

Patrícia Dziaková

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8034-0778>
<patricia.karnisova@smail.unipo.sk>

Radoslav Rusňák

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7363-9847>
<radoslav.rusnak@unipo.sk>

University of Prešov, Faculty of Education, Prešov, Slovakia

From Outsider to Outsiders

Symbolic Meaning of the Image and Text of Shaun Tan's Work in the Context of Migration and the Inner Experience of Outsiderness

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The paper provides a short overview of the current state of original Slovak literary works with the theme of migration and the interpretation of selected works of Shaun Tan available in Slovak translation, addressing the discussed issues from various perspectives of inner outsidersness. Migration is a topic that regularly appears in political and educational debates across European countries, and the Slovak Republic, which belongs to culturally homogeneous countries, is no exception. This could be the reason why Slovak citizens find it more difficult to accept the arrival of new cultures and nationalities. One of the ways to adapt (Slovak) children to a multicultural environment and help them understand the feelings of their new (immigrant) classmates could be to read fiction stories with such themes. Through “books as windows”, the child reader reshapes his or her mental representation of the world, which can result in being more open to new cultures.

Keywords: migration, inner outsidersness, picturebook, graphic novel, Shaun Tan

In 2022, the number of legal migrants in Slovakia increased by almost three times compared to the previous year, and the number of illegal migrants by almost seven times (Bureau of Border and Foreign Police of the Presidium of the Police Force SR 2022). Most of the migrants come to Slovakia from Ukraine and Syria, countries that

are in military conflict. Given the reasons for the departure of these migrants from their home country, it is essential for the process of integration into society to be as simple as possible. Sociological research on the perception of foreigners (European Commission 2019; Gallo Kriglerová et al. 2021) has long indicated that Slovak citizens tend to prefer cultural homogeneity over cultural diversity. In addition, there is a prevailing opinion that allowing a foreigner to retain his or her own cultural identity will have a devastating impact on the national culture (Gallo Kriglerová et al. 2021). These attitudes are not exclusive to the adult generation but also manifest among children and youth (Gallo Kriglerová and Kadlečíková 2009; Kalmárová et al. 2017). A significant component shaping attitudes is the information conveyed, not information acquired directly. Slovaks primarily gather information about migrants from the media, which often present the topic with negative connotations, reinforcing the representation of migrants laden with stereotypes and prejudice in the minds of recipients. On the other hand, determinants of positive attitudes are direct experiences with migrants and the acquisition of information about other cultures through literature. This underscores the conditional nature of reading and cultural competence (Kalmárová et al. 2017). In the case of child readers, an artistic text, engaging the reader emotionally through aesthetic experiences, might be more suitable than a factual text. In light of the aforementioned interdependence of reading and cultural competence, this paper aims to critically examine the literary representation of migration within the realm of fiction suitable for child readers. This analysis will encompass both original literary works and the translated works *The Arrival* (originally published in 2006; in Czech translation *Nový svět* 2012) and *The Lost Thing* (originally 2000; in Slovak translation *Stratená vec*, 2014) by Shaun Tan. In conjunction with our thematic exploration of migration within Tan's works, this study will also engage in a critical analysis of potential places of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1989), as well as visual or visual-verbal metaphors (Coats 2019). These elements may serve as a foundation for interpretive activities with child recipients in educational practice.

The theme of migration and the search for a new home in Slovak prose for children

The motif of migration and the search for a new home appears sporadically in original literary works. The increased interest in this issue is particularly noticeable after 2015 when a larger number of migrants entered Europe (Stanislavová 2019). In works of Slovak authors, adventurous *sužets* are more common than the thematisation of inner outsidership and the psychological exploration of the inner world and emotions of migrant characters. The themes often revolve around (racially motivated) interpersonal conflicts between migrants and the majority, or their journey or escape to a new land. The reason why Slovak authors tend to choose such a thematic orientation may lie in the difficulty for them, as authors from the majority culture or nation, to authentically explore the feelings of migrants without personal experience. In this case, Krishna Bista (2012) discusses the concept of outsider-authorship in multicultural literature, which

refers to situations in which a lack of personal familiarity with a topic can limit an individual's writing proficiency or imaginative capacity.

As a fragmentary motif, the theme of migration is found in *Príbeh o harmonikárovi* [The Story of the Accordion Player] in the book *Dita, 30 mušiek svetlušiek a iné príbehy* [Dita, 30 Fireflies and Other Stories] (2014) by Jana Bodnárová. Through the narrative lens of the little protagonist Dita, the story describes a situation involving a xenophobically motivated conflict, with the victim being a Ukrainian accordion player. Dita, as an empathetic and fearless child, protects the accordion player from attackers in the presence of adult onlookers, thus becoming a role model of prosocial behaviour. However, the text does not directly reveal anything about the feelings of the accordion player as a migrant, leaving his emotions in that situation open for the reader's reconstruction in places of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1989). Similarly, the theme of migration is artistically depicted in Marek Vadas's work *Útek* [Escape] (2016). The narrative centres on a boy protagonist who is compelled to leave his homeland. The reason for his departure is the emergence of the disease of gluttony, which serves as a symbolic representation of the pervasive issue of greed and consumption within society. Consequently, the protagonist is forced to escape from imminent peril by crossing multiple countries, each of which serves as an allegory of the challenges faced by contemporary society in relation to the theme of migration. These challenges encompass a range of issues, including communication barriers, avarice, forced conformity, bureaucratic obstacles, egoism, apathy or xenophobia. Although the book has been positively reviewed by literary critics from an artistic point of view (Stanislavová 2019), the work focuses on the thematisation of the journey rather than the protagonist's actual inner experience of the journey.

