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As the necessity grows for undergraduate English teachers to incorporate various multimodal texts into their course material due to the changing landscape of what is considered English studies, comics can be an increasingly viable source for such texts. This thesis introduces several formal qualities of comics available for teachers to draw upon and add to their own arsenal of critical and terminological vocabulary in order to deploy comics-specific pedagogical material. A history of comics' problematic history and growth is provided as well as several examples of the sophistication of comics texts. In addition, specific information is given on how several comics might be incorporated into common undergraduate courses, and guidance for teachers is provided through extended examples of comics' value for English courses.

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Comics in the Classroom

by

Brian S. Mosher

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Brian S. Mosher, Author

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I want to express my sincere appreciation to the faculty who worked with me on this thesis, and were patient and understanding during what turned into a learning process for us all. I also want to thank my family, who have supported me throughout this project, and without whom I might not have survived.

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DEDICATION

The author dedicates this document to his children, who will inherent all his comics.

Chapter 1: Why Comics?

Introduction

This is an exciting time for comics fans. Both mainstream and small press comics publishers are producing hundreds of comics every week. Comics now fill whole sections at major chain and independent bookstores, as well as libraries. Comics also have a vigorous online presence. Increasingly, readers, critics, and scholars recognize that some of the most compelling and sophisticated publications of our day are presented in the medium of comics. Books like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* are just a few examples that display the sophistication of comics published in the last ten years. Meanwhile, superhero comics, amid series reboots and hugely successful film franchises, are stimulating popular culture markets more than ever.

For comics scholars, this is an equally exciting time. Comics studies' decades-long growth as a recognized academic field is finally coming to fruition. The earliest comics scholars had to fight for the right to teach and study comics. Comics studies' first practitioners were academics from various disciplines in the humanities, such as communications scholar John A. Lent, art historian David Kunzle, educator Vicki A. Green, and literary critic Joseph Witek. These scholars have been publishing on comics for over forty years. Their work helped pioneer the field of comics studies and has provided the framework around which they all continue to publish, now as part of a flourishing interdisciplinary scholarly community. Comics studies is beginning to generate courses in English departments across the country, and some new degree programs are devoted to comics studies, including one graduate (MA and PhD) program in comics studies and visual rhetoric at the University of Florida, and a new undergraduate minor in comics and cartoon studies at the University of Oregon that will accept students beginning in fall 2012.

Dozens of academic journals publish scholarly work exclusively on comics, many of them new and online, but a few are now celebrating double-digit anniversaries. Two journals, the *International Journal of Comic Art* and *Image and Narrative,* are publishing their thirteenth volume this year. The *Comics Journal* began publishing interviews with creators and essays on comics in 1976, and more than twelve peer-reviewed journals on comics like *The Comics Grid* (comicsgrid.com) appear exclusively online and have been consistently publishing content for three or more years. Sequart Literacy and Research Organization (sequart.org) also publishes daily peer-reviewed articles on comics and maintains an ongoing record of books and documentary films on comics scholarship. Yale University Press has published two volumes of comics in their anthology *Graphic Fiction* (Brunetti, ed.). In addition, several well-established academic journals on literature, film, and art history have published special issues devoted to comics, or regularly included articles on comics. Examples include *PMLA*, *The Cinema Journal*, and *Theory, Culture and Society*.

Clearly, comics studies has arrived. The Comics Arts Conference at the 2012 San Diego Comic Convention celebrated its twentieth anniversary, featuring sixteen panels of the most recent scholarship on comics. Notable panels included a discussion of the direction and history of the field among the aforementioned pioneers of comics studies (Green "Pioneers"). Comics possessing great narrative, stylistic, and structural complexity are being published regularly by major imprints like Houghton Mifflin.

Anthologies of articles about comics are being frequently published by academic presses; the most recent example is Routledge's 2011 *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*. Comics have won and received nominations for literary prizes and other awards, as well. This kind of praise and attention is worth noting when given to a medium that has often been undervalued.

These developments are very encouraging. In this thesis, I want to add to the argument for the academic value of comics and comics studies. More specifically, I want to encourage university English teachers to embrace comics as a cultural and pedagogical resource in their classrooms. My use of the term "comics" collectively describes the medium of words and pictures variously referred to as comics, comic books, or graphic novels. I will further address issues of terminology later in this chapter, but for now, when I use the term comics I mean everything from superhero and other popular genre comics to such serious literary works as Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* and *Are You My Mother?A Comic Drama*, two books that explore Bechdel's experiences through the lens of literary studies and psychoanalysis.

Comics is a capacious medium, and this is one of comics' major strengths. Because comics appear in such a variety of formats, present so many different genres, and appeal to such widely different audiences, it can be just as difficult to define what comics are as it can be to discuss their potential. As a result, it is helpful to imagine comics as a continuum, with "low" art at one end of the continuum and "high" art at the other. An example of "low" art might be a beloved *Peanuts* comic strip or a comparatively uncomplicated superhero comic book. An example of "high" art might be Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a book-length "original graphic novel" (OGN: an industry term for comics only published in book length form, never serialized in comic book format). A comic that might fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum is Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol*, a complicated 1990s superhero series that incorporated elements of Dadaist art, metaphysical and alchemical properties, and occult and supernatural villains. More interested in metaphysics than your typical superhero comic book, Morrison's *Doom Patrol* does not explicitly require a background in comics or art theory and history, but I would say that a background is rewarded by Morrison's particular presentation of the superhero genre.

Obviously, stratification of comics in this way is overly reductive and connotes artistic merit or value. The range of comics studied in books like *Critical Approaches to Comics* suggests that assigning value to comics is perhaps arbitrary. Book length comics such as *Jimmy Corrigan*, *Fun Home*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* have all received critical and scholarly attention as works worthy of academic scrutiny, but these are clearly not the only source for comics worthy of study. Teachers might have reasons to teach comics all up and down the continuum—from popular culture and historical context to genre comparisons and high art. This much is true, the inclusion or exclusion of comics in this thesis does not reflect a corresponding value judgment, for the division between high and low art is one that cannot be conclusively defended because it has no correlation to aesthetic response. But the undeniable fact remains that not all comics contain the kind of literary aspirations of *Fun Home*. Thinking about this separation is helpful for the purposes of English teachers, especially. English teachers have a strong history of including both canonical and non-canonical texts in their courses, providing an aesthetic "high" art text accompanied by a popular "low" art example from the same period for context. With comics, these opportunities are similarly available, and teachers can utilize their existing impulse to provide primary texts that represent a wide range of artistic merit and cultural context.

Equally important for this thesis is a second continuum, which describes how teachers might use comics in their classroom. The terms "low exposure" and "high exposure" are the two ends of this continuum, where teachers commit different amounts of reading or class time to comics as is appropriate for them. On this continuum, a teacher at the low exposure end of the continuum could use a single newspaper comic strip to introduce visual rhetoric, analyzing how the placement of characters within frames, the size and shape of the text, the color used for different objects and characters, or any number of different elements of a comic create meaning from the visual text. Another teacher, at the opposite end of the spectrum—and this would necessarily be the "highest" exposure—could teach a class entirely on comics. Comics' history, production techniques, and auteur analyses could all be a part of a course like this. These examples describe very different courses with very different goals. The middle ground on this continuum is, obviously, vast.

In addition to the above examples of visual rhetoric introductions and thorough analyses of comics on higher levels, courses could incorporate comics in myriad ways. For example, a course which surveys British literature could incorporate Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which features beloved characters from British literature as a secret military task-force to the British intelligence agency. Allan Quartermain, Captain Nemo (and the Nautilus), Mina Harker, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the Invisible Man compose a detective crime-fighting team, pitted against Professor

James Moriarty and his various plots in a postmodern pastiche of British literature and adventure stories. Some benefits of teaching *League* at the end of a course on British literature might be: emphasizing the staying power of literary characters in popular culture, examining "Englishness" and the importance of literary figures in the British cultural consciousness, or the tenets and techniques of postmodernism as presented in Moore's parodic vision of an England where literary characters are double agents. In another example, a faculty member teaching the Bible as literature could incorporate a selection from Robert Crumb's *The Book of Genesis*. Developing a sense of cultural context is important for literature classes, and this could be one way to address that contextualization in a class on the Bible. By juxtaposing Crumb's illustrations of biblical passages with those of the famous engraver, Gustave Doré, students could identify how different artists from different periods responded to the same biblical text (Fig. 1). One final brief example of how one might employ comics in their classes could be incorporating issue #19 of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* into a class on William Shakespeare's plays. This issue of *Sandman*, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," reimagines the first performance of the famous play. In the story, Morpheus, Sandman or King of

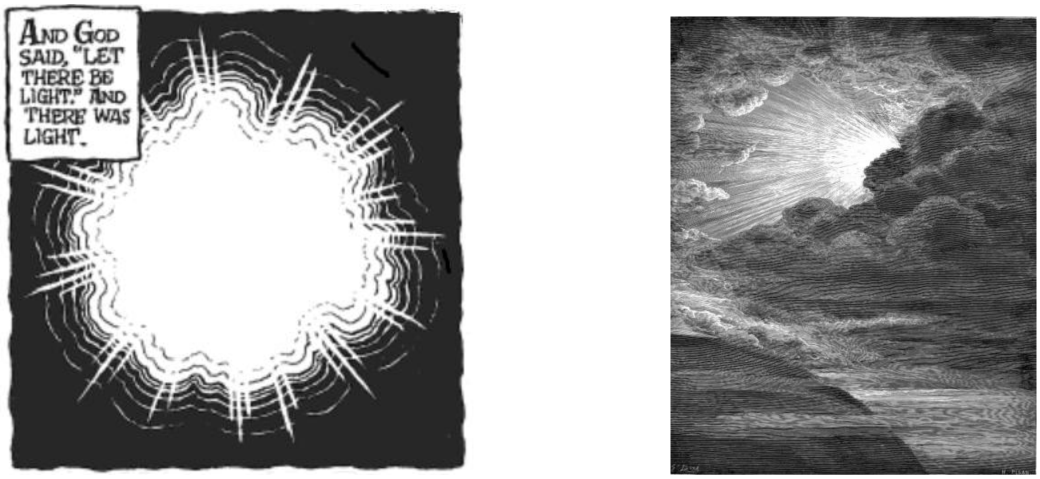

AND GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHT." AND THERE WAS LIGHT.

Figure 1

Dreams, has commissioned the play from Shakespeare, a diversion from his responsibilities caring for the land of dreams. In Gaiman’s comic, Morpheus has invited several key characters that readers will recognize as characters from the play to view its first performance. Morpheus open a door to the Faerie kingdom, allowing Oberon, Titania, Puck, and hundreds of minor faeries to attend the performance. Some respond with distaste, others with glee. Indeed, Puck doesn't much care for the actor playing him, and decides at intermission to assume the role himself, "improvising" the dialogue that we now know from the play.

