

# ANALYSING VISUAL TEXTS

**Symbolism:** A symbol is a thing that represents or stands for something else. Usually, a symbol consists of a real object that is used to represent something more abstract or complex.



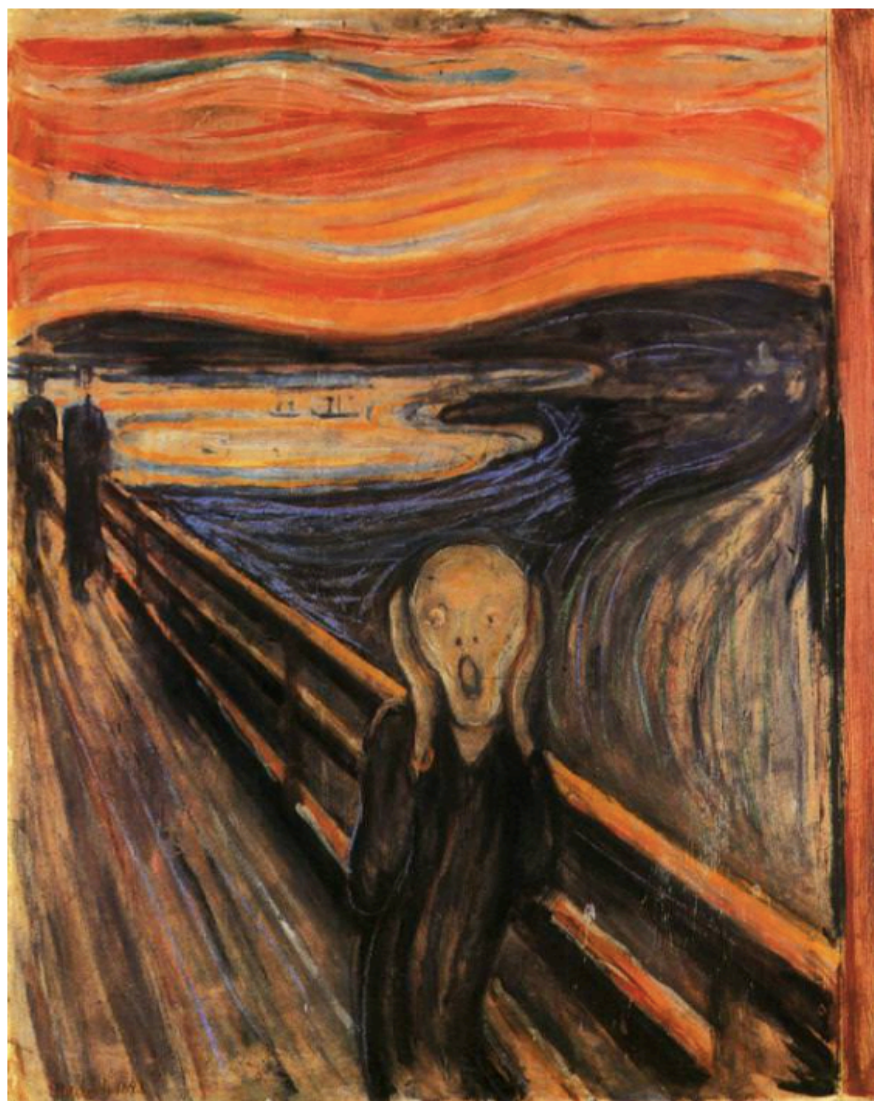
*In this image from Shaun Tan's picture book *The Red Tree*, the main character is portrayed trapped inside a bottle. This is a **symbol** of her sense of loneliness and alienation from her surroundings. The stormy weather **symbolizes** the scary nature of the world around her.*

**Salience:** Salience means importance. In a visual text, the most salient part is the part that stands out the most.



*In this advertisement, the most **salient** part of the image is the iPad. It is most salient because of its position in the centre of the frame. The dark colours of the iPad also draw attention to it, in contrast to the paler colours of the surroundings.*

**Foreground/Background:** The parts of the picture that are closest to you (the viewer) are in the foreground; the parts that are furthest away from you are in the background.



*In Edvard Munch's painting The Scream, the screaming man is portrayed in the **foreground**, whilst in the **background** other, more distant people are shown walking on the bridge.*

**Vectors:** Vectors are imaginary lines that direct the viewer's eyes in a particular way. They are used to connect different parts of the image and to create a **reading path** from one part to another.



*In T. H. Matteson's painting of the Salem witch trials, the stern gaze of the chief magistrate (upper left) creates a **vector** that draws our eyes to the accused man (bottom right). The pointing finger of the girl (bottom centre) also creates a **vector** that leads to the accused man.*

**Gaze:** Gaze refers to the way that people in an image are looking at the viewer.

When a person in an image looks directly at the viewer, this is called a **demand**. A demand asks for our attention in a confrontational way.