The motif of escape also appears in another work by the Slovak author Miroslava Grajciarová, titled *Slony kapitána MiGranta* [The Elephants of Captain MiGrant] (2018). In this case, the theme is not metaphorically depicted but is rather developed in an explicit and even descriptive manner. The protagonists of the story (elephants) are forced to leave their home (Africa) for existential reasons – the fall of burning stars, which is an allusion to bombing. Besides excessive descriptiveness and the lack of character psychologisation, the explicit happy ending is problematic in terms of artistic quality. It relies on the need for the forced acculturation of the literary heroes to a new environment. The elephants must deny their identity, as assimilating into the new environment is conditioned by learning the language and adapting to life on a housing estate. Such a portrayal sends an inappropriate signal of the violent necessity of assimilation to child readers, whether from the majority or minority culture.

The last of the original literary works by Slovak authors is the comic book *Uletenci* [Flyaways] (Fajnorová and Marinová 2018), created by collecting stories from young migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Iraq. The stories are based on presenting the contrasts between life in their home country and Slovakia. Although the idea of presenting processes from the so-called insider's perspective (Bista 2012) of migrants is considered beneficial and authentic, this text is dominated by informativeness

and descriptiveness over aesthetics and experience. Therefore, such a text may not have any significant potential to emotionally engage child readers and evoke empathy towards migrants through a literary text, as it prioritises the cognitive over the aesthetic function¹ (Stanislavová 2019).

Shaun Tan's outsiders

The problem in Slovak works on this topic lies in the absence of texts that thematise the intrapersonal conflict and inner experiences of migrant characters authentically, without any obvious effort to formatively impact the reader. For this reason, we have chosen to focus on the portrayal of migration (within the context of inner outsidersness) in available translated literature. We selected an author insider (Bista 2012) for whom the theme of migration,² different cultures, and worlds is an immanent part of his poetics.³ Shaun Tan is the creator of an unpredictable visual narrative that can resonate with both child and adult audiences. His work is imbued with a fascination for blurring the boundaries between the normal and the different, the familiar and the foreign, and is filled with introverted or peculiar beings striving to find their place in this world. Tan's poetics seem to emanate from his personal life and his outsider identity as a partial Chinese, Malaysian, Irish, Scottish, and Englishman from Perth in Western Australia (Tan 2011a; Tan 2011b; Earle 2016; Hoque 2022). In addition, we chose Tan's works also due to their format, where visuals dominate over verbal text. The minimalism or even absence of words in Tan's works, however, does not diminish their expressiveness; on the contrary, visuals compensate for the inability to verbally articulate feelings.⁴ Moreover, emotional experiences are usually better captured and received in abstract form (e.g. images or music) than in text alone (Reynolds 2007). In this context, empirical research (Farell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010; Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán 2014; Arizpe et al. 2014) has demonstrated that immigrant children experiencing challenges with

¹ The children's book *Dievčatko, ktoré malo oči otvorené* [The Girl That Had Her Eyes Opened], a collaborative effort between the European Commission and the authors Philippe Thito and Anna Sarvira, published in 2023, was created with a similar purpose to that of *Uletenci*. This book seeks to shed light on the plight of individuals fleeing conflict in Ukraine through the little girl protagonist, but because of the predominance of the ethical over the aesthetic function, it allocates minimal attention to thematising their inner feelings of losing their home. Despite its perceived lack of artistic merit and tendentious construction, the book managed to garner significant media attention.

² In addition to the thematic level, migration is also present in Tan's work in a different, metaphorical way. The author himself claims that his stories migrate to different countries, migrate through different genres, and migrate between childhood and adulthood (Earle 2016).

³ The theme of migration also appears in Tan's narrative *Eric* (originally 2010; in Czech translation *Erik*, 2011), which has not yet been translated into the Slovak language. The motif of not fitting in and inner outsidersness is subtly present throughout his oeuvre. Among the works available in Czech translation we can mention, for example, *Cicada* (originally 2018; in Czech translation *Cikáda*, 2018) and *Tales from the Inner City* (originally 2018; in Czech translation *Příběhy z vnitřního města*, 2019).

⁴ The author's comment on places of indeterminacy in his works (Earle 2016: 391): "I do consider readers of my work as co-creators, needing to invest meaning into illustrative stories that are really half-finished, deliberately incomplete".

language or literacy skills can engage with picturebooks or graphic novels at even a more sophisticated level than non-immigrant children. This enhanced engagement is facilitated by their ability to draw on personal experiences related to migration, which enables them to infer meaning from the illustrations even without verbal text.

***The Arrival*: embracing the unknown world**

Upon entering a novel milieu, immigrants frequently experience sentiments of alienation and a lack of comprehension of societal norms and expectations. Shaun Tan has authentically thematised this internal struggle of unfamiliarity and disorientation within a new setting in the work *The Arrival*⁵. *The Arrival* can be described as a wordless graphic novel,⁶ but to the average reader the work might rather resemble a family album. The images, rendered in earthy, greyish, and sepia tones, intensifying the nostalgic and melancholic atmosphere⁷ of someone's memories, carry the whole narrative. They are spatially arranged side by side as in a photo album across 128 pages. The images are divided into six narrative sequences, within which the recipient is gradually introduced to the story of a man⁸ who is forced to leave his family and find a new home in a foreign world. However, since Tan is not only a skilled writer and illustrator but also a filmmaker, the scenes in the images may also evoke individual frames of an old silent film (Tan 2011a).

Universality versus the uniqueness of the story

Tan does not reveal the specific reasons why the man must leave his home. However, they are materialised in dark, massive, creeping, spiky shadows that pervade the home environment on the first pages of the book. While this symbol is somewhat abstract, it works as a visual metaphor (Coats 2019) that gives the recipient a clear signal of something gloomy and even frightening, evoking feelings of fear.⁹ At the same time,

⁵ *The Arrival* has been awarded a multitude of prestigious literary awards on a global scale. Notably, it received the *Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Short Story* (2006), the *New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books Award* (2007), the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award* (2008), and we can mention the French translation of *The Arrival*, titled *Là où vont nos pères*, which won the *Angoulême International Comics Festival Prize for Best Comic Book* (2008).