The opportunities for discussing revisionist literature, adaptation, and genre studies with this pair of texts are clear. The tendency for Shakespeare courses to frequently incorporate screenings of filmed productions of the assigned plays is well-established, particularly in lower-division introductory courses. The inclusion of *Sandman* #19 (part of the collected *Sandman Volume Three: Dream Country*) in a Shakespeare course could be used much in the same way as a filmed version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, to destabilize Shakespeare's authority over the text, provide opportunities for students to respond to the text as adaptation (how would you have "staged" this version differently?), and perhaps visually engage students who struggle with Shakespeare's language.

The recent emphasis in English studies on multimodality and visual literacy is evidence of a general shift toward incorporating different kinds of media into English courses. Comics are an example of media which fits perfectly with the goals of English departments to develop students’ sensitivity to multiple literacies. In chapter two, I will discuss many qualities of comics which specifically address developments in visual literacy. I will also be providing extended examples of opportunities for comics in English classrooms in chapter three. The above brief examples show that comics can be used to enhance and benefit literature courses in many exciting ways.

My Personal Journey

Like many critics who are drawn to comics studies, I have loved comics for as long as I can remember, and their introduction into my professional life and course of study has proven to be both natural and compelling. I grew up reading comics. I read mostly superhero comics until college, and my first comic book was an issue of *Spiderman* during what I now know was the "Maximum Carnage" story arc. I vividly remember being enthralled by the sheer power of the characters involved, particularly by the alien "symbiote" villain, Carnage. Carnage is a super villain with nebulous and writhing skin that allows him to manipulate his body into non-human shapes. This "symbiote" skin allows him to perform destructive feats; he often dwarfs Spiderman in size and strength. Nevertheless, as superhero stories often go, Carnage is ultimately overcome by Spiderman. In one memorable scene, Carnage is defeated after rampaging through the New York City subway system as Spiderman evades the wild destruction, always just out of reach. As the story concludes, Spiderman lures Carnage toward the subway train tracks, taunting the hot-headed villain into attacking him with increasing rage. As a result, Carnage over-reaches in his anger and falls onto the electrified train tracks. The spider-like ensnaring of Carnage into Spiderman's tactical "web" (using Carnage's rage and the environmental weapon of the train tracks) is, of course, a fairly obvious and perhaps clichéd occurrence, but that one Spiderman story will forever remind me of how I first experienced comics' narrative power. I found similar experiences in traditional print text and stopped reading comics altogether from around age ten until I was a sophomore in college.

It was then that I discovered autobiographical comics in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, an ambitious literary work which tells the story of the author's first love, his changing views of religion, and the difficulties faced by the families portrayed in this powerful memoir concerning issues of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The best-known example of comics memoir is Art Speigelman’s *Maus.* Its significance to comics studies is unmatched, and a more detailed discussion follows in chapter two. I had heard about *Maus* in high school, but I had never thought it worth my time, assuming that a story about mice hiding in Poland could never be "cool" the way Batman is cool hiding in Gotham. The shock I experienced at how mature, sophisticated, and raw comics could be—especially after reading other examples of autobiographical comics like Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and David B.'s *Epileptic*—renewed my love of comics. These examples from non-fiction comics showed me that comics had expanded well beyond *Spiderman* and superhero comics. As in any artistic medium, comics' range is truly limitless.

With its origins in genres like superheroes and “funny animals” (made popular by Disney), it’s no surprise that serious comics caught me off guard. Inspired largely by underground comics, autobiographical and journalistic comics creators often brazenly and openly approach serious subjects, subverting cultural and literary conventions as the American "confessional" poets or the Beats did (Hatfield *Alternative* 18). *Fun Home* deals with the author's father's suicide, his sexual identity, and her own process of coming out as a lesbian. *Persepolis* centers on issues of gender and women’s rights during the political and social unrest of 1980s Iran. *Epileptic* dissects the disastrous consequences of mental illness on the author's family life. In comics journalism, Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde* covers the Bosnian War, while his *Palestine* reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* is another example of how non-fiction comics are being used to present contemporary events in comics form. The 2006 adaptation was approved by the chair and vice chair of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, which generated the report (Kean ix).

As I noted before, comics studies has arrived. This is as much a result of recent scholarly interest in popular media as it is an obvious result of so much great work being done in comics. Because of the narrative, temporal, and structural complexities of the aforementioned books and others like them (often called graphic novels, a useful if inaccurate term which I will discuss later in this chapter), comics have gained momentum as a medium which is increasingly being taken seriously by scholars in a variety of disciplines, including English.

I knew from an early age that I wanted to teach English. As a child, I loved reading books, but it wasn't until I first understood the power of symbolism—the way the world felt suddenly unlockable—that I knew what I wanted to do with my life. In my English classes, I learned why I love literature. My breakthrough moment came during my sophomore year in high school. I had read *Huckleberry Finn* when I was younger, and I was glad to return to it in my English class, as I remembered enjoying it. When my teacher suggested that the Mississippi River functions in the novel as a character—complete with agency and a motive and depth other than sounding—I was amazed. I entered college as a literature major and never changed my major or faltered in pursuing that goal. Courses in literary theory expanded my critical vocabulary and taught me how to understand literature. The coinciding reintroduction of comics into my reading life inspired a self-sponsored search for better ways to understand comics.

Three years ago, I first opened Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, which I will discuss in greater detail in chapter two. This book uses comics to describe comics' visual form and history, and it revolutionized the way I read comics. I suppose I knew, while reading *Blankets* for instance, that comics could entertain the kind of narrative complexity I loved to read in great books, but *Understanding Comics* opened my eyes to some of the formal qualities of comics which make the medium so interesting and sophisticated. McCloud, among many others, claims that comics benefit from and reward the same kind of critical analysis previously reserved for literature and other works of art. Obviously, not all comics warrant this kind of attention, but such texts as *Jimmy Corrigan*, *Fun Home*, and *Persepolis* have received critical and scholarly attention as works worthy of critical scrutiny.

I have never had a course on comics as an undergraduate or graduate student. My love of comics and my independent engagement with comics studies have inspired me to write a thesis to encourage teachers to add comics to their courses, whether introductory or advanced. Teachers do not have to be experts on comics to successfully incorporate comics in their courses. In fact, in my earlier examples of low exposure to comics on the continuum, knowledge exclusive to comics might be entirely unnecessary. Instead, a teacher could successfully rely on concepts of visual rhetoric (unrelated to comics) to explain how a particular comic strip works. Composition teachers have been using advertisements to this same end for decades. This brief, low-risk, in-class discussion would require little to no research in comics theory to be effective, just as the discussion of advertisements requires no research into advertising theory. But as before, the further a teacher shifts toward high exposure on the continuum, the more knowledge will be rewarded.

Why "Comics"?

Teachers using comics in their courses would benefit from a brief introduction to terminology in comics. A course entirely on comics would likely require deeper exploration of the intense debate surrounding definitions of comics, but this discussion merely introduces the concept of comics' flexibility and capaciousness. For some teachers, the knowledge that a definitional controversy exists is enough. Others may want to further engage comics scholarship on definitions and terminology. For teachers whose classes contain higher exposure to comics and different formats, the following provides helpful background for the diverse pedagogical opportunities comics' terminology can supply.

The following terms all refer to the medium of comics: comic strip, comic book, graphic novel, picture story, graphic narrative, pictorial narrative, comix, and sequential art. All of these are comics, but each term has its own specific identifying features related to format. I have chosen to refer to the entire medium by the one all-encompassing term, "comics." Each of these terms, including "comics," is problematic. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield—best known for his *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby*, which won the prestigious Eisner award (annual multi-category award named for famed comics auteur and scholar, Will Eisner) for best academic work in 2012—asserts in his *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, that:

> Terms like "comic book" and "graphic novel" are, strictly speaking, inaccurate; worse yet, they may encourage expectations, positive or negative, that are not borne out by the material itself. The phrase "graphic novel," for instance, seems to imply a breadth and cohesion to which few graphic novels aspire, let alone achieve. The label, taken for granted within the narrow straits of the comic book [collecting] hobby, threatens confusion as the graphic novel bids for acceptance within the wider field of literature and criticism . . . Conversely, the term "comic book," fraught with pejorative connotations, seems to undersell the extraordinary work that has been done, and is currently being done, in the long form. Yet to reject such terms completely is to run afoul of common usage and to risk obscuring the subject behind neologisms that are clumsy, counterintuitive, and ahistorical. (5-6)

Thus, it may be that no perfect term exists for the comics medium. As I said before, not all comics merit academic attention, and it would be similarly insufficient to simply declare equal all formats of comics. The distinctions between comic strip, comic book, and graphic novel are linked to a literal understanding of what a reader expects when opening its page(s). Still, Hatfield admits: despite my attempts to be all-inclusive, and despite inaccuracies and pejorative connotations, "format *is* important" (*Alternative* 5, his emphasis). Many conflicting arguments exist surrounding what to call comics, and the distinctions between these formats are an important part of comics studies. What *can* be declared here is that there *is* conflict—among creators, publishers, fans, and scholars—surrounding terminology. Each term for comics is "intimately tied to how one talks about the history of comics" (Hatfield "Defining" 26), because of the intrinsic political sentiments behind some of these terms. Every possible term one might choose, including "comics," is an intentional choice to not call comics anything else. As Witek suggests, even the term "comics" is troublesome: "to call a thing a *comic* when it's not funny is not more (or less) problematic than to call something a *novel* when its form was old hat in the time of Cervantes" (Witek *Comic Books* 220).

I use the term “comics” simply because it is as inclusive as any other term, and I use it with full knowledge of its shortcomings. For me, it is easy to be hampered by terminology and definitions. The critical discussion surrounding the many terms is fascinating and, frankly, exhausting. I want to encourage teachers to embrace these other terms—graphic novel is in particularly wide use in the academy—as it suits their purposes in class. As teachers with varying levels of experience with comics and comics studies (some may not engage comics scholarship at all), instructors should be free to call comics what makes the most sense to them. I raise these terminological issues to point out that the comics studies community has found much to debate within these definitions. Comics scholars want to study issues surrounding cultural recognition by a variety of groups: creators, reviewers, publishers, and fans. These debates reflect larger cultural tensions that both students and teachers may share. Awareness of the conflict could also invite authentic reader experiences from students when they learn that "comic book" means nothing more than the format in which the assigned compelling narrative is presented.

Some of comics' conflicts are part of a much wider, older phenomenon. Despite my claim that “comics studies has arrived,” some resistance remains. As scholars like Gerald Graff and Terry Eagleton have pointed out, established academic disciplines like literary and film studies had highly visible transitional periods, where traditional notions of value had to be revised in order for scholars to justify their study of the medium. Scholars in media studies and popular culture studies are aware of the recently “arrived” status of television, and the presently evolving status of video games as cultural objects worthy of academic study. Comics are in this transitional period now, but the fact remains that despite the growing acceptance of the value of comics in the academy, teachers who incorporate comics into their classes could still experience resistance from both students and colleagues. Why is this the case?

