The third and final story in issue 114 of Archie (November 1960) is titled “The Interpreter.” Although the work, like all Archie Comics material produced in the 1960s, is not signed, it is generally credited to writer Frank Doyle and artist Harry Lucey, who were responsible for the vast majority of stories in the flagship title of the Archie franchise at this point in time. Self-contained and five pages long, it is entirely consistent with the standard length and formula of the Archie stories of the 1960s. Only three members of the regular “Archie gang” appear in the story (Archie, Betty, and Jughead, the last in only a single panel), and of these, only the first two have any dialogue. The story is exceptionally simple: leaving Spanish class, Archie informs Betty that he has no need to learn this frivolous subject (“Anybody who talks to me can do it in English!” he tells her). On his way home from school, Archie spies a racing ambulance, which he then follows to the site of a car accident. A young boy lies in the street while his panicked father is unable to communicate with the emergency medical technicians and the police. “Does anybody in this crowd speak Spanish?” asks an officer. Stepping forward, Archie declares, “Yo puedo hablar Español.” He determines the boy’s blood type, then accompanies the father to the hospital. With the boy’s life saved, Archie runs into Betty and offers to help her with her Spanish homework: “You have no idea how important it is to be able to speak more than one language!”

In every way, this is a typical Archie story of the 1960s. It is completely stand-alone (there are no other Archie stories to be found in the entire decade in which Archie is shown speaking Spanish), formulaic, optimistic, and civic-minded, and it contains a strong moral message (in this case, the necessity of language study). In almost every important respect, it is unremarkable.
Figure 1: Panels from “The Interpreter,” Archie #114 (November 1960), by Frank Doyle and Harry Lucey.

Figure 2: Panels from “The Interpreter,” Everything’s Archie #2 (July 1969), by Frank Doyle and Harry Lucey.
Nine years later, in issue 2 of Everything’s Archie (July 1969), a new Archie Comics title created to take advantage of the new Archies television program, another story appears with the title “The Interpreter.” This piece is also written by Doyle and it is also drawn by Lucey. It, too, is five pages long, and it, too, finds Archie initially disclaiming the study of Spanish to Betty, only to have his attitude changed when his education permits him to intervene and to save the life of a young boy who has been struck by a car. The two pieces are not merely similar but, for all intents and purposes, identical: they share the same number of pages and panels and even the exact same dialogue, down to the placement of ellipses. They are not the same story, however. The piece has been entirely redrawn by Lucey. In the 1960 version, Archie wears the black sweater vest, orange pants, and green bow tie that epitomized his trademark look until the middle of the decade. In the later version, he wears blue jeans, a white shirt, and a red sweater. The story is identical except for the fact that it has been recreated entirely afresh. Comparing them side by side is akin to watching different actors play the same scene in two different versions of a play (see fig. 5 and fig. 6).

What can we make of this unusual development? Archie Comics was not reluctant to reuse older material in the 1960s. On the contrary, they had entire titles (Archie’s Giant Series, for example) that specialized in reprinting older material. Given the fact that the Archie stories of the 1960s developed in the complete absence of continuity—no Archie story has any impact on any other Archie story of the era, so that they can all exist in perfect isolation from each other withstanding the passage of time, so that the characters are consistently sixteen and one-quarter years old—the question naturally arises: why bother to redraw an older story? Why not simply republish what was already produced?

