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## The Manga *Attack on Titan* as a Literary Medium

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Joseph Song

Dr. Chambers

December 12th, 2022

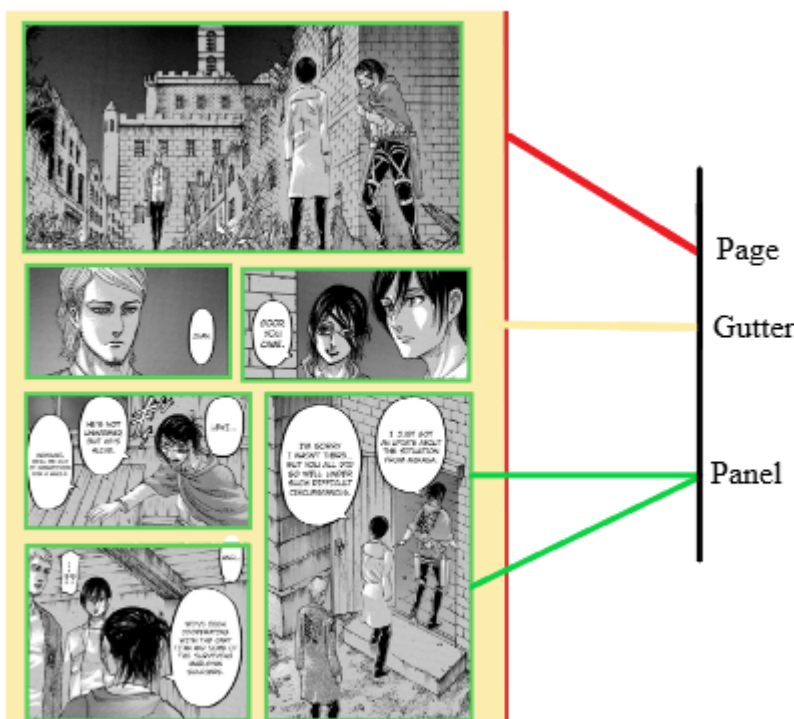
### The Manga *Attack on Titan* as a Literary Medium

*Attack on Titan* is a globally celebrated Japanese manga written and illustrated by Hajime Isayama. The manga has sold over 110 million copies worldwide, garnering several awards which have cemented its enormous success. The narrative is set in the early nineteenth century, when a small portion of humanity has been forced to live behind gigantic walls that protect them from enormous, human-like titans who feast on human flesh. It is through the events that take place in *Attack on Titan* that the reader can reflect critically on topics relevant today, such as racism, genocide, and revenge through the formal ways that manga presents complex narrative in an accessible, visual format to readers.

Before analyzing the manga as a narrative text, what follows here is a summary of the general story. It begins by focusing on the Eldians, a population who live behind walls for protection against the giant, man-eating titans on their island home, "Paradis Island." The narrative focuses on Eren Jaeger, an Eldian soldier who holds the unique power of turning into a titan. For most of the manga, the origin of the titans and the motive behind their attacks is clouded in mystery. However, as the story progresses, it is revealed that countries exist beyond the walls of Paradis Island, and that the titans were created to attack the Eldians as a form of brutal and unfair punishment. Marley, the continent primarily responsible for the blatantly racist and genocidal effort to wipe out Paradis Island, justifies their prejudice by calling the Eldians a "cursed race," referencing events from thousands of years in the past.

What is striking about *Attack on Titan* is how the social problems presented in the story are articulated through particularities of the manga as a visual medium. To begin with, one of the main differences that makes manga a unique literary medium is its visual narrative structure. In manga, images are the primary focus in conveying narrative while verbal information is secondary. The verbal aspect of manga simply conveys dialogue, thoughts, and a small amount of narrative text. Thus, “[t]o 'read' manga is to read images” (Rommens 1). The large emphasis on images rather than text in manga marks a contrast with conventional Euro-American comics, which exhibit a tendency to use a large amount of textual information in explaining the narrative, characters’ emotion, and dialogue. By eliminating as much textual information as possible, manga becomes a unique literary medium where it accomplishes the difficult task of “uniting the seemingly incompatible acts of reading and watching” (MacWilliams 298). Manga accomplishes this unique style by conducting its narrative on two levels: “interpanelly and intrapanelly, with intrapanel components found to be particularly relevant to formulating the

multimodal continuum.” (Xiran 584). Interpanels are the panels that divide the page into multiple sections and the space around the panels is called the “gutter.”<sup>1</sup>