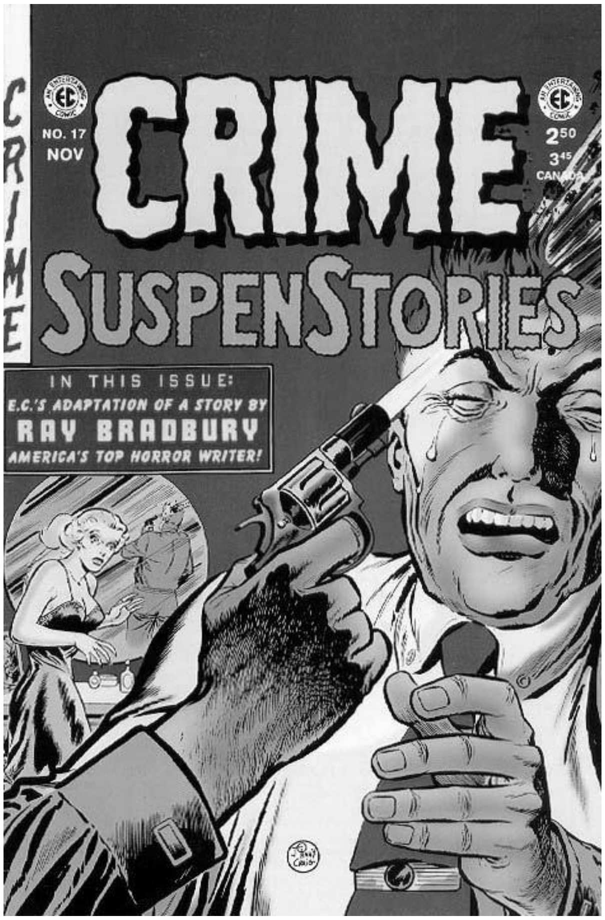
The Seduction of the Innocent

Only a complete history of the rich and diverse comics medium could fully answer this question, and several satisfying records exist of the different elements of comics’ development. Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* describes the beginning stages of the comic book industry, following its key figures through most of their lives. Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics: An Introduction* traces the growth and development of underground comics from the 1960s through the 1980s. David Hajdu's *The Ten Cent Plague: the Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* focuses on the influence of child psychiatrist Frederic Wertham on comics’ publication and acceptance. In the following, I would like to review what Hajdu and most comics scholars agree was a crucial moment in comics’ history. I believe teachers should be aware of the animosity toward comics which developed in the 1950s as a result of Wertham's 1954 book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*.

This animosity lingers today, as evidenced by critics and reviewers' sentiments about major successful comics in recent years. When Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (see my summary and analysis in this chapter) was published, a positive reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* said, "Art Spiegelman doesn't draw comics" (qtd. in Witek "Imagetext"). A reviewer of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* said, "it seems wrong to call her memoir a comic book" (qtd. in Wolk 12). Although someone reading these reviews might find it natural and even helpful for reviewers to attempt to differentiate *Persepolis* and *Maus* from other, less serious comics, comics scholars could only note the irony inherent in valuing Satrapi's text by devaluing the entire comic book format. One can similarly imagine Spiegelman's resistance to the idea that he does not do what he had spent the last twenty years of his life doing. These reviewers reflect a common assumption that comics are incapable of complex story-telling. Teachers should be prepared to discuss comics’ supposed inferiority in their classes. By understanding Wertham’s responsibility for this negativity, teachers can greatly increase students and colleagues’ acceptance of the merits of comics.

Seduction of the Innocent is an blatant attempt to connect juvenile delinquency directly with children reading comic books: "It is our judgment, in all kinds of behavior disorders and personality difficulties of children, that comic books do play a part" (Wertham 10). As the comics industry grew from 1930 to 1950, the primary audience of comic books *was* children (Duncan 171). Some accounts of 1950s comics circulation place average youth reader habits at fifty to seventy-five comics each week (Schmitt

156). The inexpensive, pulp-esque comic books' main audience was young "eleven or twelve year-old[s] who treated them as disposable entertainment" (Duncan 171). But the subject matter of comic books, without any kind of governing force for determining content, was left solely to the creators. We might say now that this was as it should have been, but popular genres of the time like crime and horror comics left little visually to the imagination (Fig. 2). When it came to light that comics contained the kind of violence and sexuality of *True Crime* comics (cited frequently by Wertham and comics historians as exemplary of such material), the negative public reaction was furious and widespread. Though "Fredric Wertham was hardly the first anti-comics crusader" (Hajdu 98), the impact of *Seduction of the Innocent* was felt in the comics publishing community and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CRIME
SUSPENSTORIES
2
IN THIS ISSUE:
E.C.'S ADAPTATION OF A STORY BY
RAY BRADBURY
AMERICA'S TOP HORROR WRITER!

Figure 2

beyond as it contributed to the United States Senate hearings on comics and youth in 1954. It was as a result of these Senate hearings that the Comics Code was established in that same year, as a group of comics publishers began the Comic Magazine Association of America (CMAA) and adopted a revamped version of the Hollywood Production Code in order to stave off legal action from the government (Weiner 8). Though it claimed to be merely a publication policy, the Comics Code acted as a *de facto* censor and changed the way comics were created.

The Code contained severe censorious language which limited participating creators' rights as to what could be published with the approval of the CMAA. The CMAA, as a publisher's organization, could not control what publishers released, but could choose whether or not to give their approval, in the form of a cover seal (Fig. 3), to books being published at the time. The Code required that members (initially twelve publishers) adhere to its six principles, reproduced here from Hadju's *The Ten-Cent Plague*:

- Sexy, wanton comics should not be published. No drawing should show a female indecently or unduly exposed, and in no event more nude than in a bathing suit commonly worn in the U.S.A.
- Crime should not be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy against law and justice or to inspire others with the desire for imitation. No comics shall show the details and methods of a crime committed by a youth. Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions should not be portrayed as stupid or ineffective, or represented in such a way as to weaken respect for established authority.
- No scenes of sadistic torture should be shown.

- Vulgar and obscene language should never be used. Slang should be kept to a minimum and used only when essential to the story.
- Divorce should not be treated humorously or represented as glamorous or alluring.
- Ridicule of or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible. (129)

Any publisher who was unwilling to follow these principles simply did not receive approval by the CMAA. But the financial implications were much greater. Without support from the CMAA, there was often little chance of commercial success, as retailers were often unwilling to carry non-approved books. Comics critic Douglas Wolk links the plunge in quality writing, art, and presentation in the comics from newsstands to the Code and its indirect enforcement: "Thanks to the Comics Code, a wave of enforced blandness swept over mainstream comics. . . no matter how expressive and creative a comic book was, it also had to be broadly commercially viable or there was no sense in publishing it" (Wolk 39). A significant amount of this "self-censoring" was a result of Wertham's book and its impact on mainstream understanding of what comics were doing to children.

Wertham's claims, it turns out, were based almost entirely on evidence that was collected with undeniable bias. All interviewees in his largely conversational and anecdotal book were taken from pools of patients already hospitalized or incarcerated for what Wertham categorizes as "deviance." Still, "while most parents did not read Wertham's pedantic book or watch the boring hearings, they could hardly avoid the basic message that filtered through the mass media: Comic books are bad for children" (Duncan 39). Wertham, a respected psychiatrist whose other work in social science is still

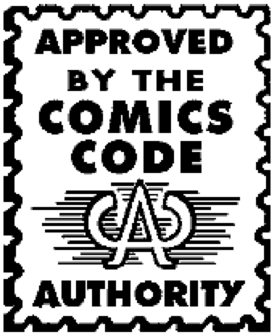


Figure 3

cited positively today, especially his efforts to enforce ethical practices of racial equality in medical and mental health situations, quite deftly declared an entire artistic medium unworthy of attention with *Seduction of the Innocent*.

The effects of Wertham's misrepresentation of comics continue, both in how comics readers are stigmatized and, until recently, how comics are published. Though perhaps not seen as social deviants (in Wertham's parlance), comics fans suffer greatly from their common depiction as "nerds" in television and films. Despite its comparable ineffectiveness in stopping the publication of unauthorized comics, the Comics Code was in regular use by major comics publishers until recently. The two largest comics publishers, Marvel and DC, announced they would cease printing covers with the Code approval seal in 2001 and 2010, respectively. The "pejorative connotations" attached to comic books are related to this paradigmatic misunderstanding of comics by Wertham, and the mainstream interpretation of his findings helped bring about a general dismissal of all comics, regardless of sophistication or complexity. Nevertheless, comics' relevance is increasingly clear, especially with the enormity of comics in popular culture, and the critical and popular acclaim given to comics published in recent years. The growing body of research on comics is evidence of a shift in critical concern for the medium away from the historical taboos and toward a respectful, even reverent treatment of comics as a literary subject of study.

My goal with this first chapter has been to introduce readers to comics as a viable, teachable tool for English courses. The rise of comics studies, along with an increase in comics' creators willingness to make comics which invite scholarly attention, has created an important "arrival" for comics in the academy. Despite definitional conflicts and past persecutions, comics have thrived. Comics' capaciousness has required that I be woefully brief with topics that deserve far more attention, a symptom I will avoid in the remainder of this thesis. Next, in a chapter on comics' sophistication, I will first examine parts of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to improve teachers' understanding of how comics work. This formal framework will set the stage for a discussion of several works which led to a major change in critical appreciation. This change occurred with the publication of three important works in 1986: Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. These three books sparked an increased sophistication in comics and arguably provided justification for its growing community of scholars, as evidenced by the overwhelming prevalence of scholarly material which addresses these three works in at least some form.

In my final chapter, I will provide several models for teaching and researching comics, using examples for how teachers might approach several 21st century comics in different settings. As Charles Hatfield writes in his introduction to *Alternative Comics*: "Comics are challenging (and highly teachable)" (xiii). In my modest attempt to encourage teachers to use comics, I want to provide examples which will resonate with teachers of varying literary interests and motivations for including comics. I love comics and want teachers to feel good about using them in whatever ways they can so that this exciting medium continues to get the attention it deserves.