These are the kinds of questions that faced me when I woke up to the fact that I had agreed to write a full-length scholarly monograph on Archie Comics a couple of years back. When I was asked by a colleague to write one of the first wave of books in the Comics Culture series from Rutgers University Press, my first instinct was to decline. Given the interest of the press in single-volume titles that explore the importance of “great works” in the history of comics, I reasoned that the series would quickly evolve certain canonizing tendencies around a predictably narrow range of well-studied works, particularly clustering around certain genres (autobiography and memoir; non-fiction; the superhero). Where, I wondered, would we place works like Archie Comics in a scheme such as this one? Given the fact that Archie Comics titles were consistently among the best-selling works of the 1960s—indeed, Archie itself was the top-selling comics title of 1969 (Miller), and Archie Comics claimed seven of the top twenty spots on the sales chart with other
While the criteria for evaluating greatness in the arts has been debated . . ., assumptions about these criteria . . . have been confounded by their close ties to social position and class interests. Titles, including *Betty and Veronica, Jughead, and Life with Archie*—how could this series be extended to deal not only with the reading culture of young children but also with works that traditionally were unheralded both within comics fandom and within academe? I told my colleague that I doubted he would ever commission a book on something like Archie Comics. What I quickly learned was how badly I had underestimated him—and the press—both of whom leaped at the opportunity to publish the first sustained scholarship on “America’s favorite teenager.” Quickly, I found myself contracted to write eighty thousand words on a series of formulaic five-page stories. How, I wondered, could I write my way out of this one?

The challenge posed by this undertaking stems from two considerations: first, that Rutgers University Press was seeking scholarship rooted in close textual analysis, and second, that the traditions of literary analysis have, for centuries, been tied to the exegesis of “great works.” One might argue that the entire basis for literary studies is the explication of atypical works. While the criteria for evaluating greatness in the arts has been debated since the days of Aristotle (at least), assumptions about these criteria, as the work of Pierre Bourdieu has so ably demonstrated in *Distinction* and elsewhere, have been confounded by their close ties to social position and class interests. In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen writes about the era of twentieth-century modernism, a historical moment that includes the origins of Archie Comics, and theorizes that mass culture (of which Archie Comics titles are exemplary) can be characterized as “woman,” that is, as “modernism’s other” (see 44–64). For Huyssen, the modernist aesthetic that defined the mid-twentieth century across the arts generates a theoretically ideal modernist art work from seven criteria.
1) The modernist work is autonomous and separate from the realms of mass culture. Clearly, this is not the case with “The Interpreter” in Archie Comics. Indeed, in almost every way, Archie Comics titles are examples par excellence of mass culture. They are by definition heteronomous objects, constructed for a marketplace and intended to sell to the greatest possible extent. The success of an Archie Comics title rests almost entirely in its sales: 515,356 monthly readers made Archie the best-selling comic book of 1969, while Betty and Veronica averaged 384,789 copies per month in the same period (Miller). By the logics of the marketplace, therefore, the tandem of Doyle and Lucey on Archie was superior to that of Doyle and artist Dan DeCarlo on Betty and Veronica. There is no Archie Comics art for Archie Comics art’s sake. It is work that is entirely constructed for the marketplace.

2) The modernist work is self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous, and rigorously experimental. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. While in fact some Archie Comics titles are self-referential and experimental, and while I dedicate an entire chapter of my book to those works, they are very much in the minority. A story like “The Interpreter” leaves absolutely nothing to ambiguity. The plot is direct and unwavering, a completely straight line of cause and effect. There is not even the slightest hint of irony. The work is didactic, almost propagandistic, in its moralizing tone.

3) The modernist work is the expression of a purely individual consciousness rather than of a zeitgeist. Again, this is not the case with Archie Comics. First, the works are rarely the labour of a single creator. Only Bob Montana (working on the daily Archie newspaper comic strip), Dan DeCarlo (on single-page pin-up gags), and Bob Bolling (on Little Archie) were given the kind of creative latitude that allowed them to work alone. Virtually all of the Archie stories produced by Lucey, for example, were written by Doyle, and many (including, possibly, this one) were inked by Terry Szenics. Further, even in the cases in which single artists performed all of the creative tasks on a piece, Archie Comics material was subject to an extremely high degree of editorial oversight to ensure a continuity of tone. As I argue in my book, the most apt metaphor for the Archie Comics titles of this period would be to regard them as the product of a machine that generates stories and jokes automatically based on limited inputs (couple Archie with a bowling ball and certain comedic outcomes begin to seem inevitable). Finally, and most strikingly, the dominant reading of Archie is precisely that he represents a zeitgeist, specifically a vision of middle-class, heteronormative, white, post-war, suburban idealism. To regard, for instance, the Archie–Veronica–Betty love triangle as a commentary on normative gender relations is to adopt the dominant reading of these texts.
4) The modernist work is experimental, like science, and it produces and carries knowledge. This is simply not the case. Archie Comics stories are highly routinized. They are produced as if by cookie cutter, almost invariable in their length and page layout (always a three-tiered grid, never more than three panels per tier, never more than eight panels per page). Their form is predetermined from the outset, and there is no sense of investigation taking place. They produce outcomes that are already well known (“You have no idea how important it is to be able to speak more than one language!”).