⁶ According to the author himself, at the beginning of the book's creation it was planned in the format of a 32-page picturebook. Gradually, however, he came to realise that in this format his illustrations seemed "emotionally vapid" in relation to the complexity of the immigrants' experiences. The inspiration for the final format of the book came from Raymond Briggs' wordless picturebook *The Snowman*, which struck him for its nostalgic atmosphere, crossing the boundaries of language and ambiguity of meaning (Tan 2011a).

⁷ Artistic techniques that enhance the melancholic and nostalgic atmosphere of the story in *The Arrival* were analysed in an article by Giorgio Busi Rizzi (2021).

⁸ Tan (2011a; 2011b) admitted that the likeness of the man, the protagonist of *The Arrival*, was inspired by himself.

⁹ In the Arizpe et al. (2014a) research, children interpreted the reason for the protagonist's departure (as a potential place of indeterminacy) in a variety of ways. Some identified looking for a new job as the cause, while others suggested that war, torture or some form of danger might be the reason.

Tan's decision not to reveal the specific reasons for the departure engages the recipient in interpretation.¹⁰ Such an approach allows the recipient to project thoughts and feelings and attribute specific threats with the ominous shadows which may for some recipients signify a poor economic or political situation, while for others it could imply war. Simultaneously, the visual metaphor of shadows implicitly suggests that the story does not have to be tied to a specific protagonist but could be the story of many. This is also reflected in other aspects of the book, such as the depictions of people on the front and back endpapers. Although their individual stories may vary and they differ in race, age, gender, and religion, they likely share the same immigrant status. A strong symbol implicitly reinforcing the anonymous¹¹ and, in such a context, the "universal" character of the story is the illustration of a paper bird, a message that the protagonist sends home, and which disappears in the flight of other birds — messages from people who share a similar immigrant status, but surely with a different story behind it. Tan also decided not to tie the story to any specific place or time, and the protagonist himself, along with other characters appearing in the story, remains anonymous throughout (cf. Earle 2016; Busi Rizzi 2021). The likely rationale behind the author's decision to render this narrative ambiguous or indeterminate is to illustrate the most common challenges confronted by immigrants, such as problems with finding accommodation and a job, misunderstanding in communication, or not understanding cultural or societal norms. It is precisely the elements of anonymity and indeterminacy, as well as the utilisation of symbols and visual metaphors, that contribute to the universality of the narrative in this context.¹² These components collectively enhance the narrative's capacity to resonate across diverse audiences, thereby facilitating a broader understanding and interpretation of its themes and messages. However, in the discourse of literary studies, the notion of "universality" within the narrative has not been without its critiques (Banerjee 2016; Dalmaso and Madella 2016; Busi Rizzi 2021). Some literary critics have raised concerns regarding various elements of the work, including the ethnic identity of the protagonist¹³

¹⁰ Although the specific reasons for the protagonist's departure from the country are materialised through the symbol of shadows, the author specifies that the reason has an economic character in his own comments on the book on the website *shauntanet.com* (Tan n.d.a): "A man leaves his wife and child in an impoverished town, seeking better prospects in an unknown country on the other side of a vast ocean".

¹¹ Tan (2011a) claims that the strategy of anonymity in the narrative is analogous to the situation of migrants in Australia, who are often perceived as anonymous in a political or social context.

¹² The author's comment on the "universal" dimension of the story (Tan n.d.a): "In researching a variety of other migrant stories, beginning with post-war Australia and then broadening out to periods of mass-migration to the US around 1900, it was the day-to-day details that seemed most telling and suggested some common, universal human experiences. I was reminded that migration is a fundamental part of all human history, both in the distant and recent past. On gathering further anecdotes of overseas-born friends – and my wife who comes from Finland – as well as looking at old photographs and documents, I became aware of the many common problems faced by all migrants, regardless of nationality and destination: grappling with language difficulties, crushing home-sickness, poverty, a loss of social status and recognisable qualifications, not to mention the separation from loved ones".

¹³ The protagonist of the story has Eurasian facial features, and also his clothes and the symbol of bread that he draws in an attempt to get food refer to his belonging to Western culture (Banerjee 2016).

and the portrayal of an ideal migrant and perfect process of accommodation, which they argue may disproportionately cater to a Western audience. Nevertheless, our interpretation of “universality” diverges from this critique; we contend that the author endeavours to convey a shared emotional experience among migrants, and in such a context we consider the story as universal. While it is imperative to acknowledge the distinctiveness of each migrant’s narrative, shaped by unique circumstances, our focus lies in the exploration of common sentiments associated with feelings of alienation and the challenges of navigating the outsider’s role in a new society. This perspective is further substantiated by numerous studies (Farell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010; Arizpe et al. 2014) indicating that *The Arrival* resonates emotionally with readers across diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, thereby reinforcing the narrative’s broader relevance and impact.¹⁴

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the seemingly universal and nostalgic nature of the immigrant’s experience narrative, Tan endeavours to prevent the recipient from assuming the role of a detached observer watching a story unfold outside his person that has happened to someone, somewhere, sometime. And that is why he draws the reader into the story by experimenting with focalisation. In addition to direct (as a viewer) focalisation, we also encounter indirect focalisation through the characters (O’Brien 2014). Tan (2011a) posits that, despite the protagonist’s anonymity, he seeks to convey specific details of the protagonist’s life to foster empathy in the recipient. Consequently, the author facilitates an immersive experience by allowing the recipient to engage with the protagonist’s perspective in selected panels by using indirect focalisation through the protagonist, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the protagonist’s circumstances through a first-person lens (O’Brien 2014). One illustrative example can be found in the depiction of the protagonist’s hands holding a family photograph. This particular shot technique creates an effect whereby the protagonist’s hands appear to belong to the recipient, thereby fostering a sense of identification. Consequently, it may seem as though the photograph is not being observed by the protagonist himself, but rather by the recipient, who is positioned in the protagonist’s shoes. Another way of experimenting with focalisation is the incorporation of parallel narratives featuring other anonymous migrants whom the protagonist encounters throughout the story. Through these parallel narratives and the shifting of focalisation from the protagonist to these other migrants — each of whom serves as the protagonist of their own respective

