Hansel & Gretel

CCSS-aligned Lesson Plan & Teacher's Guide

Hansel & Gretel
by Neil Gaiman
  & Lorenzo Mattotti
A TOON Graphic
ISBN (Trade): 978-1-935179-62-7
ISBN (Deluxe): 879-1-935179-65-8

THE *TOON* EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH TEAM:

Hsin Yu Chao, an illustrator and comic artist in her native Taiwan, is currently pursuing a master's degree in Arts Administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. Chao has worked for numerous galleries as well as for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Sasha Steinberg, who holds a BA in Comparative Literature from Vassar College and an MFA in Cartooning from the Center for Cartoon Studies, was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study political art in Russia.

TOON GRAPHICS FOR VISUAL READERS

TOON Graphics are comics and visual narratives that bring the text to life in a way that captures young readers' imaginations and makes them want to read on—and read more.

The very economy of comic books necessitates the use of a reader's imaginative powers. In comics, the images often imply rather than tell outright. Readers must learn to make connections between events to complete the narrative, helping them build their ability to visualize and to make "mental maps." A comic book also gives readers a great deal of visual context that can be used to investigate the thinking behind the characters' choices.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE ARTIST'S CHOICES

Look carefully at the artwork: it offers a subtext that at first is sensed only on a subliminal level by the reader and encourages rereading. It creates a sense of continuity for the action, and it can tell you about the art, architecture, and clothing of a specific time period. It may present the atmosphere, landscape, and flora and fauna of another time or of another part of the world.

Facial expressions and body language reveal subtle aspects of characters' personalities beyond what can be expressed by words.

READ AND REREAD!

Readers can compare comic book artists' styles and evaluate how different authors get their point across in different ways. In investigating the author's choices, a young reader begins to gain a sense of how all literary and art forms can be used to convey the author's central ideas. The world of TOON Books, TOON Graphics, and of comic book art is rich and varied. Making meaning out of reading with the aid of visuals may be the best way to become a lifelong reader, one who knows how to read for pleasure and for information—a reader who *LOVES* to read.

LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In addition to providing students with the tools to master verbal literacy, each TOON Graphic offers a unique focus on visual learning. The 21st Century has seen a shift where literacy has been redefined to include visual literacy. Our unique lesson plans and teacher's guides help instructors and students alike develop the vocabulary and framework necessary to discuss visual expressions, structure, and meaning in the classroom.

For schools that follow the ELA Common Core, TOON Graphics lesson plans offer examples of how to best utilize our books to satisfy a full range of state standards. The Common Core's learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade, and were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. Though this book can be used in any grade, we focused this lesson plan on state standards for grades 4 and 5. Quenstions included in this guide fulfill the following standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Reading: Literature (RL).4-5.1-10
Students build skills in reading and comprehending literature independently and proficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Reading: Informational Text (RI).4-5.4, 9
Students determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text. Students integrate information from several texts in order to speak knowledgeably on a subject.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Speaking and Listening (SL).4-5.1
Students engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partenrs, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Speaking and Listening (SL).4-5.2
Students summarize a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Speaking and Listening (SL).4-5.4
Students report on a topic or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and usng appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Writing (W).4-5.1
Students write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Writing (W).4-5.2
Students write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. Writing (W).4-5.7
Students conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

1

Verbal Expression

The standards listed on the right are fulfilled by every question in this section. Additional standards may be listed in the gray sidebar on the left for particular units listed below.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1
Refer to details and example in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2
Determine a theme of a story from details in the text; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3
Describe in depth a character, setting or event in a story, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1
Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2
Determine a theme of a story from details in the text, including how the characters in a story or drama respond to challenges; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3
Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Characters and Environment

◆   What is happening in the outside world during the events of this story? How have the changes affected Hansel and Gretel's family?

The author describes a great and senseless war, and outlines the resulting inflation, violence, population decline, and a general change in what people accept as normal (page 12). This contributes to the parents' discussion about whether to get rid of their children.

◆   What other factors have created hardships in Hansel and Gretel's family?

We can guess that the parents are both still quite young, we know they have always been poor, live in an isolated area, and can't afford school.

◆   Do you think Hansel and Gretel should be going to school?

Ask students if and how an education could improve their situation. Some teachers may wish to discuss the relationships between education, teenage pregnancy, and poverty.

