HSC Standard English
Module A, Elective 2: Distinctively Visual

Sample response: The Shoe-Horn Sonata

2015 HSC examination question:

Distinctive images offer a variety of perspectives on the world.

Compare how this is achieved in your prescribed text and ONE other related text of your own choosing.

Prescribed text: The Shoe-Horn Sonata, John Misto (play)
Related text: Rules of Summer, Shaun Tan (graphic novel)
Response by: Jane Sherlock

Images help us make sense of our world and provide different perspectives on how we might view it. This variety of perspectives is certainly evident through the distinctive images John Misto has created for us in his poignant and moving play, The Shoe-Horn Sonata, where we are shown both the kindness and cruelty of humanity. Similarly, Shaun Tan’s compelling graphic novel, Rules of Summer, offers distinctive and provocative images that share perspectives on the darker side of humanity.

In The Shoe-Horn Sonata Misto’s distinctively visual features are key to offering perspectives on such important human experiences as the resilience and courage of individuals against great adversity. The most compelling image is that of the women themselves: Bridie and Sheila are always on stage and their visual presence is a distinctively visual feature, forcing our focus onto these two women. The bright spotlight highlights Bridie, the ‘On Air’ sign reminds us that this is the setting for a documentary and her words are full of distinctive images as she recreates some of the wartime experiences: ‘Singapore’s lights were fully ablaze when the Japanese bombers came …’. The ferry’s sinking ‘like a wounded animal. Spilling oil instead of blood’ is a powerful simile conveying the violence of war, an idea that Misto reinforces through projected photographs throughout the whole play. 1940s posters for the Women’s army and Australian army nurses disembarking in Singapore ‘looking excited and quite happy’ act as an ironic and poignant contrast to the perspective created by Bridie’s recount. The deprivation and adversity of the prisoners of war are shown through slides of ‘children, stick-thin, obviously starving, dressed in rags, filthy’. Bridie and Sheila powerfully recreate their experiences and provide an insightful perspective on Japanese cruelty while showing their resilience and courage. In Act II, photographs of ‘emaciated male prisoners … starving, dying and covered in tropical ulcers’ are accompanied by Judy Garland singing ‘When you’re smiling’, again ironic but also conveying the inner strength of the soldiers. By this stage of the play, the combination of the women’s evocative dialogue, the effective
There are similarities and differences in the way Shaun Tan has offered his perspectives on our world. In the opening pages of *The Rules of Summer*, Shaun Tan has used his fascinating and distinctive visuals to represent the experiences of the two young boys where their relationship is challenged and rules are broken. The first double page is wordless. Our eye is drawn to the two boys huddled in the downstage section of the scene. The dull grey colours of a huge city landscape make them look small and afraid in this hostile and uninviting world. There is deliberately no natural life in the cold, concrete city landscape. The only relief from this bleakness is a clear, blue sky where our eye travels. The effect of these vectors suggests that the blue sky is where the boys want to escape from in their summer games. Like Misto, Tan also explores the darker side of human experiences and fear evoked by a tiny red sock hanging on an empty clothes line contrary the first rule: ‘never leave a red sock on the clothes line’. The boys are dwarfed by the barren, bleak backyard which is made more frightening by the high fence behind which is a gigantic red rabbit with a terrifying, piercing red eye. On the side of the page is a black raven that appears in all the rules; it acts as a distinctive visual symbol of life’s precariousness. The background is dark with little definition with the menacing addition of the occasional red reinforcing the danger of the unknown.

Symbolism is also present in the play offering us important perspectives on the more positive aspects of humanity. The shoe-horn starts its life as a utilitarian gift from Bridie’s soldier father, then keeps Sheila awake in the sea, is a valued metronome for the choir and is a chilling reminder of their fate when used as a digging tool for their dead friends. Most importantly though, it becomes a potent symbol for their own relationship; it becomes the catalyst for Sheila revealing the truth about the quinine tablets and the sacrifices she made for her friend, Bridie. Sheila’s recount to Bridie contrasts the visual beauty with the horror perceived through sounds: ‘beautiful sunsets – the mauves and golds and the nights. Filled with screams.’ Here the juxtaposition of nature’s beauty and man’s inhumanity offers us a rich perspective on human courage.

A positive perspective on humanity is also clearly evident in the ending of Shaun Tan’s *Rules of Summer*. Near the end, a double page is filled with colourful fruit of a regular size. However, in the bottom right hand corner of the page, the two young boys are seen playing musical instruments and suddenly the fruit becomes enlarged and the boys are dwarfed. The dominance of nature symbolised by the fruit offers a contrast to the beginning of the book when the boys are dwarfed by the cold, concrete city landscape. The bold and vibrant colours suggest the redemption the boys have made in their relationship.

Both texts provide contrasting perspectives on humanity, which help us realise the complexities of the human experience. Strongly crafted words
sustains main points or pictures act both separately and together to create imagery that conveys perspectives to the responder about the world.