5) The modernist work is about its support: modernist literature is about language, while modernist painting is about the canvas. Again, no. Archie Comics titles are about their characters, and their support—the printed format of the comic book—is regarded as a transparent vessel through which content is delivered.

6) The modernist work rejects classical systems of representation and effaces “content.” Once again, this rule does not apply. Archie Comics titles are entirely classical in their representational form. In this way, they are entirely typical of post-war American comic books. One of the reasons that the comic book, as part of a publishing genre, was classified so easily as a harmful example of mass culture during the anti-comic-book backlash of the 1950s was because of the significant ways that it clung to representational systems that were rendered outmoded in other art forms. While American painting rushed to embrace abstract expressionism (an ideal example of painting that effaces “content”) and representationalism declined in the period between Picasso and the rise of minimalism and conceptualism, the American comic book industry clung to the traditions of representational illustration. Indeed, to the extent that Archie Comics titles of this period are valued by contemporary audiences at all, it is because of the skilled draftsmanship of their best-remembered artists. For instance, IDW Publishing has published four volumes of work from this period under the title The Best of Dan DeCarlo, along with two titles each of The Best of Samm Schwartz and The Best of Harry Lucey. Each of these volumes focuses on the curation of an authorial voice that is anathema to the modernist rejection of “content.”

7) The modernist work is an adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life. In point of fact, Archie Comics titles might as well have been subtitled “The Bourgeois Culture of Everyday Life.”

For Huysen, the modernist project finds its origins in the work of Flaubert, whose complexity and originality provide him the hallmarks of genius. Archie Comics, on the other hand, stand in stark contrast to the modernist project. In his influential 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg enunciated a vision of the modernist project very much in line with the one described by Huysen, while denigrating comic books self-evidently...
as “kitsch,” a form of “pre-digested” culture intended for children or subliterate audiences (39). Despite advances springing from the Cultural Studies traditions developed in Birmingham, the disposition championed by Greenberg and described by Huyssen has continued to structure normative academic thinking to the present day: there are still more university-level courses on the canon of British literature than there are on comic books or children’s literature, and moreover, such is the colonizing power of the dominant field that, even when these subordinated genres are taught in traditional departments, it is often through a lens that seeks to replicate the authority of the canon in miniature by focusing on the “best” works of the popular genre. The study of typicality, at least in literary studies, is still very much a marginal concern.

Certainly, this was how I imagined the Comics Culture series to be conceptualized by its editors: as a modernizing project for comic books that would seek to elevate a chosen few to the vaulted realm of “Literature.” Freed from that understanding, I was then confronted with the task of crafting a book about work that had so very little in common with the likes of Flaubert. What I quickly learned is that there is a reason that a search for “Gustave Flaubert” brings up 27,700 hits in Google Scholar and “Harry Lucey” brings up none: the scholarly apparatus is very much structured to deal with self-referentiality, ambiguity, and complexity in precisely the ways that have been enumerated by Huyssen and so many others. What this left me with was a struggle to identify new forms of questions around which I might shape this study. For example, why did Archie’s artists stop drawing him in his sweater vest in the mid-1960s? Surely, this change was not a function of the zeitgeist but of a rational publishing system. I could examine the impact of subtle historical developments over time by noting that Archie stories take place in an eternal present, whether that present is fixated on sock hops, Beatlemania, or the summer of love. Mostly, however, I was left to speculate and to improvise. In the absence of library holdings, I was compelled to build my own Archie archive. With no access to production notes, I was forced to surmise. Like a paleontologist, I found myself with a historical record that was remarkably partial. I found that I could offer theories about Archie much more than I could offer answers about him.