◆   Describe the personalities of the main characters. Compare them. Explain the reasons why the characters have each developed their own unique personality. Can they be divided into "good people" and "bad people?"

In addition to their economic disadvantages, gender plays an important role in the author's characterizations. Some teachers may wish to introduce the ideology of Separate Spheres, which historically proscribed different spheres of work for women and men [women in the private sphere, men in the public sphere]. Ask students to analyze how this plays out in the story. What does the father teach Hansel and Gretel? What does the mother teach them? What does the old woman teach them?

◆   Why does the mother bring up the subject of abandoning the kids? Compare the different positions of each parent regarding the topic of abandonment. Why are they different? What is the mathematical reason to abandon them? Emotional reason? Ethical reason? How was the father eventually convinced to abandon the kids? Would you be convinced to do so if you were the parent? Were there any other possible solution(s) aside from abandoning kids? Describe how Hansel and Gretel handle their abandonment. What does Hansel do? What does Gretel do? Why? Whose approach would you take if you were one of the kids?

Ask students to think about the differences in gender as they are presented in this story. Introduce the stereotype of the rational male and emotional female. The mother claims to be using "logic" to support her idea (page 16). Does her logic hold up? Is the father being logical or emotional? What about moral/ethical? Look to pages 13, 16, and 20-21 for supporting passages. When it comes to Hansel and Gretel, the stereotype of rational versus emotional is more clear cut. Hansel deals with their abandonment in a rational and pragmatic way: by dropping pebbles (and later bread) (pages 17 and 24); Gretel is more emotional: sharing bread, hugging her brother (pages 25 and 29). Also compare their respective ways of acquiring knowledge. Hansel learns of their pending abandonment by directly over-hearing his parents; Gretel figures this out through personal experience and implicit deduction. How would you describe this difference? Which is more effective: explicit or implicit observation? Are these two strategies related to gender difference (or ideas about gender difference)? Does the gendered dynamic between Hansel and Gretel change later in the story?

◆ Discuss the different reactions of the mother and the father when the children come back (pages 20-21). Why do they respond in different ways?

The father is motivated by love for his children and guilt. The mother cannot see past her own hunger. What happens in this story when characters make decisions motivated only by hunger? (Hansel and Gretel on page 32, the old woman on page 41, the mother on page 49)

◆ Why can't Hansel go to sleep after his first abandonment (page 21)?

Some teachers may wish to introduce ideas about PTSD, trauma, Dissociative anxiety, etc. Compare this event to what happens later, on page 44, when Hansel can't bring himself to let go of the bone that saved his life.

◆ If you were in the children's situation, would you wait for the father as Gretel does or would you try to go home like Hansel regardless of what the father had said? Why?

◆ Compare the way the old woman catches animals with how she treats the kids. For her, the children are no longer humans but rather animals and hence sources of food. Discuss this idea. Compare it with what happens during war and other bleak social situations. Are there similarities between what the old woman does to people and what war and famine do to people?

◆ Why do Hansel and Gretel receive different treatments in the old woman's house (Gretel is chained and forced to work, Hansel is pacified within a cage)? Does the old woman bully them?

The old woman plans to teach Gretel how to "grow into a woman" following her own model (page 37)—ensnaring birds and travelers, feasting on human men. She's instituting a divide between male and female labor that is not so dissimilar from that followed by the father and mother on page 9 (father provides the meat, mother is chained to the home). The old woman, like the mother, is sharp-tongued, calling the children many names and falling into fits of anger. What are some other similarities between the old woman and the mother?
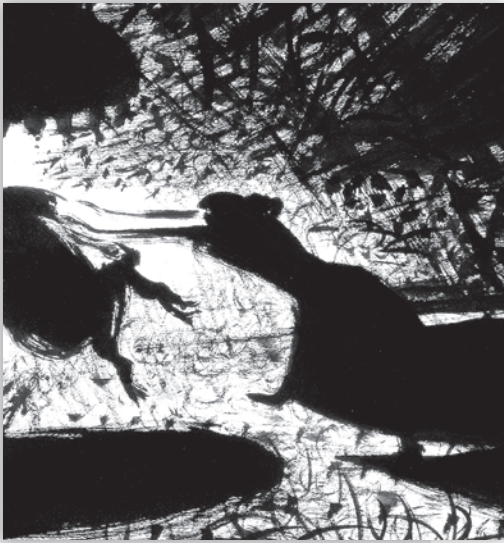
◆ Do Hansel and Gretel grow or become more mature in the story? Do they seem more like children or adults to you during the story?