*In Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's self-portrait, the artist represents herself looking directly at the viewer with a **demand** gaze.*


When a person in an image looks away from the viewer, this is called an **offer**. An offer is a less confrontational way of engaging the viewer and usually shows that the person in the image is involved in some action.



The New Nissan Note.  
Because everyone knows girl stuff contaminates boy stuff.

Because there's no bigger adventure than having kids.

Having a large, easy-to-load boot is an obvious necessity for any family car. Having one with a unique mechanism designed to separate one set of objects from another isn't. Enter the Floorboard, our way of keeping wet things from dry things, muddy things from clean things, and boy things from girl things.  
For more information: [www.nissan-note.co.uk](http://www.nissan-note.co.uk)

NOTE  **SHIFT** family life

The advertisement features a blue Nissan Note with its rear hatch open. A young girl in a pink floral dress stands on the left, holding a red heart-shaped balloon. A young boy in a striped shirt and blue pants stands on the right, holding a striped bag. The car's trunk is filled with various items, including a teddy bear and a ball. The background shows a suburban street with houses and a clear sky.

*In this car advertisement, the two children are represented using **offer** gazes. They are involved in their conflict with each other, not looking at the viewer.*

**Panels/frames:** A panel is one frame in a graphic novel.

**Gutters:** Gutters are the spaces in-between the panels in a graphic novel.



*This scene from Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel, Persepolis, is made up of two panels. A gutter separates the panels. The gutter tells us that some time has passed in between the two moments.*

*The first panel shows Marjane's mother giving her some advice; the second panel shows Marjane attempting to put it into practice. The viewer has to infer the connection between the two panels.*



## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Now that you have learnt these new techniques, try putting them into practice when analyzing visual texts. Remember to be as specific as possible by using the correct terms to explain how the composer of the text creates meaning.



Sample analysis paragraph:

The **panel** from Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* represents the cooperation between one recent migrant and another. The suitcase shown in the **foreground** suggests that the older girl has only recently arrived in the country. The suitcase could also be a **symbol** of the many past experiences that the girl brings with her to the new land. The most **salient** part of the image is the two girls, however, their **offer gaze** and the **vector** created by the younger girl's pointing finger leads the viewer on a **reading path** towards the place beyond the frame. As we imagine this destination, Tan shows us the importance of friendship and cooperation when navigating an unfamiliar landscape.

Text one — Image: Lost and Alone in the City



JULIA MARK

Acknowledgement: Courtesy of Julia Dennis

We'll be focusing on the visual text above and the question below.

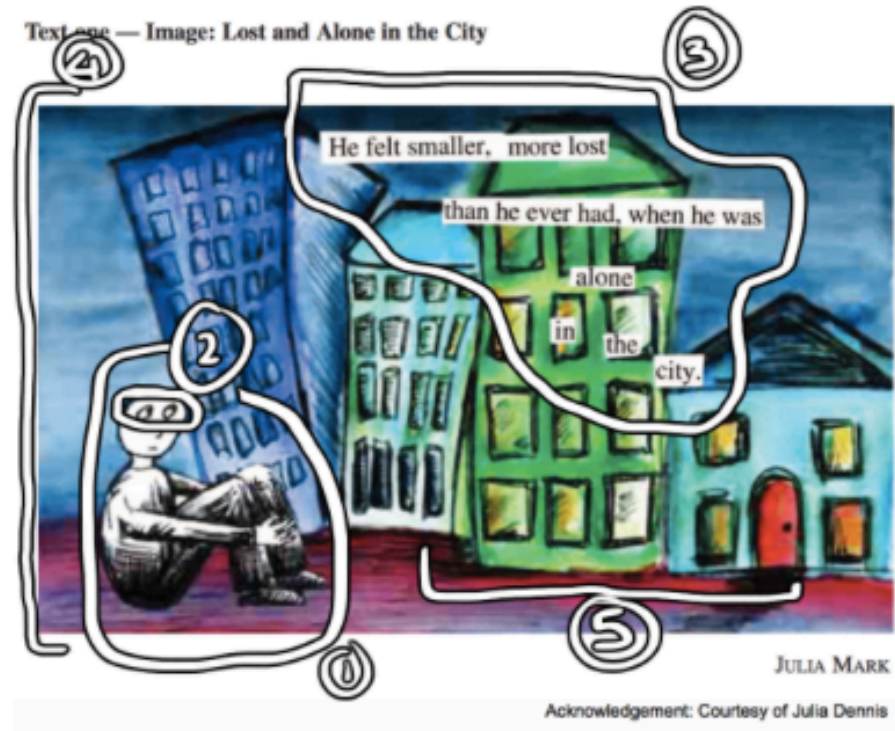
Texts one, two, three and four — Image, Poem, Memoir extract and Prose extract

- (e) Analyse how **one** of these texts portray the complex emotions resulting from a desire for connection.

5

## Example

Our example has a few really obvious visual techniques as well as some subtler ones we can pick out.