¹⁴ The potential of the wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* as a pedagogical tool for fostering inferential thinking in the comprehension processes of immigrant children (aged 10–12 years old) has been explored in complex research conducted by Evelyn Arizpe et al. (2014a). This work highlights the efficacy of visual narratives in enhancing cognitive engagement and interpretative skills among young readers navigating complex themes of migration and identity. In this study, participants generated parallel verbal narratives in response to a pictorial story. The authors emphasised that these verbal narratives were significantly reflective of the participants’ literacy and life experiences with their own migration journey. This observation supports the thesis that the presence of places of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1989) within the text allows the recipient to assume the role of a co-creator, thereby facilitating a dynamic process of creative reinterpretation and cognitive engagement within their consciousness.

stories — Tan seeks to transcend the conventional structure of a singular narrative. This approach allows for the presentation of a more intricate and nuanced depiction of the migrant experience, thereby enriching the overall narrative complexity and uniqueness.

It is worth mentioning one more form of character-bound focalisation, in which Tan gives the recipient the opportunity to be not only in the role of an immigrant, but also on the side of a character from the majority, receiving culture. The aforementioned focalisation approach is exemplified in the visual narrative, as we perceive the protagonist through the perspective of an officer who inspects a male immigrant in a foreign land. Such a technique engenders vicarious engagement, prompting the reader to confront their own emotions and reflections as they gaze upon the bewildered countenance of the immigrant. Taking on the individual social perspectives of the protagonist, other migrants and a representative of the receiving culture, gives the potential recipient the space to confront his or her own emotions in individual roles.

Contrast in the portrayal of characters and space as a visual metaphor of outsidersness

Visual symbolism is a significant component of the work, which can communicate feelings more effectively than verbal text. The author portrays the outsider's feelings of peculiarity and foreignness, as well as the sense of not fitting into the new society, by creating a contrast in the depiction of the characters and the environment. While the characters are portrayed realistically, almost photographically, the depiction of the space has a surreal character that combines the past with the future (Farell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010; Earle 2016). It represents a massive, over-mechanised space resembling a factory. The character of the environment and the size of objects probably aim to evoke feelings of uniformity, coldness, and the environment's indifference to the individual. Although some symbols (such as the statue of two men shaking hands as a sign of friendship, representing the immigrants' first contact with the new land) suggest that the country is open to new cultures, the recurring leitmotif of paper birds also hints at hope for a positive outcome for the protagonist (cf. Banerjee 2016; Busi Rizzi 2021).

In the “foreign” world the protagonist enters, strange devices, modes of transportation, beings, and things that are an integral part of the author's poetics appear. The visual representation of the strangeness of the new world, contrasted with the realistic drawing of characters, is a metaphor for perhaps only the subjectively fictionalised perception of the new country by immigrants (Banerjee 2016). In addition to the inability to understand the realia of the new world (customs, food, transportation, etc.), a significant challenge for foreigners in adapting to the new environment is the language barrier (Dalmaso and Madella 2016; Earle 2016). Although *The Arrival* is wordless, this fictional world can feel quite noisy to the recipient due to the presence of many characters, advertisements or references (Busi Rizzi 2021). To help create a mental representation of the noise and incomprehensibility of the city, Tan introduces a recipient

with a newly invented graphic language¹⁵ consisting of various types of lines, marks, and symbols. This seemingly negligible detail reveals the thoughtfulness of the idea to allow the reader to empathise with the authentic experience of the protagonist because even the reader must decode what each symbol might mean. The feelings of confusion and even frustration that automatically arise in the recipient may cause the unconscious introjection of the recipient into the experience of the immigrant's outsider position. The aforementioned sentiments of helplessness and frustration while experiencing a new language were notably observed among immigrant children as articulated in the research conducted by Evelyn Arizpe, Teresa Colomer and Martínez-Roldán (2014). These children instinctively began to contextualise their challenges associated with the acquisition of a second language, alongside their emotional responses to the potential loss of their native language while experiencing *The Arrival*.

The process of accommodation

From an unwelcoming environment, misunderstandings, and the protagonist's unsuccessful attempts to accommodate, Tan gradually transitions to catharsis,¹⁶ easing the hostility of the unfamiliar environment by providing the protagonist with a companion in the story. The companion is a mute creature – a peculiar-looking domestic pet that faithfully accompanies the man. The acceptance of this domestic pet is simultaneously a symbol in the story, indicating that the man is ready to embrace a new culture in which such peculiar creatures are an immanent part. The acceptance of an element from a foreign culture initiates the protagonist's process of accommodation to the environment. Another interesting perspective on the process of accommodation experienced by Tan's protagonist is offered by Bidisha Banerjee (2016), using a material culture framework to elucidate this transformation. The author notes that common objects that the protagonist brings to a new environment – such as a paper bird, a photograph and a hat – serve as leitmotifs throughout the story and help the protagonist to domesticate the new home space. In the final passages of the book, recipients can notice that these personal items coexist with elements of the new culture in the protagonist's home, symbolising the protagonist's image of a new immigrant identity. This coexistence reflects the protagonist's evolving concept of identity as a new immigrant, and highlights the complex relationship between material culture and personal adaptation.