Note that Hansel is described as having "transformed" into a "plump young man" on page 44 and Gretel is described on page 37 as about to "grow into a woman." They are definitely changed by their experience in the forest. When they return, they recognize the "familiar places where they had played, and the trees they had climbed" (page 48) as if they themselves are now long past that. And in a sense, they are. They have seen death, triumphed, and provided for themselves. They are more grown by the end of the story.

◆ Describe how Gretel manages to rescue herself and her brother from the old woman. (She lies, steals keys, murders a person on purpose, and then loots the house. Why does she behave this way? Was she like that at the beginning of the story?

Has Gretel learned something from the old woman after all? Note that Hansel is saved by his sister and that Gretel manages to free herself. Compare this to the earlier part in the story where Hansel is the one carrying white pebbles, saving them from abandonment. Gretel is the older sibling, but her transformation into the "leader" may be seen as an act of gender rebellion.

◆ Do the children follow the original route into the forest when they were leaving? How do you know? Why does the author describe the path as "the path they had known all their lives" (page 48)?

Is the journey in and out of the woods a kind of "life journey" for Hansel and Gretel? If the forest signifies maturity and adolescence, and the house "in which they had been born" signifies birth, what does the journey home signify? Are they becoming children again, or revisiting their childhood with fresh eyes? Note that when they arrive, they "called out, not daring to come too close." It seems that after their experiences, home doesn't feel like home anymore. They recognize it, but feel somewhat detached. This may be a common experience of getting older (feeling detached from things you used to love, or take for granted). Ask students if they have ever experienced this.

◆ Discuss the possibilities for what happened to the mother and caused her death? Why?

Note the connection to hunger and eating? What do students make of the fact that the mother dies during the same time that the old woman is murdered? Is there a connection between these two characters? (See earlier discussion)

◆ Was the woodcutter telling the truth about searching every day for the kids but not being able to find them? How do you know?

What would the father's reasons be for lying? If he is in fact telling the truth, why couldn't he find them? We are told that he knows the forest better than anyone. Is the old woman's house somehow hidden, or does it exist on a different plane/dimension?

◆ Why do Hansel and Gretel marry well? Why is it important for us to learn this? Explain why the author chose to spend a paragraph describing the food people enjoy at Hansel and Gretel's weddings.

Marriage is a traditional ending to fairy tales, because it functions as shorthand for a happy and profitable adulthood. The author here, however, gives us a rather grotesque account of the weddings, describing the fat running down the meat-eating chins of the guests (remember that "meat," for most of the story, was used in reference to human flesh). Is there a connection between being successful/affluent and being a predator (like the old woman, or perhaps any meat-eater)?

◆ Note the "pale moon" at the very last sentence. Why does the author bring up the pale moon at the end of the book?

This can be seen as a return to the dark/light dichotomy, but also a further complication of it. A pale moon occurs at night (which is dark) but it also casts a lot of light. Perhaps the "pale moon," a symbol of both light and dark, represents some kind of ambivalence (such as moral ambivalence [not good or evil]). In the end, after all, the children are both good and bad. They've cared (for each other, for their father), but they have also killed.

Words and Metaphors

◆ What do you think the concept of "hunger" means in this story? How do the characters satisfy or respond to their hunger? Do they tolerate their hunger? Why or why not? What are some verbal expressions related to "hunger" that appear in other parts of this story?

Hunger operates on many levels throughout this story. Ask students to compare the family's hunger with the hunger of the old woman (or even the hunger of the animals who eat the pieces of bread in the forest [page 28]). In addition to these literal manifestations of hunger, the author often uses words like "cut" or "chop" in reference to items and activities that are not food-related (page 8).

◆   What does "food" mean in the story? Compare different foods that appear in the story and discuss what they mean.

There are a lot of contrasts in the food we read about. Have students compare the descriptions of sweet foods (pages 21, 29, 37) with descriptions of meat (pages 9 and 49), or compare the tasteless pale bread (page 17) of Hansel and Gretel's home with the savory colorful candies of the old woman's hut (page 29).

