building or street, their backyard. After looking at the double page spread on the page beginning '... darkness overcomes you ...', the children turn their ordinary pictures into something extraordinary. They then colour them using a medium of their choice, such as, paint, coloured pencil, felt tipped pen or crayon. Display the children's artwork beside the wall stories.

'... nobody understands ...'

Why is the girl drawn in a bottle? Where would you find this bottle? How does the place Shaun Tan has drawn make you feel? Why?

Message in a bottle

Give each student in the class a copy of a bottle shape, based on the one in the book, which has the name of someone in the class printed on it. Each student writes a
positive message on the bottle about the person whose name is written down. For example, I like the way you always help people and share your pencils with me. I think you tell really funny jokes because they always make me laugh. The teacher collects (and checks) the bottles and gives them out to the student whose name appears.

'* the world is a deaf machine ... '*

What does the illustration on this page remind you of? Why is there a light bulb inside the girl? Is it real? What do you think it means? What shapes has Shaun Tan used? Why?

Find pictures of Aztec art and World War 2 aeroplanes. How has Aztec art and World War 2 aeroplanes influenced this illustration? Why do you think Shaun Tan has used these images?

'* without sense or reason ... '*

Give the children a copy of the book and a magnifying glass to reveal the detail. Allow time for them to look carefully at the illustration. What did you discover? Make a list of as many words as you can from the illustration. What do they mean? Why has Shaun Tan used newspapers in this way?

**Visual Arts: Art Movement: Cubism**

Cubists depicted their subjects from various viewpoints using a combination of angular solids and geometric planes. Recurring themes in the work of some artists include angular human figures and landscapes in which houses were reduced to geometric cube shapes. The introduction of new materials into works of art was initiated by the Cubists. Everyday objects were combined to form collages.

Famous Cubist Paintings
  - Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Newspaper, Glass and Bottle*, 1913.

How have the Cubists influenced Shaun Tan's illustration? Make a list of the shapes and objects Shaun Tan has included in the illustration, for example, aeroplanes, ladders, clocks, faces etc. Why has he used these images? Are there any symbols in this illustration? What colours has he chosen? Why? Does the illustration have a message or theme?

The class brainstorms ideas or messages that could inspire a similar illustration. Using the illustration as a model and taking note of the work of the Cubists, the
students create their own picture using newspapers as a starting point. The students choose a message or theme for their illustration.

‘... sometimes you wait ...’

How has Shaun Tan used perspective and time in these small illustrations? Brainstorm a sequence of actions that could be illustrated in this way. Using paper folded into eight squares the students try and draw a sequence of actions using the book as a model.

‘... then all your troubles come at once ...’

What has inspired the illustrator in this illustration? The Titanic is a good place to start! How has shape been used in this illustration? Colour? Perspective? How does the illustration make you feel? Do you think the girl feels the same way?

‘... wonderful things are passing you by ...’

Describe what the girl can see from the window? Using the list as a starting point create a Stretch Poem.

**Stretch poem: Same Beginning, Different Ending**

Begin with a phrase such as 'I can see' or 'Through the window' or move on to the imaginative 'I wish I were ...'; 'If only I could .....'.

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ can see clouds} \\
I \text{ can see something flying} \\
I \text{ can see butterflies} \\
I \text{ can see the moon} \\
I \text{ can see the sky}
\end{align*}
\]

Then expand each idea. The pattern can be changed at any time. The last line must provide a concluding thought, opinion or statement.

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ can see soft yellowing clouds drifting to orange} \\
I \text{ can see a huge flying shape - A plane? A machine? Escape?} \\
I \text{ can see butterflies flittering, flocking, flying free} \\
I \text{ can see the moon, small, grey and dull} \\
I \text{ can see the open sky, blue and purple and stormy} \\
\text{Please open the window} \\
\text{So I can fly to the moon with the butterflies.}
\end{align*}
\]
‘… terrible fates are inevitable… ’

What does the border illustration look like? What pictures can you see in the border? What is the girl carrying? Why? Where is the central illustration set? How does it make you feel? Why? Where do you think the girl is going?

**Board Game**

Using the small illustrations in the border as inspiration the students create their own board game.

**Purpose:**
To take the reader, as a game player, back to the text as both reader and viewer. To take the reader, as a game creator, beyond the written and visual text.

**Materials:**
Multiple copies of the double page spread which includes the text ‘… terrible fates are inevitable… ’, felt tipped pens, A3 & A4 paper, large sheets of cardboard.

The students form small groups of 4-6.

**Procedure:**
Look at the illustration carefully. What do you notice about the text? The illustration? Is the illustration ‘surreal’?

Discuss your favourite board games. What made them interesting? Fun? How much reading was involved? What strategies were required? What did they look like?

List the characteristics of a good board game. What should be included?

Discuss how you can design a board game based on this illustration and the book The Red Tree.

The first board game you design will only be in draft form, using the felt tipped pens and paper provided. All of the following elements must be included:

**Instructions**
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Age range of players
Rules
Board design
Cards
Player tokens
Your innovations

Playing the game:
When you are happy with your draft discuss it with your teacher. Make any changes. Play the game to make certain that it works and make changes if it doesn't.