Chapter 2: How Comics Work

In the last chapter, I asked: “why comics?” There are several answers to that question, of course. The medium is limitless. Comics can be used in many ways. They can be compelling. To understand why comics are worth studying, it can be helpful to understand what comics are, as well as how they work. Learning *how comics work* can be an especially valuable asset for teachers. Whether a teacher is using a comic strip to teach visual literacy or all twelve volumes of Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* to investigate mythology, understanding how comics work will play some role in their discussion. In this chapter, I will first review different ways that comics work. This is both helpful information for teachers *and* students using comics, but also provides further evidence of comics’ sophistication on a conceptual level. Then, with a grasp on basic formal concerns, I will introduce three advanced theoretical concepts about how comics work spatially, aesthetically, and metacognitively. Not all courses would benefit from these advanced concepts, but I want to provide useful information for teachers with varying levels of interest in comics. To show how these concepts actually occur in comics, I will present three examples of excellent book-length comics in a second section. All three examples were published in the same landmark year and have been identified by numerous critics as a turning point in comics’ sophistication. To analyze these examples, I will discuss the narrative, formal, and advanced qualities discussed in this first section.

Sequential Artistry: Comics Form and Theory

Reading comics is different than reading traditional print texts. Comics are, essentially, a hybrid art form of words *and* pictures. As readers, we read words when we read traditional print text, and we see pictures when we view art. David Carrier asserts in his 2000 book, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, that the dual natures of meaning-making while "reading pictures" and "seeing words" are combined when "viewing comics" (Carrier 61-74). Comics readers often require a different kind of literacy or set of interpretive skills than when reading traditional print texts. This is not to say that comics are more or less difficult or rewarding than traditional print texts, but that the act of reading the hybrid text requires a different, hybrid skill. The value of comics in the classroom is this hybrid skill, or multimodal literacy (visual, textual, metatextual, etc.) which is increasingly important in literary and composition studies. In discussing this skill, I will describe and then make use of a set of critical terms. Developing a critical vocabulary allows both students and teachers to discuss comics' phenomena more accurately. This kind of vocabulary is comparable to the need for critical terminology in poetry, drama, and other art forms.

As I wrote in chapter one, the recent focus on visual rhetoric and multimedia in English studies emphasizes the importance of multimodal texts like comics. To describe this hybrid literacy skill, I will use examples from well-known comics creator Scott McCloud's 1993 primer on comics form (written in comics medium), *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. The most valuable thing about comics, for McCloud, is the ease with which comics readers are able to comprehend action and movement when they are actually viewing static images and words. In other words, readers are able to understand comics because of a literary skill which they already possess. McCloud describes this phenomenon and explains how readers are able to understand comics.

According to one introduction to his work, McCloud's is best known for "showing the way for contemporary thinkers who would seek to rigorously analyze emerging media" with *Understanding Comics* (Wardrip-Fruin 711). McCloud’s contribution to comics studies of a basic analytical framework earned him the title: "the Aristotle of comics" (Wardrip-Fruin 711). In *Understanding* Comics, McCloud develops a medium-specific system for categorizing image types; a psychosocial classification of line, style, and color in comics; and elements of a formal grammar for comics studies including "closure" and "icons." McCloud's elaborate categorization of iconic images draws from art history and aesthetics, and with it he constructs a triangular grid on which all iconic images fall. *Understanding Comics*' subtitle, "the invisible art," refers to the concept of closure, which I will explain fully in this section. The terms "icon" and "closure" are not exclusively related to comics, but McCloud uses them in ways which help to clarify their importance to comic art. These terms are especially useful for teachers and students. When comic art is considered iconic, McCloud describes how meaning is made through psychological concepts of projection and self-reflexivity. McCloud explains how icons work through the framework of linguistics, art, and semiotics. English teachers might find it reassuring that McCloud’s classification of iconic images and different artists' style choices is very similar to concepts from Roland Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image" and semiotic meaning systems from linguistics. Because of its theoretical depth, and the fact that it is composed entirely of comics, *Understanding Comics* is considered a seminal project on comics form.

McCloud's inspiration for the book (as he openly states in the acknowledgements to this and his 2000 *Reinventing Comics* and 2006 *Making Comics*) is Will Eisner, whose likewise-seminal 1985 volume on comics' formal qualities *Comics and Sequential Art* was "the first book to examine the art-form of comics" (McCloud *Understanding* iv). Eisner was perhaps one of the most important figures in inspiring comics studies' growth and is best known for his creation of the highly influential series, *The Spirit*, and his long work *The Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories*. This last book has been erroneously called the first graphic novel, though its 196 pages certainly drew attention to the potential of longer-form comics in 1978. These comics, in addition to Eisner's emphasis on the medium as an instructional tool while teaching at the School of Visual Art in New York City, earned him a place as one of the comics community's most loved and respected creators. The annual Eisner Awards have honored his achievements in comics by carrying his name since 1988.

McCloud’s theoretical concepts in *Understanding Comics* are elaborations on Eisner's critical formation of how comics work: "Unless comics readers can recognize the imagery or supply the necessary events that the arrangement of images imply, no communication is achieved. The comics maker is obliged, therefore, to devise images that connect with the reader's imagination" (Eisner *Graphic* 71). The semiotic connoting between simple comics images happens without even the slightest awareness by the reader. There are, of course, degrees of complexity, which McCloud describes and I will review. But the raw power of comics is this "invisible" semiotics that occurs completely off the comics page.

To further illustrate this point, McCloud provides sample images that clarify the effectiveness of comics' reliance on closure, defined as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud *Understanding* 63). The phenomenon of closure is one of the reasons comics are so teachable. Closure can be as simple as viewing a photograph of a person's head and being able to mentally "create" or imagine the rest of their body (not visible in the photograph, but implied). Closure also describes the complex process our brains complete when we *observe* a circle, two dots, and a line but *perceive* a human face (Fig. 4). And what happens if those two dots become Xs? In comics, closure occurs between each sequential panel, "filling in" the details of the scene. These details might be related to time, spatial placement and motion, or any other change. In other words, the reader mentally completes the actions which happen in the "gutters," the term for the space between a sequence of comics panels. The changes observed between panels—in the gutters—provide the sequence of panels with narrative, and perceiving this narrative requires closure from the reader: "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). Thus, the reader is complicit in the creation of comics' narrative, and the events which occur in the gutter are often open to a wide array of interpretation. McCloud illustrates this point with the following example (Fig. 5):

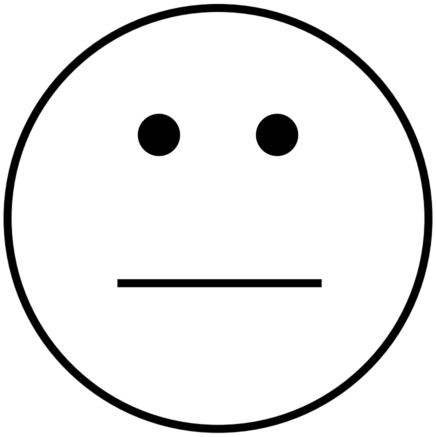


Figure 4

> Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. . . I may have drawn an axe being raised. . . but I'm not the one who let it drop, or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style. To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths. (66-69)

This two-panel example is enough to explain the phenomenon of comics' "invisible art" to even the most skeptical viewer and is an excellent teaching tool. Recognizing that comics have this reader-perpetuated narrative possibility (even within a simple pair of images!) is the first step toward believing in the power of comics. Convincing our students of that power may be as easy as showing this image and quote from *Understanding Comics*.

Teachers of poetry will recognize the similarity in "filling in" information that is intentionally left out, much as someone teaching experimental fiction from the modernist or postmodern periods would, or even some realist fiction like that of Henry James.

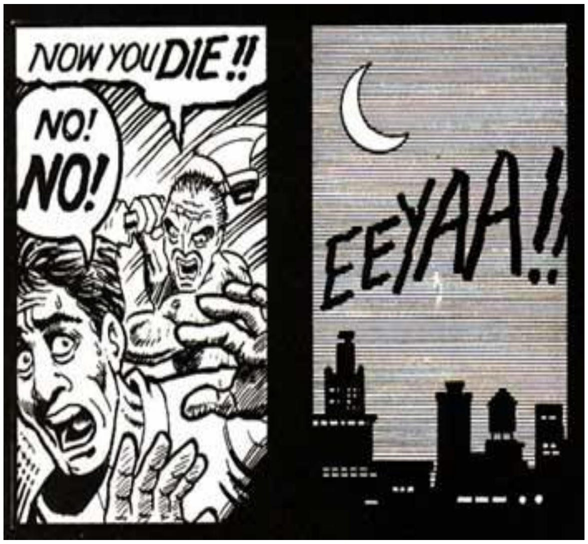

NOW YOU DIE!!
NO! NO!
EEYAA!!

Figure 5

Comics are not unique in their cognitive demands of the reader, but the way in which comics elicit closure passively makes the analytical possibilities enormously available for all ranges of readers' critical experience. Obviously, complex comics like *Jimmy Corrigan* do require a more sophisticated system of closure which is not necessarily automatic or passive. Moreover, McCloud describes different types of transitions between panels that can provide distinct kinds of closure. This classification of transitions is another helpful tool in explaining how comics work.

McCloud describes six types of transition between panels: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur transitions (Fig. 6). Each type requires a different degree of complexity of closure and

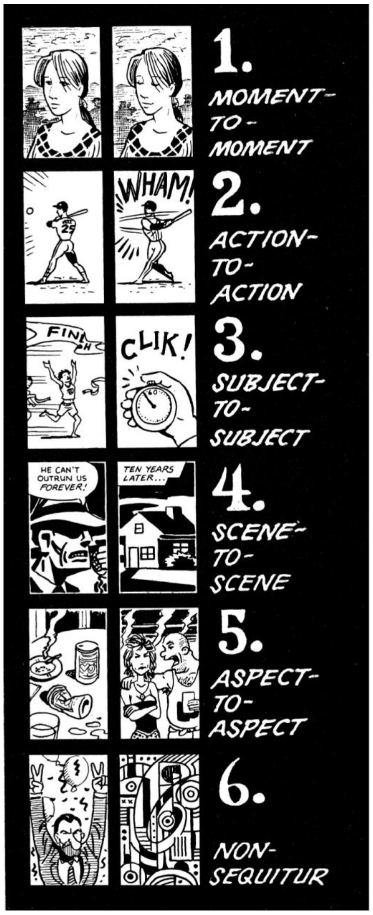

1. MOMENT-TO-MOMENT
WHAM!
2. ACTION-TO-ACTION
FINISH
CLIK!
3. SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT
HE CAN'T OUTRUN US FOREVER!
TEN YEARS LATER...
4. SCENE-TO-SCENE
5. ASPECT-TO-ASPECT
6. NON-SEQUITUR

Figure 6

can be used to serve a specific purpose in the text, functioning in its own distinct way. Moment-to-moment transitions typically involve very small differences between panels, requiring very little closure from the reader to comprehend the narrative between the panels. Action-to-action transitions feature the same specific subject in the progression of an action. Subject-to-subject transitions maintain scene or idea while switching subjects. Scene-to-scene transitions often transport the narrative across time and space, bridging potentially large gaps in narrative. Time is arbitrary in aspect-to-aspect transitions, where different aspects of a place, mood, or idea are presented. Finally, non-sequitur transitions offer no logical connection at all (70-72). These transition types offer possibilities for presenting and interpreting narrative. Consider a common comics scene where a series of four horizontal panels each presents a consecutively larger version of the same subject, akin to the "zoom" of a film camera lens. There is a tension building behind this moment-to-moment transition sequence, contributing to the narrative using only visuals to suggest this tension. Or perhaps consider a series of non-sequitur transitions to mimic a drug-induced stupor or a life-altering trauma. The success of these techniques relies on the reader's ability (and willingness) to make the connection between panels, "transforming them into a single idea," providing closure for a series of related—or, just as easily, unrelated—images.