◆   When the author describes a "swollen cherry" (page 21), what does this expression make you think of?

The word swell is only used two times in this book; the other is in the expression "belly swell" (page 8). Ask students to think about how these uses could be connected. What is the connection between nourishment and family?

◆   Note that the gingerbread house is defined by its smells. The old woman, we are told, has dim eyes and poor eyesight. Are these connected?

When one of the senses is weaker, other senses often grow stronger to compensate. Teachers may additionally wish to describe how Olfaction (the sense of smell) works. It is the most primitive sense (this is why the children are "impelled" by the smell of food on page 29). There is a strong relationship between smell and taste. Olfaction is also located in the same part of our brain that effects emotions, memory, and creativity.

◆   What do you think the "forest" means in this story? What does it mean (perhaps metaphorically) to "live on the edge of the forest" as they do in the story (page 8)?

One could see the "forest" as a metaphor for the unknown in general, for adolescence and maturity, or even for the confusing modern age.

◆   Relatedly, find instances when the author uses verbal expressions that have to do with light and dark in reference to the forest. In addition to the abundance of words like "dark" and "shadows," note that there are some surprising uses of the word "white" (white pebbles, white tree trunk [page 17]). What could the author be trying to communicate with this interplay of black and white?

This story often plays with the connection between literal darkness and the metaphorical idea of darkness as "not-knowing." Things that are "white" or "light" in the story serve as recognizable beacons in the darkness of the forest (also the light of a fire, or of the sun).

◆ What do you think of or feel when you see shadows and darkness? What are you afraid of? What are Hansel and Gretel afraid of?

Most of Hansel and Gretel's fears have to do with being isolated—getting lost from the human world, detached from family, abandoned by parents, etc. Have students discuss the ways that the author presents the "forest" as an embodiment of Hansel and Gretel's fears.

◆ What might the river / stream signify (pages 24 and 45)?

This river separates a space of death from a space of safety. Ask students to compare this river with the River Styx of Greek mythology. In that tradition, the river represents a liminal space between two worlds. In other traditions (Christian), rivers are associated with re-birth and cleansing.

◆ Make note of when vibrant colors are described, as opposed to the typical black/white dark/light language. What do colors symbolize?

Note the colorful descriptions on pages 9, 32, 45. In each case, color is associated with affluence and comfort.

Visual Expression

2

The standards listed on the right are fulfilled by every question in this section. Additional standards may be listed in the gray sidebar on the left for particular units listed below.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.7
Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, indentifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.5
Explain major differences between poems, drama, prose, etc. Refer to the structural elements when writing or speaking about a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.4
Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text. (Here, art and comics vocabulary)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.7
Analyze how visual and mulitmedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.5
Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, stanzas, etc. fits together to provide the overall structure of a story.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4
Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text. (Here, art and comics vocabulary)
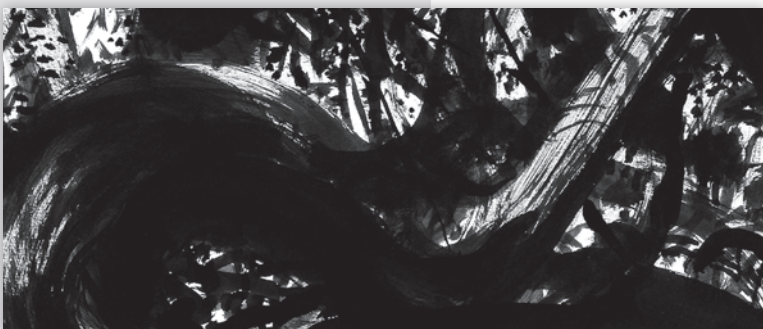
◆ Generally describe the artistic style of the illustrations. How do they make you feel? Look at the straight, curvy, and swirly lines. Compare them, and pay attention to where the illustrator decided to put them.

Note that the illustrator typically uses large/long strokes for backgrounds/non-human objects and adopts smaller strokes for the characters.

◆ Note the contrast between dark spaces and white spaces in the illustrations. Compare them with the dark/white metaphors & symbols in the text. What do you think the dark and the white spaces mean in the illustrations?