Within the realm of visual language, the process of the protagonist's experience from a state of alienation to one of integration into a new land is depicted through the deliberate shift in the colour palette. Moving from cooler, more detached hues to

¹⁵ The visual representation of language in *The Arrival* was addressed in an article by Smiljana Narančić Kovač (2019).

¹⁶ We assume that in the field of emotionally demanding literary texts, it is necessary for a moment of catharsis to occur in the story, including elements of an optimistic resolution or a semblance of hope, given the emotional vulnerability of child recipients (cf. Reynolds 2007).

warmer and more inviting tones, the author effectively conveys the process of gradual accommodation experienced by the protagonist (cf. Busi Rizzi 2021). This strategic use of colour serves as a visual metaphor for the protagonist's journey towards understanding and assimilation within an unfamiliar environment. Following up the symbolic usage of the colour palette and luminosity in the narrative, Karen Coats (2019) posits that children, even at a young age, possess the cognitive ability to comprehend the visual metaphor of light and darkness. Drawing from their personal experiences, these young individuals instinctively associate dark environments with feelings of danger and negative emotions. This is because children naturally tend to associate dark places as a state of separation from their primary caregivers, which can evoke a sense of vulnerability and fear. The ability of child recipients to understand a conceptual metaphor of colour usage in *The Arrival* was confirmed by research conducted by Maureen Farrell, Evelyn Arizpe and Julie McAdam (2010). The research revealed that child participants demonstrated an awareness of the use of colour in the book, specifically regarding its intensity and luminosity. Participants interpreted that Tan employed a specific colour palette to evoke a sense of sadness within the narrative, while others recognised that the manipulation of light was indicative of the representation of memories.

However, the hope for accommodation to the foreign environment is most prominent in the protagonist's interactions with other immigrants who, upon their arrival in the country, felt the same way as he did. In these characters, Tan employs parallel retrospective scenes, placing recipients in their memories, colourfully represented by faded and dark shades of grey. The people the man encounters, like him, had to give up their own homes under (more or less) difficult conditions. The reconstruction of their reasons for leaving is again symbolic and left to the reader's interpretation (e.g., men who resemble exterminators with peculiar vacuum devices as a possible symbol of genocide or political persecution), although some images communicate the reason clearly (e.g., war). It is the solidarity in shared destinies that eventually leads the man to stop struggling with the foreignness of the environment (Banerjee 2016). He begins to understand the language, food, the way of living, the conditions of the new world, and finds a job. The climax of the story is the arrival of the man's family in the new world. The immigrant's story, initially very gloomy, thus ends happily, the man and his family becoming part of a world that is no longer foreign to them but has become their new home. On the other hand, Renata Lucena Dalmaso and Thayse Madella (2016) offer a critical perspective of the narrative's conclusion and its resolution of the central conflict, framing it as colonial from an imperialist and hegemonic perspective. They contend that the story's closed ending, coupled with its depiction of an idealised and fully acculturated immigrant family, may inadvertently perpetuate a colonial framework concerning migration (similarly stated by Banerjee 2016). Nevertheless, when considering the potential audience of child or adolescent recipients, the presence of an optimistic conclusion and the cathartic resolution of the narrative may be deemed beneficial, as it may resonate with their own lived experiences and aspirations (compare with Arizpe,

Colomer and Martínez-Roldán 2014).¹⁷ This duality highlights the tension between critical literary interpretation and the psychological needs of younger recipients.¹⁸

The Arrival is a work depicting the process of transforming an outsider into an insider in a country that was initially foreign to him. The extensive space of unspoken or only hinted facts (the reasons for the immigrant's departure, symbols, the protagonist's emotions) become crucial moments that should be communicated to child readers. By completing these spaces by projecting one's own perspective, the story becomes unique for each child reader.

The Lost Thing: standing out in a world of similarity

*The Lost Thing*¹⁹ was the first book²⁰ Shaun Tan wrote and drew and is the only book that has been translated into Slovak. Even though it is not a book where the issue of migration is explicitly present, it deals with the theme of belonging, feeling one's distinctiveness and not fitting into a new society (Hoque 2022). While in its textual form, it might be a simple story of an encounter or rather discovery of a peculiar entity – the Lost Thing, the visual discourse is what adds additional dimensions and meanings to the work, relating to politics, the environment, art, disabilities, and many others. Shaun Tan himself claims that even after such a long time since creating this title, he gradually continues to uncover unconsciously hidden additional layers of its meanings (Tan 2011c).²¹

¹⁷ In relation to emotionally demanding topics, to which the topic of migration and hope for accommodation undoubtedly belongs, Reynolds (2007) says that whatever appears in the pages of children's books and no matter how realistic the portrayal of a negative emotion may be, bearing in mind the child recipient, it is important to bring a hint of optimism and catharsis to the story.

¹⁸ Pertaining to the cathartic experience illustrated in *The Arrival*, we conclude that Tan does not offer the reader the vision of a utopian resolution. In this respect, we align with the assertions of Evelyn Arizpe, Teresa Colomer and Carmen Martínez-Roldán (2014), who contend that Tan adeptly navigates the complexities of the migration experience by effectively juxtaposing its positive and negative dimensions.

¹⁹ The film adaptation of the book won an Oscar for *Best Animated Short Film* in 2011. In his acceptance speech, Tan (2011b: 2) concluded that "it's a wonderful irony that a story about a creature that everyone ignores, produced by a struggling four-person studio above a suburban laundromat, happens to be the centre of attention".

²⁰ The author wrote the book at the age of 25 and claims that it was written as self-criticism of his own ignorant attitude towards important things in his life and in society (Tan 2011b).