In addition to closure, McCloud successfully outlines comics' reliance on iconic images. Beginning with René Magritte's famous painting, "The Treachery of Images," McCloud discusses the nature of icons, meaning "any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea" (27). From Magritte, we understand that "Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe)" is a gesture toward the difference between image and reality. We realize that the image of a tobacco pipe is not an *actual* pipe, but merely a painted representation of what one pipe *might* look like. Three categories of icons exist for McCloud: symbolic, practical, and pictures. Symbolic icons are images that represent ideas, concepts, and philosophies. Practical icons represent language, science, and communication. Picture icons are designed to actually resemble their subjects (27). Any *reproduction* of a image—whether a photograph, a simple line drawing like the "face" from above, or Magritte's pipe—is an example of an picture icon.

McCloud constructs a triangular grid on which to place all pictures icons (Fig. 7), with a photograph of a person's face in the "reality" corner and the cartoon face in the "language" corner. The axis of measurement between these two points is semiotic

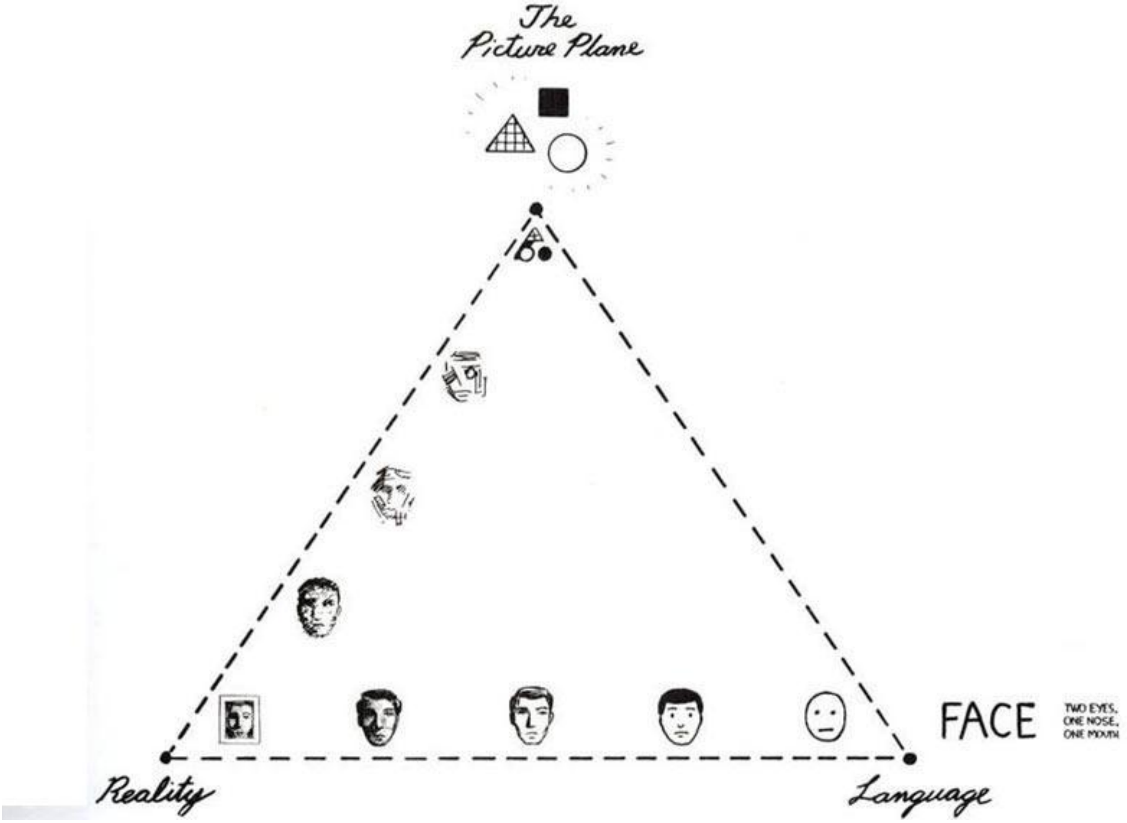


Figure 7

abstraction. Using this grid, we see that photographs and realistic pictures best resemble reality, but the human mind can make meaning despite abstraction, hence the meaning of “face” from the circle, two dots, and a line. In the grid, the line of faces continues beyond the abstract face toward further abstraction, and McCloud includes the word "face" outside the grid. Words are still semiotic images for McCloud, but they are not "pictures" in his sense of the three categories. The third corner of the triangle is what McCloud calls "the picture plane." This is another realm of abstraction, but is more related to the composite parts of an art object rather than the meaning behind them. In McCloud's words, this is "where shapes, lines, and colors can be *themselves* and not pretend *otherwise*" (51, emphasis original). Locating images on this grid provides opportunities to talk about artistic style without the need for comprehensive art history or theory.

Understanding Comics and its discussion of closure and icons is an example of the kind of rich detailed grammar available in comics, and it has certainly contributed to the wealth of published work on comics' form. Concepts of closure and icons are particularly useful at the level we would expect to be able to teach our students, which is why I have taken as much time discussing their importance here. However, the detail displayed here is not always necessary for class lectures. The basic concepts of icons and closure can be described in as little as twenty minutes, which I have done during guest presentations to undergraduates.

I want to briefly explore three of these qualities of comics which may be valuable to teachers in order to illustrate my earlier claims about the multimodal value of comics. To do this, I will describe three comics scholars' approach to comics' dynamic construction of space, their aesthetics, and their sociocognitive complexities. In "The

Construction of Space in Comics," Pascal Lefèvre discusses the dynamism of constructed space in comics. Contrasting diegetic (visible, on the page) space with extradiegetic (invisible, off the page) space in comics, Lefèvre draws attention to the "suspension of disbelief" required of all fictional narrative. A willing suspension of disbelief is something all readers are familiar with when confronted with unbelievable coincidence or unlikely narrative, setting, events, or people; but suspension of disbelief in comics works in a particularly interesting way. This is due to comics' artistic style—where cartoon visuals (even in the most realistic settings) are abstract compared to reality—but also due to what Lefèvre calls "contigency" (159). Contingency is related to the believability of diegetic spaces which, in comics, are frequently represented differently or incongruously *between consecutive frames*. A comparable example from film would be continuity errors, where discrepancies between two shots of the same subject take away from film's realism. But in comics, this is an inherent hazard of the medium, because "in comics every panel has to be composed again on the blank page[;]. . . everything that is not drawn again will be absent" (Lefèvre 160). That is, because of changes in perspective, visual prominence, or focal points, things may not always appear to be consistent throughout panels where the depicted scenery is the same. But Lefèvre claims that a comics "reader will not check every diegetic space in all its details for its degree of contingency: he knows that the diegetic world is not completely the same as his daily reality" (Lefèvre 162). The implication of this statement confirms the "reader's contract" with the creator (Eisner). This contract is fulfilled when the creator effectively and efficiently controls his reader's viewpoint, while the reader implicitly agrees to believe the scene to have stayed realistically the same between moments, though his eyes logically tell him otherwise.

As stated above, this suspension of disbelief is similar to reading traditional print text in many ways, but constant checking for contingency is physically available in comics, where adjacent panels can be rapidly and repeatedly cross-referenced for detail because of their physical proximity. What is surprising, and what Lefèvre points out, is that comics readers do not root out lapses in contingency; they accept them as part of the medium. This is a different sort of suspension of disbelief, and requires that the reader fulfill their contract on each and every page; at times in each and every panel. And yet, despite the paranoia-like obsession with which modern filmgoers attack continuity errors evidenced by the exhaustive error catalogs associated with nearly every film on the Internet Movie Database, comics readers willfully ignore the "errors" in comics. The best part is how this all feels very natural while reading.

In summary, there is a payoff for English teachers in all this: the uniqueness of comics in this regard is in establishing and maintaining setting. In traditional print texts, a setting or character description is usually given merely one time, and the reader stores that information in their mind’s eye, as it were. The author need not repeat their probably elaborate and evocative description, because a reader’s memory will do the work. In comics, the artist presents the physical “description” of their settings and characters *in every single panel*, again and again, sometimes for hundreds of pages. Therefore, small changes in appearances can be dissected as often as they are disregarded. As in word economy in poetry, every brushstroke matters in comics. The wealth of possibility for teaching a comics page with this concept in mind is large, indeed. A teacher might use this concept in a classroom to compare how different creators draw their settings. Will Eisner, in *The Contract with God*, lavishly depicts the New York tenement buildings his characters inhabit. His deep connection to the tenement life is expressed in his willingness to render these horribly maintained buildings in such detail.

At this point it would not aid my argument to fully address comics that problematize this concept, but it is worth pointing out that some comics employ flashback and dream scenes from a subjective point of view, often flouting these "rules" and intentionally unsettling the viewer. Passionate filmgoers and comics readers may notice more continuity errors than an average person, but books like Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* build narrative power through the destabilization of reality, both for characters and readers. Suffice it to say I will describe how selections from *Jimmy Corrigan* employ this destabilization and what it means for readers in an extended pedagogical example in chapter three.

Suspension of disbelief is a commonly-used term to describe many different types of aesthetic phenomena, but because comics form requires such a constant, simpler version of that suspension, understanding comics can provide a window into how we read and why reading is an essentially human activity. David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* uses traditional aesthetic art criticism and philosophy to discuss comics. He equates an awareness of history (consciousness) with the realization that the present is "one of a sequence of moments" (73). Carrier declares that by "externalizing this awareness, displaying the antecedents and consequences of one moment [i.e., the panel], [comics] narratives thus show what it is to be a person" (73). This isn't the only kind of awareness which makes us human, nor is it the only kind of awareness which comics encourages and promotes. Lisa Zunshine begins her essay, "What to Expect when You Pick Up a Graphic Novel," with a discussion of "mind-reading" (114), or the intuitive attribution of mental states onto others: a kind of folk psychology theory of mind. This, Zunshine claims, is a "cornerstone . . . of every aspect of human sociality" (Zunshine 115) and is something which fictional narratives stimulate in our brain. We are "greedy mind readers" who gladly (though without thinking about it) will attribute mental states onto others without hesitation. This kind of projection is involved in comics, as they build on this impulse "to offer readers a pleasurable exercise in navigating complex social situations" (115). Zunshine suggests that we effectively desire a reader's role in our interpersonal experiences, a desire which is heightened and satisfied through the very act of reading. Again, this kind of fulfillment of interpersonal desire is likewise fulfilled in traditional print texts. Comics taps into this goal in a unique way through the use of its iconic images: cartoons.