Note how light spaces are used to draw attention to the characters. Hansel and Gretel are always surrounded by a light area and on page 19, the father's eye is highlighted by a field of light. Just as "white" or "light" metaphors in the story were recognizable beacons in the darkness of the forest, in the art, white spaces help us make sense of the dense and twisted forest imagery.

◆ Compare the front and back endpages (pages 2-3 & pages 54-55), along with pages 6-7. Note how similar all three are. What are the differences? What do you think the illustrator is trying to express through these three similar, yet different pages?

The front endpages have characters but with no visible roads; while the back endpages have no characters but a strong directional path/tree.) The path/trees on 6-7 faces opposite ways from the path/trees on 54-55. Those on pages 6-7 seem to point into the book and get lost, while those on the back endpages (54-55) point out of the book (and therefore out of the story).

◆ Compare the illustration of the family home on pages 10-11 with the same home on pages 50-51. Notice the similar compositions. What are the similarities and differences?

There are no characters, no cooking smoke, and no road on pages 10-11. Pages 50-51 have all these things, and also a big open space in both the sky and the foreground (with no visible forest anymore). Ask students to analyze how the two drawings make them feel.
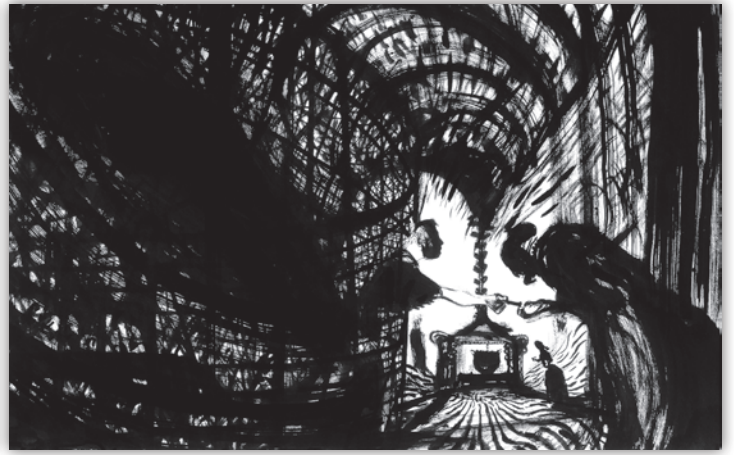
◆   Compare the deep interior perspective on pages 14-15 with the one on pages 38-39. How does they make you feel?

Both images guide the reader deep inside the composition, while creating a claustrophobic, somewhat dangerous feeling to the spaces. Students may note that the center of each image (the vanishing point) represents "death" in both cases: the parents planning abandonment (pages 14-15) and the open oven (pages 38-39).

◆   How many characters are there on pages 18-19? How do they look? Refer to the text and compare with the picture. Does anything seem strange?

Note the hand next to the woodcutter. There is a possible fourth person in this picture. Is it the mother? Although she is not in this scene, it is her "hand," as it were, that guides the father in his actions. This may be the one representation of the mother—hidden in shadows, just a guiding hand.

◆   In some pages the characters are facing left. In others, they face right. What do you think is the purpose of these different compositions?

In this book, characters face left when they are entering into the forest or a bad situation, and face right when they are escaping, or moving forward to safety.

◆   On pages 30-31, the characters start getting bigger and taking up more space. What do you make of the shift in representation? We also see a new building (the gingerbread house). How does it differ from Hansel and Gretel's house? Compare them.

The characters seem to grow more mature as the story continues, and they move from the background of illustrations to the foreground. This may be connected to their increasing agency within the narrative. The gingerbread house is a huge feature of the illustrations (it serves as the background for four spreads). But it is a little hard to make sense of it. The house is abstract and it blends into the forest. It has exotic elements and ornate decorations. In all, it is markedly different from Hansel and Gretel's family home, which meets our expectations for a "traditional" house.

◆ Look at pages 34-35. Note the contrast between slimmer lines of the window and thicker lines of the house itself. Look at the white spaces and the perspective. There's a confined feeling in this composition. Why? Did it feel confined when Hansel and Gretel were in their own home?

Hansel and Gretel's own home does not look as confining because of the flat empty expanse of the floor (pages 14-15). With its dark floor, arched ceiling, and latticed walls, the gingerbread house does not look dissimilar from the forest. At the same time, though, the gingerbread house is itself a huge cage. On pages 38-39, the bars of the cage are almost indistinguishable from the walls of the house.