1. **Colour contrast** – black and white figure contrasts with colour background, symbolic of 'grey' mood and not fitting in
2. **Gaze** – offer gaze, creates a vector from the character's eyes to the text, encourages audience to read the words
3. **Text** – symbolically appears 'cut-out' and disjointed, word connotations of "smaller", "lost" and "alone"
4. **Colour** – the whole image is in rich, saturated colours to better contrast the black and white figure
5. **Angles** – the buildings/houses all appear at different angles, creating a sense of being off-kilter or unbalanced

Texts one, two, three and four — Image, Poem, Memoir extract and  
Prose extract

- (e) Analyse how one of these texts portray the complex emotions resulting from a desire for connection. 5

Having identified key points, let's break down what each one means.

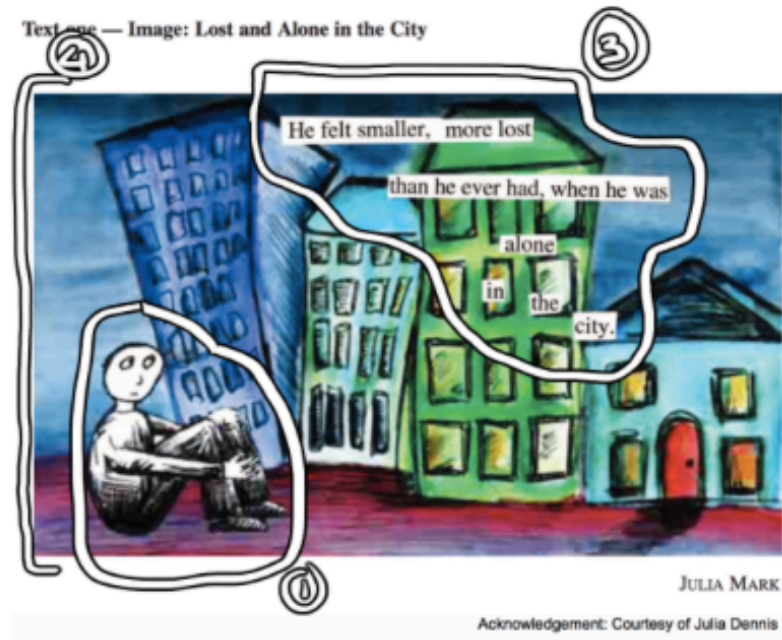
**Analyse** – The markers are looking for you to use techniques from the text to break down what the text is actually saying. The best way to tackle the example is by using the 'TEE' method to show how the text represents an overall idea.

**Portray** – Portray is basically the fancy way of saying 'show'! This means that we want to be looking at specific examples from the text – our techniques – and how they show something (the complex emotions/desire for connection).

**Complex emotions** – The markers want you to think of emotions in a more sophisticated way – instead of just saying "he's sad" think about why he's sad, how we know that he's sad, etc. Also try to think of other emotions that a character may be feeling and how they conflict. Maybe a character is happy but also nervous, or sad but also relieved? These are things to consider when thinking about "complex" emotions.

**Desire for connection** – This is what our complex emotions should be about! Make sure that all the emotions you talk about link back to a character wanted to 'connect' or belong in some way, and talk about how the text shows that (visual techniques).

Now to choose our best 3 techniques to focus on in our response!



**Colour contrast** – black and white figure contrasts with colour background, symbolic of ‘grey’ mood and not fitting in. Shows that character is aware of their lack of connection and is saddened by it.

**Text** – symbolically appears ‘cut-out’ and disjointed, word connotations of “smaller”, “lost” and “alone”. Emphasises character’s lack of connection and the negative impact his desire for connection has on his emotions.

**Colour** – the whole image is in rich, saturated colours to better contrast the black and white figure. Shows the ‘outside’ as bright and happy, making it clear that the character would desire to be connected with it and enjoy more positive emotions.

## Example

*“The complex emotions resulting from a desire for connection is effectively portrayed in text one through its use of contrast, text and colour.*

*The figure in the lower left corner of the image is the most salient feature, his black and white colouring creating a high contrast with the otherwise colourful background. This choice of colour to greyscale contrast creates an immediate sense that the character lacks a connection to the world around him, which results in his own sadness or ‘grey’ mood. The text in the upper right confirms this, not only through the negative connotations of words such as “smaller”, “lost” and “alone”, but also through its stylisation as ‘cut out’ fragments. This emphasises the sense of disjointedness and disconnection borne of lacking connection and reinforces the character’s emotions of isolation and melancholy. Finally, the colour used in the rest of the image is rich and vibrant, a clear choice made to present the ‘outside world’ as desirable and full of colour. This prompts the audience to consider that the character clearly desires connections with this world, but seems reluctant to make them. This reveals a more complex emotional situation as he seems to actively choose to remain isolated, perhaps out of fear of rejection.*

*Overall the image presents a complex insight into how a desire for connection can result in complex emotions, as the character seems to both desire connections and actively avoid them. Thus it is through contrast, text and colour that text one effectively portrays how complex emotions can result from a desire for connection.”*