²¹ Nazneen Hoque (2022) in the study "Dislocation and Home Space in Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*" (2022) analyses the intertextual and intermedial references in the illustrations of the book (e.g. the title illustration of the book as a reference to the work of *Cahill Expressway* by Jeffrey Smart (1962)). An interesting observation is that the illustrations of the verification stamps make use of the symbol of the pig in what the author identifies as a reference to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). Such a reference symbolises an ironic and critical attitude towards bureaucracy, censorship, or the totalitarian system, which are topics that the adult reader can find in the second plan of the text. This interpretation of the intertextual reference is confirmed by the fact that Tan himself (2011b), in the study "Lost and Found: Thoughts on Childhood, Identity and Story", recalls the book *Animal Farm*, which his mother read to him during his childhood and which awakened in him an interest in problematic and ambiguous narratives.

An (in)organic protagonist as a visual metaphor of outsidersness

The Lost Thing, as one of the characters of the story, is a peculiar entity that straddles the line between an organic and inorganic creature.²² The Thing can be described²³ as a device (a kettle, a teapot) with animal-like limbs (tentacles, feet, wings, etc.) and the presence of human emotions (Capek 2018; Gal Drzewiecka 2019). The organic or human aspect is thus hidden beneath an inorganic hard metal outer shell, indicating the protagonist's internal uncertainty or attempt to hide from the world. The assumption of the organic nature of the Thing, apart from some parts of the body, is mainly anthropomorphism, which manifests itself in the presence of emotions (the Thing appears sad and lost) and an attempt to communicate with the boy. Although the Thing does not speak, it makes sounds, and emits steam from its tentacles, thus communicating non-verbally. The protagonist's inability to engage in verbal communication may arise from various factors, such as a language barrier, as well as excessive introversion or selective mutism caused by fear of the unfamiliar world in which it does not fit. With the issue of the (in)organic nature of the protagonist, parallels can be drawn with the feelings and situations of immigrants, who are often regarded by authorities or political bodies as inanimate objects that are the subject of many discussions but are not themselves invited to participate in them (similarly stated by Tan 2011a). The complexity of the untold inner experience of the Lost Thing in an over-technicalised world is finally enhanced by the fact that the author does not use any blank spaces in the illustrations, but all the illustrations are framed by a collage of various diagrams and texts from mathematics and physics textbooks (Tan n.d.b; Hoque 2022).

However, the outsidersness of the Thing is not only about internal self-isolation and the lack of ability to communicate but also extends to its visual representation. The Thing stands out from the crowd and from the environment in size, shape, and colour. Its striking red colour evidently does not fit into the conformist world of shades of grey, brown, or green. In its appearance, it also disrupts the culture of the city characterised by sameness, uniformity, and rigidity of behaviour or thinking. Such an attitude of society can be decoded only in the visual language of the depicted steampunk architecture of the space (Capek 2018) (illustrations of terraced houses and buildings with perfect

²² The reason why such an anthropomorphised being with an unclear identity was chosen is explained by the author himself as follows (Tan 2011a: 7): "The Lost Thing is more than a simple character, object, or idea. It represents anything that's beyond the reach of conventional understanding, something that cannot be named or placed, that 'just doesn't belong'. It's a concept that I felt could only be clearly expressed through detailed but inexplicable illustrations, where a subject is clear and obvious but cannot be mentioned directly. Bizarre, faceless, and unable to communicate, the bright red creature being ushered through a grey city – a place obsessed with codes and measurement – can only be understood in silence, some kind of metaphor for various social, political, and personal problems".

²³ The Lost Thing's identity and visual appearance can only be established through the visual discourse. The verbal text, devoid of explicit references to the Lost Thing's physical attributes, leaves the reader solely dependent upon the visual representation to interpret its form and essence.

geometric shapes, the presence of various prohibitions and orders, gears, etc.) and the portrayal of people in suits, walking and looking in the same direction with the same facial expressions (compare with Hoque 2022). In the process of creating the ‘retro-future’ chronotope (Tan n.d.b), the author articulates that his conceptual framework was significantly influenced by the tenets of economic rationalism prevalent in Australia in the 1990s. This ideological paradigm is distinguished by a marked departure from humanistic principles, prioritising quantifiable outcomes of economic advancement while systematically disregarding ethical considerations and moral implications (Earle 2016). Additionally, this image of the city’s inhabitants also suggests the societal attitude of the dominant culture, which rejects any element of a foreign culture. The contrast between the polished, industrial appearance of the environment and the clumsy appearance of the protagonist is thus a visual metaphor for the conflict between the majority and minority cultural identity.

The fact that the author unveils the identity of the Lost Thing, as well as societal attitudes toward it, exclusively through an illustrative component, underscores the sophisticated mastery of establishing a non-redundant yet fully complementary²⁴ relationship between word and image. Research carried out by Sandie Mourão (2013) examining the reception of *The Lost Thing* among young readers²⁵ indicates that audiences were acutely aware of the significance of the illustrative element, recognising its dual role in shaping the narrative and influencing the overarching message of the work. Participants of this study appreciated that this interplay between the visual and textual elements not only enriches the interpretative experience but also changes the moral message of the story. Concurrently, the participants were able to infer that the visual representation of the protagonist serves as an irony, highlighting the prevailing apathetic attitudes of society towards the Thing.

The encounter between the two outsiders

The story, however, is not so much the story of the Lost Thing, but rather the story of a boy²⁶ who finds it abandoned on the beach, and whose perspective is expressed in the work. The selection of an autodiegetic narrator, characterised by a colloquial narrative style²⁷ and the incorporation of handwritten text, significantly enhances the

²⁴ In defining the relationship between text and image in a picturebook, we follow the classification of Denise Matulka (2008), who distinguishes three forms of text-image relationships: symmetry, complementarity and contradiction. The complementary relationship means that the verbal and visual components in the work cooperate and complement each other’s narrative gaps.

²⁵ The research sample in the study consisted of participants aged 16–18, confirming the cross-over nature of the narrative.

²⁶ According to Tan (2011a; 2011b; Earle 2016), this boy character was based by his own teenage self. Similarly, the beach where the boy finds the Lost Thing is inspired by the beach next to which the author grew up.