Take “The Interpreter,” for example. I do not discuss this story/these stories in my book because the first one falls outside my Archi(v)e. Needing to limit the scope of the project, I opted to focus only on the period between 1961 and 1969, when an Archie Comics comic book carried a price tag of twelve cents (hence the title, Twelve-Cent Archie). Issue 114 of Archie was one of the last ten-cent Archies, so it was disqualified from consideration. Nonetheless, “The Interpreter” raises what are, for me, extremely interesting questions, three of which bear some discussion here.
First, there is the issue of self-plagiarism. To reiterate, Archie Comics, more than almost any other comic book publisher of the 1960s, constantly recycled old material in their titles. Given the production of no fewer than nine monthly and semi-monthly titles (some of them eighty pages long), Archie Comics required a large amount of new material on a regular basis. At the same time, their readership was extremely transitory. The ideal Archie Comics reader probably ranged in age from about seven years old to about twelve. Archie Comics titles were typical preteen fare that depicted the life of American teenagers for a reading public still aspiring to that status. It is highly unlikely that many readers of Archie Comics titles in 1960 were still readers in 1969. From that standpoint, recycling would be expected. Since every Archie story takes place in an eternal present, older stories offer no narrative issues to be resolved. Further, the story will be new to a new generation of readers, so far from being a cheat of the audience, reuse is simply a best practice model for a publisher focused on the bottom line. Here is the problem with this theory: with remarkably few exceptions, Archie Comics did not reuse older material. It reprinted, yes, of course. But repurposed work? Almost never. In the almost one thousand comic books that I studied during the course of my research, I found exactly one joke that had been drawn twice—and even in that instance it had been restructured visually in fundamental ways. One of the outcomes that I had not expected to find in the course of my research was the fact that Archie Comics, that avatar of inexpensive children’s culture, was not prone to self-plagiarism. This is a fact that makes “The Interpreter” all the more unusual.

This leads directly to the second issue, which is working method. How, exactly, did Harry Lucey come to draw this story twice? There are many ways for writers and artists to work together in the production of comics texts. Typically, the writer will provide the artist with a script that is not unlike a screenplay. Pages are delineated, panels are counted off, and the dialogue and “stage directions” (for want of a better term) are passed along to the artist to render. Certain writers provide thumbnail sketches (stick figures) as a shorthand. In the absence of an established archive, I have no record of how Doyle and Lucey worked together. I do not know if Lucey worked from a full script, from thumbnails, or simply from note-form suggestions. “The Interpreter,” however, gives us some insight. Let us suppose that Harry Lucey drew this story twice because he did not recall that he had drawn it the first time. This is not entirely unbelievable. Given the rapid pace of production, Lucey drew literally hundreds of Archie stories over the decade of the 1960s, and this one is not especially memorable. Is it conceivable that through some sort of editorial malfunction he was given the same script twice? If we accede this possibility, then what do we learn about
the way Lucey works with Doyle? What is striking about the two versions of the story is that they are almost identical despite their differences. That is, if asked to describe the contents of each panel verbally, one would use exactly the same phrasing to describe each version. On the fifth page, for instance, one would say, “Archie and the boy’s father speak to the surgeon in front of the doors to the operating room. Archie is on the left with his back to the reader; the boy’s father clutches his hands as if in prayer; the surgeon addresses Archie.” Or, “We see Betty from behind as she approaches Archie; he stands in front of a low brick wall, holding a textbook.” Or, “Archie and Betty leave the scene. He gestures with his left arm, while she looks, startled, over her shoulder toward the reader” (see fig. 3 and fig. 4). There are important and unimportant differences in the two versions (the surgeon’s scrubs are white, then they are green), but in almost every single panel, Lucey has presented the characters in the same distance from the reader, with the same “camera angle.” The tremendous similarities between the two versions would suggest that Doyle provided Lucey with scripts that were so detailed that he would follow the same instructions and essentially recreate the same work a second time.
And yet, given the fact that Archie Comics titles (almost) never used scripts twice, what were the odds that Lucey would be sent the same one on two occasions? And, really, what were the odds that he would forget completely that he had drawn it once before? Further, what would be the odds that Doyle’s script would dictate that Archie should, on the final page, stride with a diagonal body posture past a fire hydrant and a tree while whistling (see fig. 5 and fig. 6)?