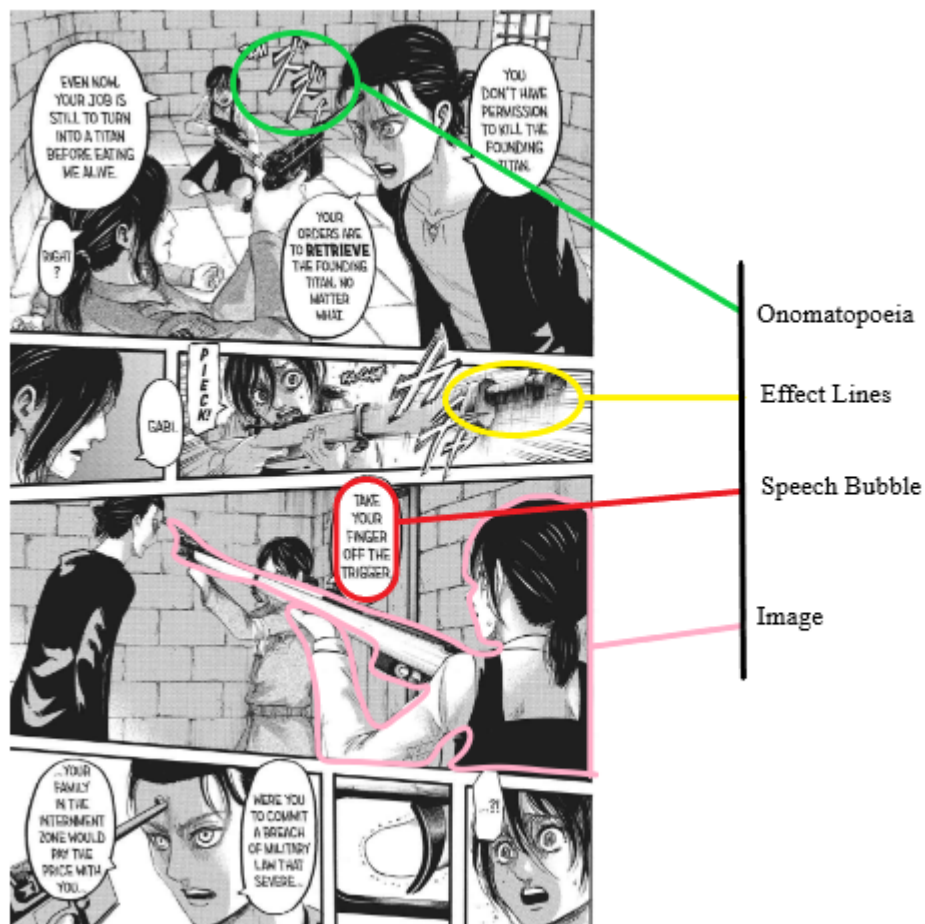


Interpanel components of manga are essential to manga’s unique narrative structure because of how its organization achieves a central focus on images and how they structure narrative progression. The freedom behind the design of interpanels allows the author to immerse their reader into the story by creating different perspectives or tenses in the story, or as Xiran phrases it, helps “establish and consolidate the concept of ‘unmarkedness’” (Xiran 585). For example, in figure 1<sup>2</sup>, the gutter of the page was colored to be black, and each panel flows with different angles on the conversation between three characters: Mikasa, Jean, and Hange. The black gutters create an immersive feeling for the reader, causing them to visualize the night sky and a sense of secrecy behind the conversation the characters are having since, in the story,

<sup>1</sup> Visual analysis was closely inspired by Xiran Yang’s and Jonathon Webster’s *To Be Continued: Meaning-Making in Serialized Manga as Functional-Multimodal Narrative*.

Hange and Mikasa are trying to convince Jean to rebel against the newly created Jaegerists and their goal of mass genocide. The different angles in each panel and their flow enable the reader to visualize who is taking part in the conversation and where it is taking place, allowing the dialogue between the characters to convey what is occurring. The organization of these images structures the narrative flow to visually demarcate the relationship between the characters.

Above in figure 1, Mikasa and Hange are shown in one panel and Jean is shown in the panel



opposite, highlighting that Jean is not on Mikasa and Hange's side. Furthermore, after introducing the characters, Isayama shows an overview and a central focus on Hange, since she is the only one who speaks on this page.

Intrapanel components are the more complicated of the two since they are situated inside each panel. The major groupings in intrapanels are the verbal and graphic elements; however,

manga is not strictly regulated to have both in each panel or even the whole page. More specifically, manga will generally contain images, effect lines, and speech bubbles. Image “refers to a realistic or at least a partly iconic image, like a person, a brush, or a slice of French toast.” (Xiran 588; see figure 2 where various elements are indicated, with Gabi outlined in pink). Effect lines are extremely flexible in terms of their role in representing external stimuli and filling up vacancies. They can either be straight, curved, or in the form of onomatopoeias, which is the main difference between western comics and Japanese manga. In figure 2, there are several instances where Isayama uses effect lines, namely the onomatopoeias and the straight lines on the rifle, to depict motion. Speech bubbles are simply representations of dialogue between characters and their connotation can be different based on the shape, frame, or lining. In figure 2, speech bubbles are used to convey the conversation of Eren, Gabi, and Pieck.

