

THE UNSEEN POTENTIAL BEHIND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Isabel Barbera

Department of English, Penn State York
Research Mentor: Dr. Jennifer Nesbitt



Introduction

Ever since the first comic book was given the title of “graphic novel” in 1986, the topic of including various graphic novels into the literary canon has been contentious. For scholars, the idea of using sequential art and panels to tell a story is revolutionary in the literary world, and whether this new medium is exciting or senseless is controversial for professionals in this field because of how they are stereotyped as an immature medium. Despite the canonization of two widely popular graphic novels, *Watchmen* (1986) by Alan Moore and David Gibson, and *Maus* (1987) by Art Spiegelman, there is still a stigma behind reading graphic novels as serious stories, which limits a regular inclusion in public school and college curriculums. This project explores how graphic novels have been stigmatized in the past, while identifying a set of criteria that can help instructors incorporate rigorous analyses of this newer novel form into the classroom.

Key Findings

- Graphic novels are stigmatized for having a comic-inspired format
- The improper display of graphic novels in bookstores and libraries proves the stigma is still contemporary
- Graphic novels are limited to the “comic book and manga” sections of bookstores; comics are mistaken for a genre, but they are a medium
- Graphic novels gained more exposure when being sold in bookstores and included in libraries, instead of being limited to magazine stands
- Scholars have realized more potential behind graphic novels in the classroom because of more exposure

The Exceptions

Two widely popular and award-winning graphic novels, *Watchmen* and *Maus*, have been included within the classroom setting numerous times across public schools and in the college curriculum. They have been received positively for the potential teaching material they contain and have paved the way for more graphic novels to receive scholarly recognition.

Watchmen is recognized as one of the greatest graphic novels of all time because of its storytelling capabilities and ethics. Throughout the story the audience reads about a world where superheroes exist, but are outlawed, and the climax of the story explores a deep ethical debate between the characters, Rorschach and Ozymandias, whether sacrificing millions of lives within New York City was the correct route to go in order to prevent World War III.

Maus, written and drawn by Art Spiegelman, has been called a record of history because of its well-written and unique way of teaching its audience about the Holocaust from a Jewish survivor’s perspective

Alternative Perspectives on History

Graphic novels can be narrated in a first-person point of view, but they still offer something that text novels are not as capable of, even if the story is presented as a third person narrative; and that is the perspectives and reactions of several characters at once. A sequence of comic panels can present an action taking place, and while the main character may be the focus of the scene, the perspective and reactions of other characters are still present as well. It offers an unbiased narrative for the reader to closely analyze, and often the result can be an interesting debate and class discussion.



Yang. *Saints*. 2013

A graphic novel that contains both historical relevance and philosophical concepts is the two-part graphic novel, *Boxers and Saints* (2013) by Gene Luen Yang. *Boxers and Saints* is a magical realism story that centers around two different characters during the Boxer Rebellion that took place in China in 1900.

- *Boxers* follows a young Chinese man, Lee Bao, who leads an army from the Boxer Rebellion against foreigners who are perceived as invaders
- *Saints* follows a young Chinese woman, Vibiana, who is introduced to Catholicism by the foreigners Bao fights against in *Boxers*
- Ethical concepts of warfare entices readers into viewing two different perspectives of the conflict, and a deep conflict is formed between Bao and Vibiana when they cross paths

The two perspectives allow readers to see the difference each side has to offer, while at the same time promoting that both characters are Chinese, and they both believe they are doing what is right for their country; which in a sense makes them the same.

Perspective and Narrative

Speak (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson is originally written in a first-person narrative, which is still captured by the graphic novel adaptation published in 2018. However, what the graphic novel offers is a new perspective from not only Melinda, but her other classmates as well on certain topics.

- Readers get the chance to read the expressions of other characters; including Melinda’s classmates and her attacker
- Melinda’s perspective is illustrated in surreal images and artwork, offering a new form of analyzation for the audience to study
- Most iconic is the depiction of Melinda’s trauma, in the repeated imagery of rabbits throughout the novel



Anderson and Carrol. *Speak*. 2018

Conclusions

An argument within these communities comes from the issue that teachers may feel as if graphic novels do not fit the curriculum much like the original text novel may because of how different the mediums are. However, students today have been introduced and encouraged to familiarize themselves with many diverse mediums, either for knowledge and education, or simply just for entertainment. Gretchen Schwarz explains this point well in her essay, “Expanding Literacies Through Graphic Novels,” “Increasingly, scholars and teachers realize that in a media-dominated society, one traditional literacy—reading and writing of print—is no longer sufficient. Today’s young people also have to read films, TV shows, magazines, and Web sites. Both practical information and the stories of our culture come from many media, especially those made possible by current technology” (Schwarz 59).

- *Watchmen* and *Maus* have been praised with literary excellence because of their storytelling; the same concept should apply to the previously discussed novels and more
- Movies and other visual mediums have begun to regularly enter the college curriculum, and it is coherent that graphic novels do as well
- Key moments that sparked the recognition of graphic novels as forms of literature are not just through the inclusion in bookstores, but primarily through their use in educational facilities
- Many educators have encouraged the use of graphic novels in the classroom, but there is still not enough influence from educators for proper recognition

Recognizing the benefits of including graphic novels in the college curriculum more frequently may expand their success within libraries and bookstores as well. There might be a day where graphic novels are finally placed in their own respective categories based on what their genre is, instead of “graphic novels” being considered one collective genre themselves. When that day may arrive, it will be guaranteed that the growth of more independently created graphic novels will increase, and the inspiration to use art as a form of storytelling will grow. For additional reading and information on this project, see the essay, “The Unseen Potential Behind the Graphic Novel” by Isabel Barbera.

Secondary Sources

Carter, James Bucky. Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Towards Our “Optimus Prime.” *English Journal*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2007, pp. 49-53., doi: 10.2307/30046788.

Kan, Katharine, et al. *Graphic Novels and Comic Books*. The H.W. Wilson Co., 2010.

Schwarz, Gretchen. “Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels.” *English Journal*, vol. 95, no. 6, 2006, pp. 58-64., doi:10.2307/30046629