²⁷ The narrative has a subtitle “A tale for those who have more important things to pay attention to” and it is written as a boy’s memory of what happened one summer: “So you want to hear a story? Well, I used to know a whole lot of pretty interesting ones. Some of them so funny you’d laugh yourself unconscious, others so terrible you’d never want to repeat them. But I can’t remember any

authenticity and personal dimension of the narrative (Tan n.d.b; Hoque 2022). The boy, the verbal narrator of the story, has a hobby of collecting unnecessary things, and that is most likely why he notices the Lost Thing. Since we enter the situation of finding the Thing in medias res, we do not know how it ended up on the beach, where it comes from, or how long it has stayed in that place. The “mystery” of this protagonist’s origin presents stimulating places of indeterminacy in the story (Ingarden 1989), which can be discussed with young readers.

The mutual “attraction” between the two characters is likely caused by the fact that the boy, in his essence, is like the Thing, an outsider in society – but for different reasons from the Thing (Karnišová 2020). Although this rather introverted boy belongs to the majority population, he represents a different element in society – an empathetic element, distinguishing him from indifferent people. It is empathy and interest that drive the boy’s determination to find a home for the Thing. During their journey, the two outsiders encounter either apathy or resistance towards the Lost Thing. The boy’s parents also label the Thing as dirty, and full of various diseases, and advise the boy to take it back to where he found it. We can assume that society considers indifference to be the most suitable way of behaving towards outsiders who do not meet societal norms. The apathetic attitude also becomes an alibistic justification for indifference that means no harm to anyone. Thus, the Thing is not our problem, and if we are not interested in something, we cannot harm it, and at the same time, the Thing cannot harm us. A very good strategy employed by Tan in the verbal discourse is that even though there is an autodiegetic narrator, he does not let him comment on personal sentiments regarding societal attitudes or those of his parents towards the Lost Thing. This deliberate choice facilitates the reader’s immersion into the mind of both characters, as well as into the mind of the silent majority. Consequently, this approach provides a platform for recipients to discuss and articulate the social perspectives of all characters in the story.

The phenomenon of social detachment from the protagonist is also manifested through the artistic portrayal of the relationship between the viewer and the object of observation, a concept exemplified in the visual technique of focalisation. While in *The Arrival* Tan explored focalisation techniques to a greater extent, in *The Lost Thing* he uses direct (as a viewer) focalisation (O’Brien 2014) most of the time. This deliberate choice suggests the author’s awareness of the potential for the Lost Thing to captivate but at the same time potentially unsettle or even frighten viewers, prompting a strategic positioning that allows them to observe the narrative unfold from a secure and distanced vantage point. By employing this focalisation technique, which presents the narrative of *The Lost Thing* from a distanced vantage point — such as a bird’s-eye perspective, a frog’s-eye perspective, or from the periphery of a building — the author effectively

of those. So I’ll just tell you the time I found that lost thing” (Tan 2000: 2). According to Gal Drzewiecka (2019), the pretended contentlessness or disinterestedness of the story told from the boy’s position can be understood as a purposeful narrative strategy. In this way, the author tries to provoke curiosity on the part of the recipient in terms of increased receptive effort in reconstructing the meaning of the narrative.

cultivates a sense of adventure and enhances the reader's investigative curiosity. As the author posits (Earle 2016: 396): "when faced with the unexpected, we might respond with either apathy, prejudice or curiosity. Of course the last one offers the only source of genuine hope: curiosity is really a kind of empathy, a will to find 'otherness' actually interesting rather than problematic, whether that be a person from another culture, a political idea, a tentacled creature, or any much smaller day-to-day encounter with the unanticipated".

Finding a place to fit in

After the boy's previously unsuccessful attempts to find the Thing a home with the help of a friend or at his parents' house, there is finally a glimmer of hope for the story's protagonists when the boy spots an ad in a newspaper clipping. It is a newspaper advertisement for an institute called "Departments of Odds and Ends" with the slogan "sweepus underum carpetae", which suggests to the attentive reader the nature of the activities that this institution will undertake (Hoque 2022). At the same time, this advertisement and the existence of such a place can become a potential stimulus to discuss the conceptual metaphor of "sweeping something or someone under the carpet" and the ethics of the existence of such places in the real world. Although this greyish, windowless building with a hospital-like smell, which should be a potential home or place of oblivion for the Thing, may map out a not-so-happy ending, Tan ultimately grants the reader catharsis. A mysterious character, whose visual appearance suggests the identity of an accommodated immigrant, comes to the protagonist's aid to find a new home for the Thing. The character is depicted as a being that, like the Thing, straddles the line between human and animal, has a short stature, and a tail peeks out from under its uniform. This character gives him a business card that transports both of them to a mysterious place called Utopia. Utopia, which becomes a new home for the Thing, is characterised by classical Roman architecture and a more positive atmosphere (Capek 2018). This is achieved through its colourfulness, the purity of the air (a blue sky in contrast to the greyish sky of the city), but especially the presence of similarly lost, strange-looking beings like the Thing. Utopia is the exact opposite of the previous environment, which can be called Dystopia (Karnišová 2020). This contrast in architecture, colours, and shapes visually distinguishes two different spaces: the world of equality (the cultural majority) and the world of otherness (the cultural minority). Another way Tan differentiates the distinct worlds, Dystopia and Utopia, is exemplified by the reader's physical engagement with the text. Specifically, the transition from a horizontal to a vertical orientation of the book upon entering Utopia symbolically underscores the idea that appreciating the beauty of a diverse multicultural society requires a change in perspective. However, the fictional construct of Utopia can also be interpreted through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1984), which delineates a real cultural, institutional, or discursive space that stands in contradiction to other societal spaces. Within this framework, the Utopia depicted in the narrative

embodies the heterotopia of deviance, serving as a locus for individuals who deviate from societal norms or average behaviours. This interpretation is implicitly confirmed by the fact that, in Foucault's perspective, heterotopia is not a freely accessible place for the public, because "heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault 1984: 25). In this context, we can notice that the entry of the boy and the Thing into Utopia is also contingent upon the possession of a card emblazoned with an arrow symbol, which is handed to him by a mysterious character.