Given the rapid pace of production, the non-essential story details (fire hydrant) would almost assuredly be left entirely in the hands of the artist—it is his job and his alone to make the panels visually balanced and appealing. It is almost inconceivable that an element like the arrow indicating the X-ray room could have been included in a script by Doyle.

What this suggests is that, for some reason, Lucey decided to redraw this earlier story based on the earlier story. Clearly, Lucey is redoing his earlier work while looking at it, but he is doing it in his more contemporary style. Over the course of his career as the artist on the flagship Archie title, Lucey began by producing work very much in the house style, but he gradually drove his drawing to become more and more baroque. The later version of this story, for instance, contains significantly greater amounts of visual detail (such as bricks and grass). On the third page, Lucey recreates the original story down to the placement of the police officer’s leg and the EMT’s arm and leg as they hover over the fallen boy—they are largely identical panels (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). At the same time, however, he has added

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**Figure 5:** Panel from “The Interpreter,” *Archie* #114 (November 1960), by Frank Doyle and Harry Lucey.

**Figure 6:** Panel from “The Interpreter,” *Everything’s Archie* #2 (July 1969), by Frank Doyle and Harry Lucey.
figures and details to the first panel. What the two stories demonstrate is the role of the artist and, more importantly, the subtle evolution of Lucey’s rendering style over time. Taken together, these two versions of “The Interpreter” seem to say, “That was the Archie of 1960, but this is the Archie of 1969.” Given that they worked in a story system that allows for no passage of time, this strikes me as a semi-subversive gesture of an artist who was not permitted even to sign his own work. It is almost—dare I say it?—Modern.

When I agreed to write an entire book about Archie Comics, I faced a number of obstacles, not the least of which was a complete absence of archival documents and even of the primary source material. More than that, however, I struggled to work within the confines of the expectations of literary studies and its emphasis upon the exceptional, the unusual, and the atypical. What attracted me to Archie Comics, the most popular comic books for children published in the 1960s, was precisely their repetitiveness, their deliberate lack of depth, their predictability, and their classicism. In short, what I hoped to explore was their typicality. In so doing, I hoped to grapple with the biases that literary study has inflicted upon the scholarship around comic books and to come to terms with the way that the literary field has distorted the study of comic books through its relentless focus on the “graphic novel.” Archie Comics comic books are not graphic novels—they are barely graphic short stories. What they are is also typical of the work addressed to children by the American publishing industry of the 1960s. Unlike most children’s books—which, with their hardcover and costly price tags, typically have been purchased as gifts for children by adults—comic books were the culture of children that children selected and purchased themselves. That the Archie Comics titles of the twelve-cent period rose to a position of industry domination tells us a great deal about the interests of children during this period. That they were not modern in any truly meaningful sense should not mean that they do not draw our attention. The failure of literary studies to find meaningful ways to talk about Archie Comics over the past half century speaks more clearly to disciplinary shortcomings than it does to anything about the eternal present of stories set in Riverdale.
Works Cited


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