To explain why this is, I will return briefly to McCloud. The ability to see a human face in the iconic pictorial of a circle, two dots, and a line is a self-reflexive and "self-centered" phenomenon (McCloud *Understanding* 32). During a conversation in person, we are aware of our conversation partner's face, visibly before us, and maintain a connotative awareness of what their facial structures might mean (a smile, a nod, etc.). We are also simultaneously aware of the features of our own face, "but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement, a sense of shape, a sense of general placement: something simple and basic as a cartoon. Thus, when you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself" (36). The constant projection of self into the narrative of a comics world is comparably heightened to the projection experienced in a traditional print text because of the visual qualities comics possesses (Fig. 8).

Excellent class discussions could evolve from this understanding of how intimacy with characters works in comics. Students frequently wish to comment on their relationship with a character, how they feel about what a character has done in a text. In comics, their critical distance is given some psychological merit and the sense of projection might change with different artists. For example, the many different artists who have drawn Harvey Pekar's autobiographical comic, *American Splendor,* have done so in many different styles. Some are more cartoonish, inviting McCloud's projection concept. Others are very abstract, with some artists using pointillism or watercolor to achieve abstract, un-cartoonish art. These different visual presentations of Pekar's characters might affect how easily readers are able to relate to those characters.

Clearly, comics can be immensely sophisticated. The theoretical concepts introduced in this section should provide teachers with background in how comics work

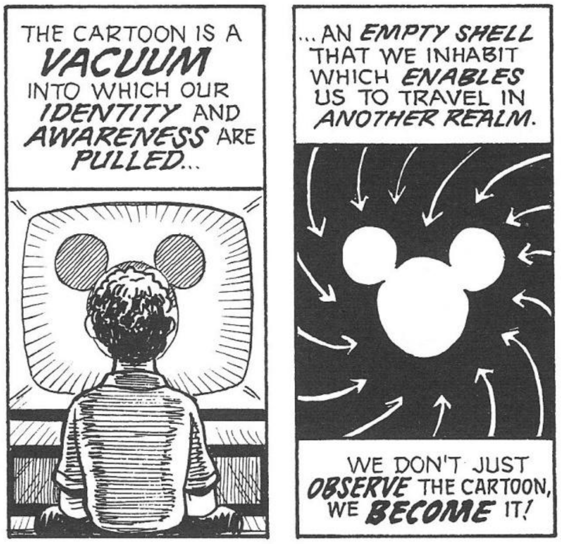

THE CARTOON IS A VACUUM INTO WHICH OUR IDENTITY AND AWARENESS ARE PULLED...
...AN EMPTY SHELL THAT WE INHABIT WHICH ENABLES US TO TRAVEL IN ANOTHER REALM.
WE DON'T JUST OBSERVE THE CARTOON, WE BECOME IT!

Figure 8

on formal, aesthetic, and metacognitive levels. I believe our students can benefit from any amount of the preceding theoretical material, but the degree of exposure to comics theory would have to depend on the level of exposure to comics more generally. My next section focuses on a key moment in comics' past. Just as not all teachers will need to master formal and theoretical concepts in order to satisfy their particular course's exposure to comics, not all teachers will need to have the comprehensive background in comics that is clearly available for research. The following section introduces three comics that have been recognized as crucial to comics' recent success, all published in 1986.

Comics' Acceptance and Sophistication – The Turning Point

Many comics critics and scholars claim that 1986 was a pivotal year for increased sophistication in comics (Gravett 56, 76; Klock 25; Sabin *Comics* 162-5, 188; Weiner xi, 34-5; Wolk 8, 175-6, 236, 342). Within that one year, three different comics that would become international successes were the new examples of serious, mature, and sophisticated literary and artistic work being done in comics: *Maus: A Survivor's Tale,* Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (Weiner). Because of their influence, a knowledge of these three particular books is essential for understanding the state of comics' current sophistication. As Douglas Wolk points out in *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, "From then until the turn of the millenium, [these] three books became the standard against which comics that wanted to be important or meaningful were measured" (Wolk 8). Reading these books would be absolutely essential for someone studying comics, but as before, my intent is to provide these summaries as tools for teachers who may not be able to engage with comics on such a comprehensive level. For teachers to fully grasp the sophistication of the 21st century comics which I will discuss in chapter three, this turning point in comics' sophistication is very important. These books brought sophisticated comics into the mainstream. This resulted in the opening of new possibilities for creators like those featured in chapter three to produce work with such high artistic and literary ambitions.

Maus weaves together two complex personal narrative threads. The first is of Spiegelman's father's survival of the Holocaust. The second chronicles Spiegelman's own act of recording the information and interviews needed to tell his father's tale. In some sections of *Maus*, Art (Spiegelman), who is a character in the story, asks his father, Vladek, to give Art the details of his survival, which then are composed as a secondary narrative. As Vladek narrates his personal experiences to Art in one arc, so Art delivers the story as narrated text in a first-person account. Both narratives are accompanied by Spiegelman's comic art, which transposes the facial features of each character into those of animals. All characters have a human body, but the face of an animal. The Jewish characters are drawn as mice, the German Nazi characters as cats, and civilian Polish characters (neutral, friend, or foe) as pigs. This artistic decision echoes the traditional "funny animals" comics genre, invoking a Disney-esque motif to tell a darkly emotional and horrifically violent story.

The parody of Disney is effective, underscoring the influence of the underground comics (also called comix) of which Spiegelman was so directly a part. The rough, heavy line, colorless black and white, and densely cross-hatched texturing all corroborate the undergrounds' influences on *Maus*. Comix rose of out of 1960s and 1970s counterculture. As a direct response to the Comics Code and the censorious attitude of mainstream comics publishers, the undergrounds were full of violence, sexual themes, and adult language. Comix flouted the "rules" of the Code and proudly embraced adult material specifically identified in the Code as off-limits. The narrative layering of *Maus*—most notably when, in the second volume, Art self-reflexively discusses the critical acclaim *Maus*'s first volume received, or when Art shows Vladek sketches for the book and includes his response (Fig. 9)—creates an intensely compelling book, tracing and troubling the relationships between father and son, trauma and memory, biography and fantasy.

Initially published as a series in *RAW*, *Maus* ran from 1980 to 1991, but when Pantheon books published the first six chapters as a collection in 1986, bookstores marketed the collection as a "graphic novel." *Maus* was not the first to be so labeled, but it was the first to receive the kind of critical acclaim that *Maus* garnered at its release. Hundreds of reviews and articles were published featuring overwhelmingly positive praise for the volume, and as a result, a renewed attention was given to comics as an art form. The acceptance of comics in academic communities grew around this time, but truly became a movement after the second and final volume of *Maus* was published in 1992, and received a Pulitzer Prize special award. *Maus* has been cited as inspiration by many comics creators who embrace serious topics in autobiography, journalism, and other non-fiction genres that we see today.

But *Maus* wasn't the only book to take on this kind of serious and mature material in 1986. Serious themes could also be found in the medium's staple genre: superhero comics. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, writer and artist Frank Miller's first exploration of

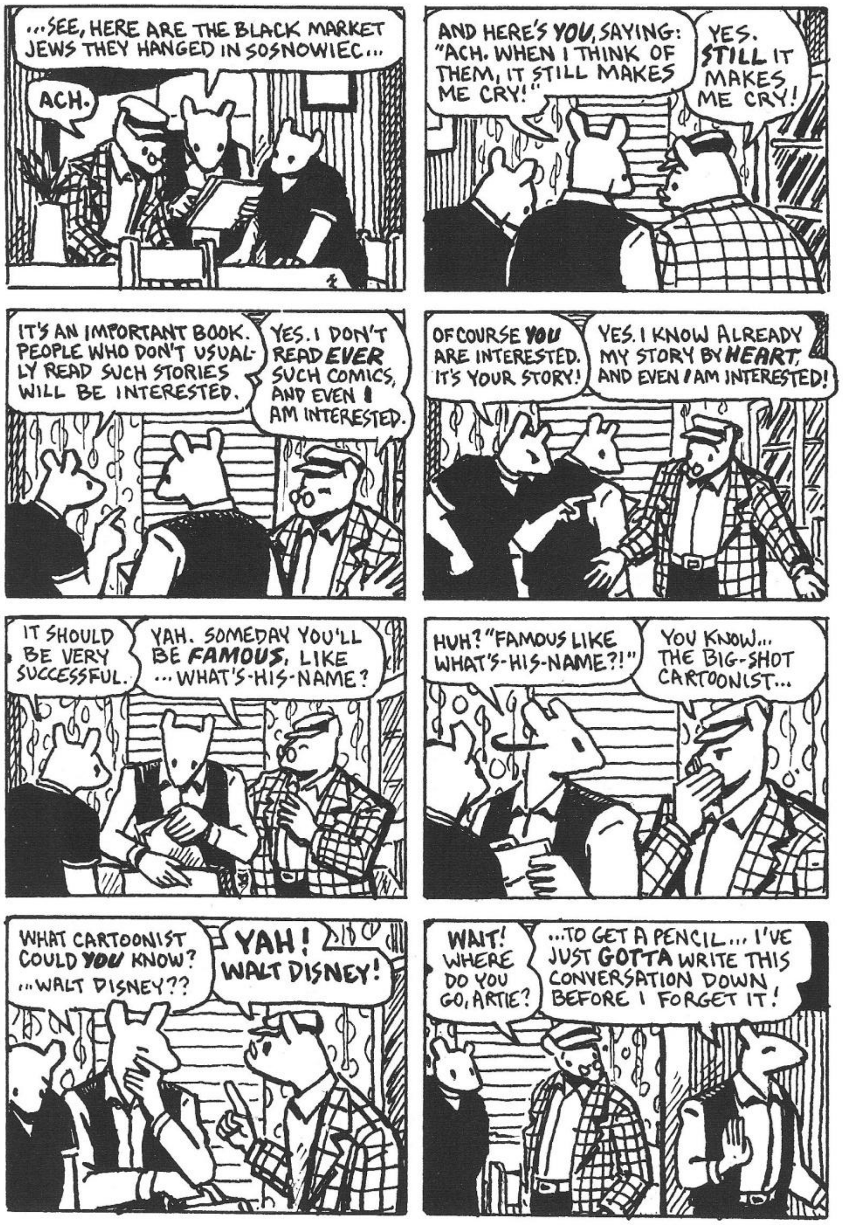

...SEE, HERE ARE THE BLACK MARKET JEWS THEY HANGED IN SOSNOWIEC...
ACH.
AND HERE'S YOU, SAYING: "ACH. WHEN I THINK OF THEM, IT STILL MAKES ME CRY!"
YES. STILL IT MAKES ME CRY!
IT'S AN IMPORTANT BOOK. PEOPLE WHO DON'T USUALLY READ SUCH STORIES WILL BE INTERESTED.
YES. I DON'T READ EVER SUCH COMICS, AND EVEN I AM INTERESTED.
OF COURSE YOU ARE INTERESTED. IT'S YOUR STORY!
YES. I KNOW ALREADY MY STORY BY HEART, AND EVEN I AM INTERESTED!
IT SHOULD BE VERY SUCCESSFUL.
YAH. SOMEDAY YOU'LL BE FAMOUS, LIKE ...WHAT'S-HIS-NAME?
HUH? "FAMOUS LIKE WHAT'S-HIS-NAME?!"
YOU KNOW... THE BIG-SHOT CARTOONIST...
WHAT CARTOONIST COULD YOU KNOW? ...WALT DISNEY??
YAH! WALT DISNEY!
WAIT! WHERE DO YOU GO, ARTIE?
...TO GET A PENCIL... I'VE JUST GOTTA WRITE THIS CONVERSATION DOWN BEFORE I FORGET IT!