While in *The Arrival* the process of accommodation is completed by accepting the new environment and culture, in this work, the Thing sheds the outsider position by finding a space where their distinctiveness becomes the norm. The story for the protagonist thus ends with an ambiguous "happy ending", indicating that even for the most peculiar being, there is a space where they fit in. However, the interpretation of the Utopia space can be twofold.²⁸ A positive interpretation may refer to the need to create a safe environment for immigrants where they will be accepted and able to cultivate their own cultural identity (Hoque 2022). On the other hand, a negative interpretation views Utopia as a segregated environment of heterotopia, a kind of cultural ghetto where the apathetic majority society seeks to remove non-fitting cultural minority beings. Which of these interpretations will be more acceptable for the young reader depends on their open-mindedness, and may be a possible place of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1989) that the teacher could use as a stimulus to discuss the question about belonging. As the author himself claims (Earle 2016: 393): "The real answers are therefore not in the work, a story or picture, but in the readers' contemplation of their own reactions to that work".

Conclusion

Nowadays, many teachers face the challenge of finding ways in the educational process to accommodate new students, immigrants, into the cultural majority environment. One potential option is the use of "books as windows" (Bishop 1990), which offer the majority child recipient a different perspective on the world, making them more aware and sensitive to the issues of migration. In relation to this theme, original Slovak literary works offer teachers texts with a dynamic plot, typically focused on the thematisation of the journey/escape of immigrants. Another characteristic of original works dealing with this issue is the presence of interpersonal conflicts between the majority and minority, which is, however, also the reason for Slovak teachers to try to avoid these literary texts. Teachers perceive thematically oriented texts as too emotionally demanding for the child recipient and as a threat for potential interpersonal conflict or portrayed violence which might lead to xenophobic behaviour or undesirable reactions (similarly stated in Dziak 2020). Even though we understand the concerns of

²⁸ In research conducted by Sandie Mourão (2013) on the reception of *The Lost Thing*, young readers tended to exhibit a more optimistic interpretation of the concept of Utopia. Participants in the research characterised this place as a manifestation of inclusivity, envisioning it as a perfectly created environment where diverse beings coexist in harmonious unity.

teachers or parents to protect children from this challenging situation, we agree with Reynolds (2007) who suggests that these themes and the resulting negative feelings are not exclusive to the adult world, but equally affect child recipients. One potential solution to this situation could involve selecting texts that emphasise the intrapersonal conflicts experienced by immigrants and the psychologisation of their internal sense of being outsiders, rather than selecting texts that focus solely on interpersonal conflicts. Although it is considered important for the child recipient to encounter texts that thematise the migrant journey or that deal with xenophobia, in terms of empathy development and introjection processes, books that address the intrapersonal conflict of migrants arriving in a new environment could be more meaningful. The purpose of this paper is to offer books that address the inner experiences of immigrants and, through a literary, aesthetic and narratological analysis, draw attention to aspects that should be communicated with child recipients. Our choice was two works by Shaun Tan, dealing with two situations in which the immigrant finds themselves in their inner world – experiencing the difference of the environment in relation to oneself (*The Arrival*) and feeling one's own distinctiveness in relation to the environment (*The Lost Thing*). The formative potential of these texts lies mainly in the fact that the child recipient must reconstruct and infer the inner experiences of the protagonists through their own interpretation in many places of indeterminacy (in both visual and verbal discourses), thus unconsciously completing the works. In addition to building literary discussion on the personal experiences of the child recipients, it is also important to develop visual literacy skills that the child may not be aware of without teacher guidance. These are compositional elements such as the use of a particular colour palette, light, point of view, illustrative style, or overall design (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán 2014). However, teachers should be aware that interpretation of these compositional elements and visual metaphors does not necessarily have to be verbal. In such a case, research on the response of immigrant child recipients to picturebooks and wordless books (Farell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010; Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán 2014; Arizpe et al. 2014) suggests that it could be useful to provide children with the opportunity of inner conversation with the implementation of visual strategies for responding to illustrations. This critical reading approach facilitates nonverbal engagement with images, allowing child recipients to articulate their questions, thoughts or reflections in written or drawing responses to visual stimuli.

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Patrícia Dziaková
Radoslav Rusňák

Sveučilište u Prešovu, Pedagoški fakultet, Prešov, Slovačka

Od autsajdera autsajderima

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Rad donosi kratak pregled aktualnoga stanja slovačkih književnih djela s temom migracije te interpretaciju odabranih djela Shauna Tana dostupnih u slovačkom prijevodu, pri čemu se razmatranim problemima pristupa iz različitih perspektiva unutrašnjega osjećaja autsajderstva. Migracija je tema koja se redovito pojavljuje u političkim i obrazovnim raspravama u europskim zemljama, a Slovačka, koja spada u kulturno homogenije zemlje, nije iznimka. To bi mogao biti jedan od razloga zašto Slovaci teže prihvaćaju ljude druge nacionalnosti i kulture. Jedan od načina na koji (slovačku) djecu možemo približiti multikulturnomu okruženju i pomoći im da razumiju osjećaje svojih novih (imigrantskih) vršnjaka jest čitanje fikcionalnih pripovijedi s takvim temama. Putem „knjiga kao prozora“ dječji čitatelj preoblikuje svoju mentalnu sliku svijeta, što može rezultirati većom otvorenošću prema drugim kulturama.

Ključne riječi: migracija, unutrašnje autsajderstvo, slikovnica, grafički roman, Shaun Tan