◆ Describe the tension in the picture on pages 42-43. How many characters are there in the composition? How have these characters changed since from earlier representations

Note Gretel looks more like "a woman." Her bent-over pose and silhouette actually resemble the old woman in previous pages (and pushing a living creature into the oven is certainly something that they have in common). Hansel looks younger than Gretel for the first time in the book, an indication that she is the one with a plan this time. Have students look at the old woman's feet. There is something almost inhuman about them, like a goat (or other cloven animal). This satisfies the folkloric association of goat and hooves with evil creatures.

◆ On pages 46-47 Gretel is on the back of a bird/boat while Hansel watches her from the bank of the river. What does this tell you about the dynamic shift between these two characters? Examine the differences between texture and lines on this page (straight black lines vs. white waves). Note how much white is used on this page. How does this make you feel? Look at how all the lines converge to the right in a vanishing point. How does this make you feel?

Hansel and Gretel's dynamic has shifted, and Gretel is now the leader. Some may feel that she has become a kind of adult during this journey, and is now very clearly embracing her role as the older sibling. In the image, all lines point toward the sun, and strong black shadow indicate Hansel and Gretel's movement toward "the light."

◆ On pages 50-51, Hansel and Gretel look like children again (especially Gretel). The woodcutter appears without his axe. Why might the artist have chosen this change in representation?

Hansel and Gretel do wish to return to their childhood innocence, despite their maturing encounter with the old woman. Their father and home represent childhood to them. Some may find it tragic that the children want to please their mother with treasures, even though she essentially sent them to their death. In this sense, we can still see a king of naiveté in the children, or a childlike optimism at least.

◆ Also note that in this page, almost everything is drawn in straight thick lines. Why?

Compare this with the curvy thick lines adopted to depict the forest. The straight lines are also featured on pages 10-11 and 14-15. This allows the visual effect of the forest (and the gingerbread house) to stand in opposition. To the children, the home is "known," so it seems more orderly, predictable, and linear.

➡ Further Research

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4-5.9
Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics and patterns of events in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-5.9
Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-5.1
Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting point of view with reasons and information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-5.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-5.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-5.7
Conduct short research projects that build knowledgfe through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
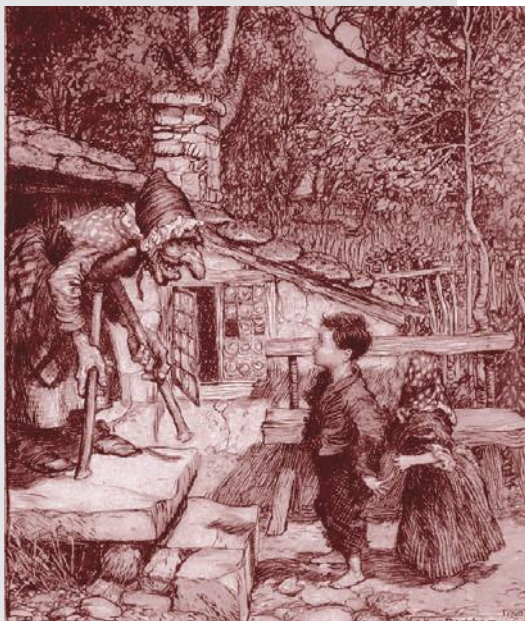
◆ Find another version of the Hansel & Gretel story. Point out the similarities and differences. How does illustration style (or cinematography, if a film) effect the overall mood and style of the fable? Which version do you prefer and why?

◆ Try to create your own Mattotti-inspired landscape using only black ink and a brush. Pick a location of your choice and draw it it using only shadows. Make sure to think about line width and style (straight lines look more orderly, curvy lines more organic and confusing). Present the drawing to the class for discussion and analysis.

◆ Writing Project: choose any of the questions from the Verbal or Visual Expression sections. Write a short piece explaining your answer clearly, using reasons and evidence from the text.

◆ Readers Theater: read various scenes aloud in class. Pay attention to their inflection. If possible, try out multiple roles and be sure that you adjust your performance accordingly. Try to incorporate visual information from the images into their performance. Have fun!