Figure 9

the results of age on classic models of super-heroism, an aging Bruce Wayne, who has left crime fighting behind, faces several of his old enemies. Wayne has sequestered himself from public life, a billionaire living alone with his very old butler as sole companion. At the start of the book, Miller's Batman is 55 years old, and the events of the book begin on the tenth anniversary of Wayne's retirement as Gotham's dark knight.

Wayne, walking Gotham City's streets, meditates on hating the city, feeling like a "zombie. A flying dutchman. A dead man, ten years dead" (Miller 12). Superhero comics have generally assumed unrealistic aging for their longest-running superheroes. Comics scholar Geoff Klock summarizes this atemporality using Batman as an example: until the *Dark Knight Returns,* Batman only appeared as "a perennially young twenty-nine-year-old since his appearance in 1939, even though the environment in which he fights has changed month by month [the release schedule for individual issues] to remain contemporary" (27). Miller's premise was completely new and shocked many readers with its comparable realism. But a retired Batman isn't a very interesting superhero story, so Miller has Wayne return to vigilantism when Harvey Dent, the notorious *Batman* split-personality villain Two Face, makes his own return to Gotham as a physically and mentally reformed citizen. Of course, Wayne doubts that the reformation is legitimate and watches Dent's actions closely from the safety of Wayne Manor. As DC (previously Detective Comics) Comics' "world's greatest detective," Batman has always been able to stay one step ahead of his nemeses, but the detective work usually required is absent at the beginning of *The Dark Knight Returns.* Instead, Wayne monitors Dent through watching televised interviews with the once famous district attorney turned infamous criminal, now turned reformed citizen.

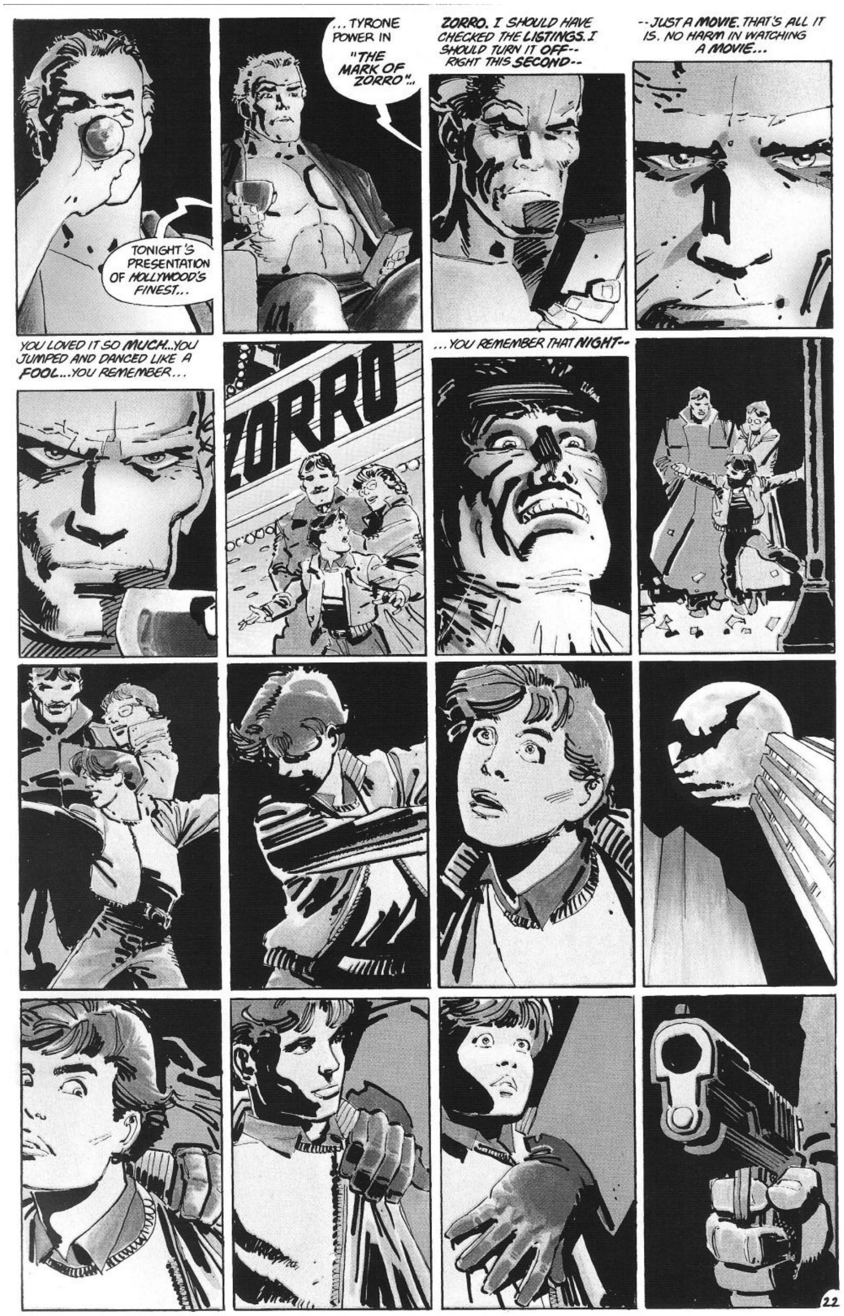
Aside from rejecting the status quo and creating an aging Batman, Miller introduces postmodern concepts of technology and representation into *The Dark Knight Returns*. Batman's self-imposed departure from crime fighting has left him disconnected from the police data he often used to solve crimes, aided by friend and police commissioner, Jim Gordon. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Wayne—as himself, not

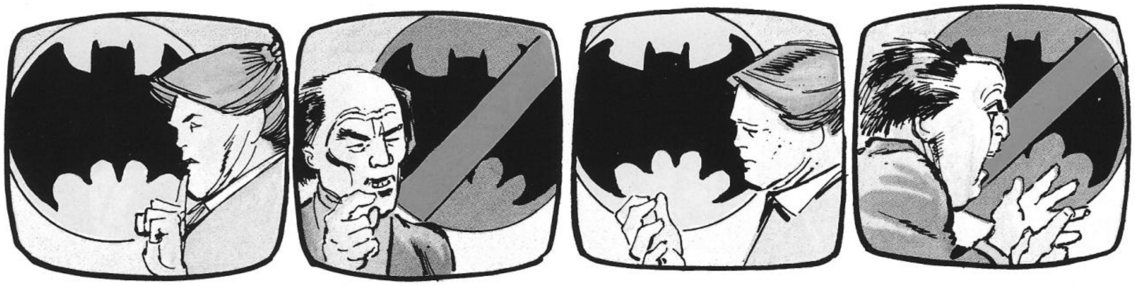
Batman—and Gordon maintain an uneasy friendship, and presumably Wayne's access to the specificitiess of criminal evidence and the statuses of patients at Arkham Asylum (where many Batman villains are detained for criminal insanity) are lessened by his professional distance from the police. Batman learning of Dent’s rehabilitation through television, rather than occurring through Batman's traditional detective work, cheapens the "thrill of the hunt," per se, and undermines Batman's authority as the great detective. In fact, as I will discuss, television blurs many of the self-erected boundaries with which Bruce Wayne has surrounded himself, possibly causing the break from his commitment to retire from crime fighting.

Late one night, Wayne is watching television when the film *The Mark of Zorro* comes on unexpectedly. This is the same film that Wayne saw with his parents the night they were shot and killed in Gotham City, the event which spurred Wayne into his career as Batman. In one way—through the reproduction of this film—television represents an invasive, unwelcome intrusion of memory into Wayne Manor, where Wayne has hidden himself away from the city. As the movie plays, Wayne's memories replay the event of his parents' murder, stirring up old feelings related to crime fighting. The sequence moves very quickly, with small, uniformly-sized, wordless panels eliciting a rapid, almost manic pace to the reading (Fig. 10). Images of Bruce's face reflect the light from the screen as well as the remembered horror that has been building throughout the television-infused sequence. The evening news which comes on after the movie is filled with tales of rape and murder in Gotham by a new criminal gang of "mutants," including a case involving abducted children.

Miller's art style reflects the pervasiveness of television, as well. Using a panel style which appears on nearly half of its pages, *The Dark Knight Returns* literalizes the presence of the television with series of small square panels with curved edges, reminiscent of tube television set screens (Fig 11). These panels appear in groups or alone with other panels, evoking the kind of televised look and feel of a mixture of the media of television and comics. As before, these technological images symbolize an anti-detective, supplying unwanted and unwelcome "entertainment" alongside the grim news reports. This juxtaposition of memory with present issues effectively inspires the return of Batman, who strikes out against the new "mutant" breed of criminals that very night. The television panels contain reporters and news anchors who regularly offer their opinion on the motivation and effectiveness of the new Batman. As with news outlets today, two speakers appear together, responding to the events from the last few pages with conflicting opinions. Batman is regularly treated as an anti-hero, when calls for his arrest are shouted on screen by various interviewees. These speakers are often misinformed about the events, or sometimes seem to intentionally skew the story that the reader just experienced "first hand," provoking a critical mistrust of news sources that could be seen as Miller's attempt to inspire cynicism about real new anchors. The television panels are also an effective transitional and narrative tool, like a classical Greek chorus, one which confronts the reader with the issue of surveillance, a virtual panopticon of multimedia visuals, with Wayne and Batman at its center.