The combination of both interpanel and intrapanel components is what allows manga to place a primary focus on imagery and make verbal information secondary. *Attack on Titan* is distinguished by Isayama Hajime’s unique approach to manga narrative, working with the formal elements presented here, to make the manga accessible and informative on the topics of vengeance, racism, and violence. Unlike many *mangakas*, which is a term to label many Japanese manga authors, Isayama began writing *Attack on Titan* with a clear plan for its ending from the beginning, contrasting many manga in the mainstream action and adventure genre. This is evident with Isayama’s circular storytelling technique, which is the idea that the story ends where it begins. An example of Isayama’s utilization of circular storytelling is in the connections between the characters on opposing sides, specifically Eren with Reiner and Gabi, and Armin with Bertholdt. At the very beginning of the manga, Reiner with his armored titan destroyed the walls that protected Eren and the rest of the citizens on Paradis Island, resulting in the death of

Eren's mother. Reiner was a warrior of Marley and, in his mind, he was trying to save the world. However, when he is instructed to enlist in the Eldian army as a spy, he learns that the people on Paradis Island are good people who are victims of genocidal discrimination from Marley and the rest of the world. Decades later, before Eren attacks Marley with his titan, Eren discusses with



Reiner that “over the sea, inside the walls, we are all the same.” (Isayama 2022). The reason why this connection is memorable is because of Isayama’s unique application of intrapanelling and interpanelling, which articulates Reiner’s fear due to his realization of Eren’s goal of eliminating Marley and all the innocent civilians in it. In the image on the left, Isayama blurs out the background and creates a central focus on Reiner’s facial expression to convey his horror. Isayama also tilts the panels of Eren’s recollection of his time at Marley, creating visual support

for his realization that Marley and Eldia are the same. The intrapanel of both Falco and Reiner’s faces shows the absolute fear that they are experiencing as they come to realize that Eren will make the same choice as Reiner and “save the world” in his mind, effectively murdering many

innocent citizens as an act of war. Another instance of Isayama's utilization of intrapanelling and interpanelling is to highlight the parallels between Gabi and Eren. As shown in the two images below, Isayama chooses the same positioning of the panels and the same angles in the panels when showing Eren and Gabi putting up their hair while looking at themselves in the mirror.



This visual connection between the two characters adds another layer of similarity between the two, beyond their shared stories and motives. In the beginning, when Eren was a child, he decided to enlist in the Eldian army as an act of revenge against the titans for eating his mother; Gabi, in a parallel case, decided to take revenge against the Eldians when Eren attacked Marley, murdering amongst the innocents Gabi's friends Udo and Zofia. This connection emphasizes circular storytelling because the same events that happened at the beginning of the story are



happening at the end, as visually represented through the parallel of Eren and Gabi. The circular storytelling that Isayama utilizes highlights the never-ending cycle of war and violence in the world of *Attack on Titan* and could have implications for understanding our own.

Another aspect that makes Isayama's utilization of manga structure unique is the way he demonstrates the flow of information and shifts in perspective. In *Attack on Titan*, the perspective is focused from specific characters, namely Eren, which is a "peculiar approach to narrative structure" (Ursini 1). Thus, the readers discover more about *Attack on Titan* as the characters themselves progress. An instance of this is when it is revealed that Reiner and Bertholdt can turn into titans like Eren, and are the ones behind the destruction of the walls that



killed Eren's mother. This reveal was masterfully done because, until this point of the story, Reiner and Bertholdt were seen as friends. They were only revealed to be the titans when Reiner and Bertholdt used their titan powers in front of everyone as a last resort measure to capture Eren and his titan abilities. Another instance was after a major narrative skip in time, when the perspective shifted from Eren to Eren's friends while they tried to figure out why his personality underwent a massive change and why is he wanted to advance a genocide against the world beyond the walls. In the

image to the left, Mikasa and Armin get into an argument with Gabi, and are left awestruck when Eren suddenly bolts into the room. This is further emphasized through the use of effect lines

when Eren arrives as well as a perspective focus on Mikasa and Armin as they become frightened, realizing he had walked inside. Through these intrapanel and interpanel component applications, Isayama was able to show that the perspective shifted from Eren onto his friends, resulting in Eren becoming the villain of the last arc of the story.

In conclusion, the uniqueness behind manga's emphasis on visual language conveys important modern issues like violence, revenge, and the cycle of hatred through a simple and artistic way. This simple and artistic manner of expressing messages gives meaning to manga for its ability to act as a literary medium and gives the author freedom in conveying their topics or issues they choose to cover through their manga. The freedom given to authors allow a variety of manga to be enjoyed by reader throughout the globe that simultaneously entertains and educates readers about important issues.

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