Create the final version of your board game.

Present your board game to the class.

Arrange an afternoon where the students can play and share the games they have created.

'… Sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to do …'

How did you feel when you didn’t know what you were supposed to do? Do you think the girl feels the same way? How do you know? Why is the girl dressed the way she is? Why do you think Shaun Tan has created this illustration?

Look carefully at the illustration and list the unusual or bizarre things you can see. For example, walking candles, strange looking people, someone playing a trumpet with a paper bag on their head etc.

List the different 'words' that you can find. Do they make sense? Are they another language?

'… or who you are meant to be …'

Why is the girl drawing herself as an outline? What else can you see drawn on the wall? Who do you think you are meant to be? How has the colour changed from the previous illustration? Why?
'... or where you are ... '

Look at this illustration from a distance - What does the central hill remind you of? Why do you think Shaun Tan has drawn the hill this way? Again, how has the colour changed from the previous illustration? Why? Where do you think you would find this landscape? Why? How has Shaun Tan used texture? How do you think the girl is feeling? Have you ever felt the same way? When?

Compare this illustration with the work of artist Russell Drysdale - *The Walls of China, Gol Gol* (1945).

'... and the day seems to end the way it began but suddenly there it is right in front of you bright and vivid quietly waiting ... '

'... just as you imagined it would be ...'

What is the red tree meant to be? How is the girl feeling at the end of the book? Why?

**Visual Arts: Art Appreciation / 2D Drawing**

How has Shaun Tan used colour, line and shape in his book *The Red Tree* to get your attention? Convey mood? Emotion? Define character? Indicate change? The children create a class book (not a story) where colour, line and shape are used to convey different messages.

**Visual Arts: 2D: Painting/ 3D: Collage**

Look through the illustrations and try to find the red leaf on every page. What does the red leaf symbolise? Why do you think there are so many brown leaves and only one red one?

Have children draw a large maple leaf on cardboard and paint one side brown and the other side red. Allow to dry.

Write or wordprocess words to describe:

1) what makes you sad
2) what makes you happy
Cut out these words and collage them onto the maple leaf. Paste the sad words on the brown side, and the happy words on the red side. Create a class mobile of the leaves.

**Visual Arts: Alternative Activity**
Have each child draw two large maple leaves and paint one brown and the other one red. Collage the sad words on the brown leaf and the happy words on the red leaf. To display, create a pile of brown leaves piled below a tree full of bright and vivid red leaves.

Attach a caption below it, that the children have made up, indicating that happy times can be found in the midst of sadness.

**Drama: Living Sculptures**
Divide into groups and have each group take one sentence from the text and write it on a card.

Sentences could include:
- *The world is a deaf machine without sense or reason*
- *Then all your troubles come at once*
- *Wonderful things are passing you by, terrible fates are inevitable*
- *Sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to do*

Ask each group to create a Living Sculpture to represent the sentence on their card. They may use their own ideas based on the text, or use some of the Shaun tan’s ideas as expressed in the pictures.

*Note:* In a Living Sculpture, one child positions the other children to create a sculpture to represent emotions, events, pictures, sentences, etc. They freeze in that position for the rest of the class to enjoy. Use a digital or polaroid camera to capture the sculpture in print for the children to see how they look.

**Music: Tone Colour**
Using the same groups from the above activity, have children use instruments to create a soundscape to represent their sentence from the text.

Read the book and have each group play their soundscape as their sentence is read aloud.

Sequence the sentence cards and use them as a graphic score, eg. point to the cards, one at a time, and the relevant group plays their soundscape without any words being spoken.
Record this soundscape and listen through to it, reflecting on how well the instruments have been used to represent the different sentences in the book. Discuss how this activity has created a continuous sound description of the despair and sadness which finally resolves into hope and happiness.

**Dance: Student Compositions**

Have each group devise a sequence of movements to their sentence and recorded soundscape. Share these movement sequences with each other, sequenced as in the text.

**Music: Structure / Duration**

Discuss how the red leaf which appeared on each page of the text represented a glimmer of hope in the midst of despair and sadness. Sometimes this can be likened to lighting one candle in the midst of darkness.

Learn to sing the song *One Little Candle*, from ABC Sing! 2002, pages 92 - 93. Listen to the song while clapping the beat of the verse and clicking fingers to the beat to the chorus.

Read the song through and clap the rhythm of the words in the verse and click the rhythm of the words in the chorus.

*Note:*

**Beat** = the steady regular beat throughout a piece of music, like a heart beat;

**Rhythm** = the irregular notes based on the syllables of the words.

What do the double lines and dots at the start and finish of the music mean? (Repeat the section between the double lines and dots; the first time it is sung, the bars marked '1' are sung, and the second time it is sung, the bars marked '2' are sung.)

**Music: Dynamics**

Sing through the song again, thinking about which sections could be sung loudly and which could be sung softly.

Make three flashcards showing a small, medium and large candle. As children sing the song through use the flashcards to indicate when to sing softly, medium or loudly. Have individual children conduct the class using the flashcards to indicate the different dynamic levels. Reflect on what sections sound best sung loudly and which sections sound best sung at a medium or soft dynamic level.