The anti-heroic themes of *The Dark Knight Returns* appear in another book, questioning the purpose of superheroes. Both books explore the fallibility of humans, and whether the same applies to superhumans. The famous phrase, "with great power there


TONIGHT'S PRESENTATION OF HOLLYWOOD'S FINEST...
... TYRONE POWER IN "THE MARK OF ZORRO"...
ZORRO. I SHOULD HAVE CHECKED THE LISTINGS. I SHOULD TURN IT OFF-- RIGHT THIS SECOND--
--JUST A MOVIE. THAT'S ALL IT IS. NO HARM IN WATCHING A MOVIE...
YOU LOVED IT SO MUCH...YOU JUMPED AND DANCED LIKE A FOOL...YOU REMEMBER...
ZORRO
...YOU REMEMBER THAT NIGHT--
22



Figures 10 & 11

must also come great responsibility," was used in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, an early Spiderman comic published in 1962. What Miller asks is whether that great power and responsibility can be trusted to any particular person. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* asks the same questions on a grander scale. *Watchmen* is about two groups of masked vigilantes and their varying social and psychological adjustments to the responsibility of being crime fighters, as well as to a world which does not necessarily welcome them. Gibbons' artistic style in *Watchmen* is decidedly simple, following a standard comics grid of nine equally-sized frames per page. But the subject matter is anything but standard; the narrative structure anything but simple. *Watchmen* is set in a world only slightly removed from our own. Certain historical events have occurred differently in *Watchmen* as a result of these characters. Most notably, the Vietnam War was won by the American forces with the help of members of the Minutemen group, which later becomes the Watchmen. The conflict is resolved through extreme violence, not unlike the actual Vietnam War, but the presence of the very powerful Dr. Manhattan turns the tables in the war against communism (Fig. 12). In this version of history, the Vietnamese surrender rather than suffer inescapable nuclear destruction by Dr. Manhattan. The Cold War has never ended in *Watchmen*, and the fear of nuclear attack is a constant threat. Interestingly, this threat is given physical form, also in the powerful character of Dr. Manhattan, who unknowingly gives off nuclear radiation from his blue skin, slowly killing those closest to him.

The characters in *Watchmen* each respond differently to the hyper-stimulating environment of the vigilante life. The violence they confront and inflict is often graphic and disturbing, and its effects are cruel and devastating. Rather than instilling a sense of

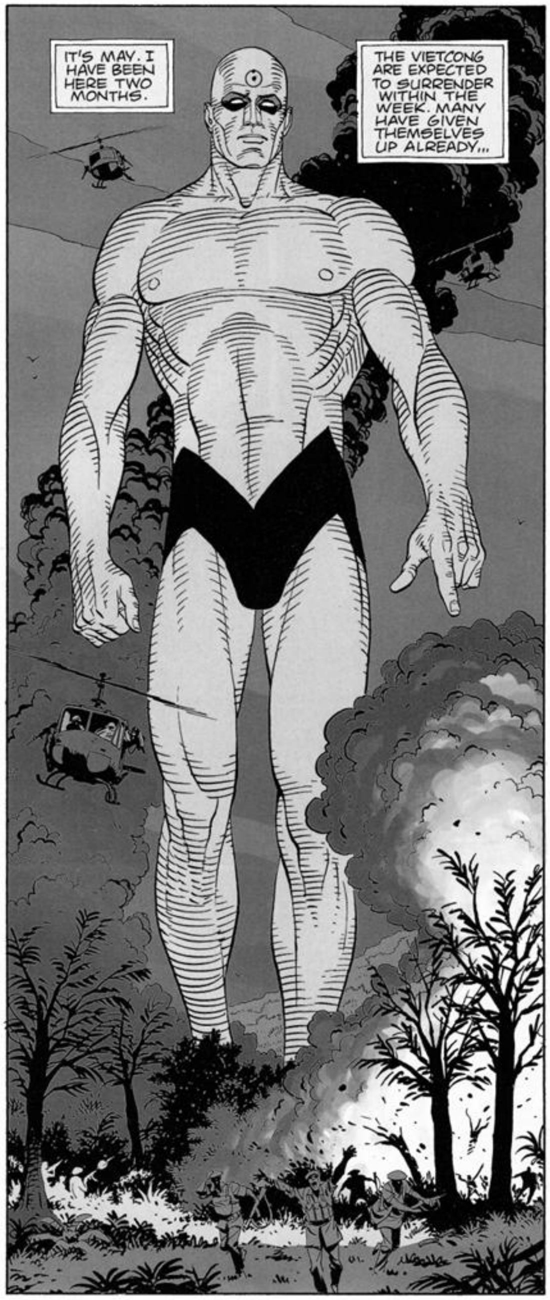

IT'S MAY. I HAVE BEEN HERE TWO MONTHS.
THE VIETCONG ARE EXPECTED TO SURRENDER WITHIN THE WEEK. MANY HAVE GIVEN THEMSELVES UP ALREADY...

Figure 12

justice and peace, these heroes are often damaged by their violent encounters, much as one might expect from a real person who experiences such violence. Some characters recede into their fractured psyches so as to avoid human contact; one male teammate's violence against women appears multiple times, both in Vietnam and at home as he attempts to rape a female teammate. The team's involvement in Vietnam succeeds because of the one hero who truly has super powers. This, of course, is Dr. Manhattan, previously Dr. Jon Osterman, who becomes trapped in a machine during his research into nuclear physics and whose physical and metaphysical being is thus altered. He becomes less human and more like a god, a creature who can alter the size and shape of its own body and mass, as well as manipulate the structures of time and space. With these abilities, he does not perceive time and space in a traditional, linear fashion, and those parts of the narrative which feature his character are often subject to a temporal structure which attempts to reflect this shift in perceptive ability. For example, when Dr. Manhattan realizes the danger to others that he literally radiates, he transports his physical and mental presence to the planet Mars. As he emotionally processes the events which led him to this point, the narrative becomes non-linear, allowing the story to be experienced as Dr. Manhattan would experience it.

For Dr. Manhattan, all of time is experienced like memory, and every moment—those past, present, and future—is always occurring simultaneously. For a reader, the creators' attempt to render this phenomenon visually and textually is disarmingly effective and dreamlike. Time is non-linear and stretched out, as in *Watchmen*'s fourth chapter, "Watchmaker," that begins when Dr. Manhattan drops a photograph on Mars (Fig. 13). Over the chapter's twenty-eight pages, the narrative becomes a first-person exposition narrated all in present-tense. Every few panels, large leaps in time provide background for Dr. Manhattan: ranging from his childhood, successful scientific career, and the accident which caused his condition, to the formation of the Watchmen and some

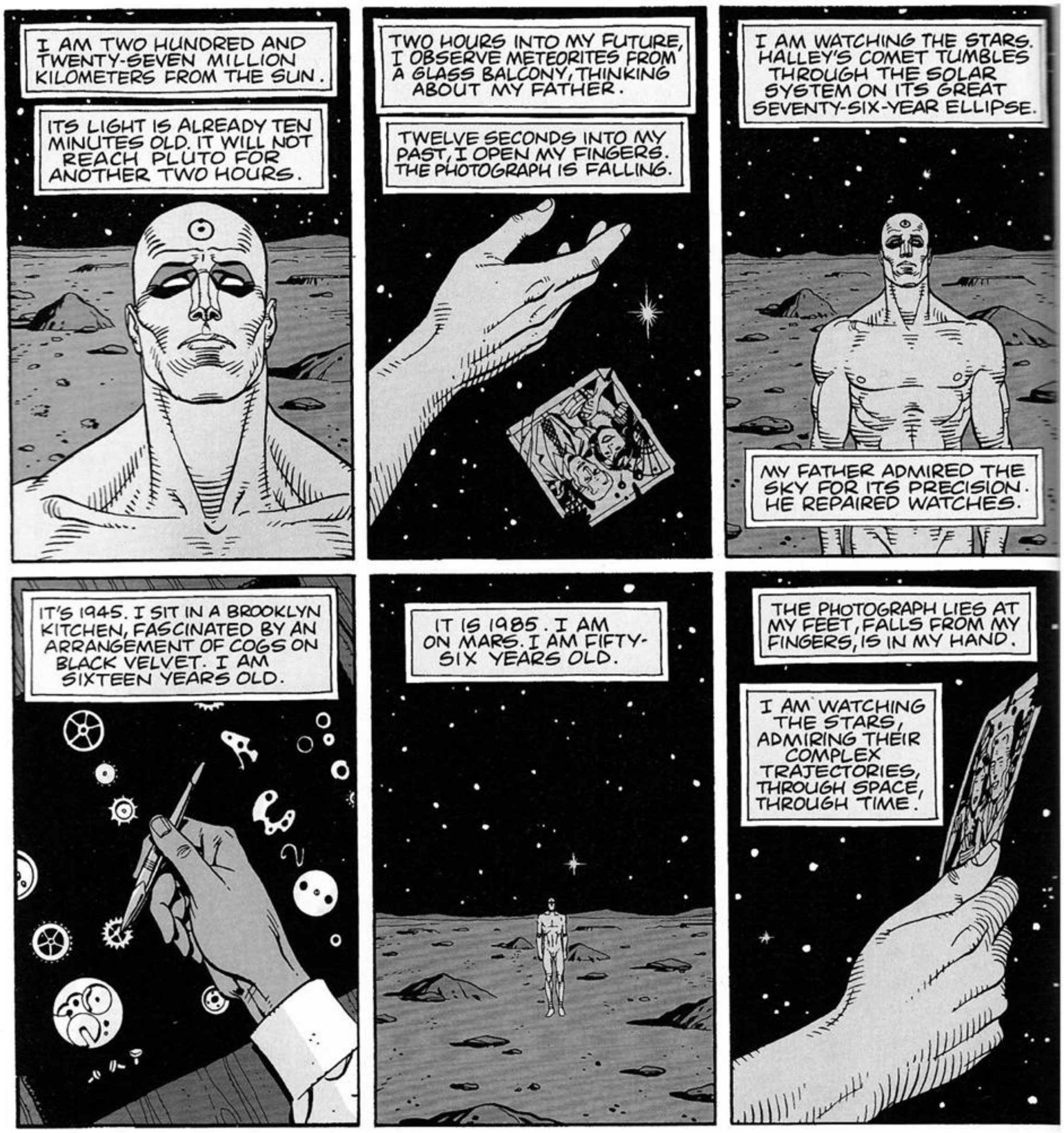

I AM TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SEVEN MILLION KILOMETERS FROM THE SUN.
ITS LIGHT IS ALREADY TEN MINUTES OLD. IT WILL NOT REACH PLUTO FOR ANOTHER TWO HOURS.
TWO HOURS INTO MY FUTURE, I OBSERVE METEORITES FROM A GLASS BALCONY, THINKING ABOUT MY FATHER.
TWELVE SECONDS INTO MY PAST, I OPEN MY FINGERS. THE PHOTOGRAPH IS FALLING.
I AM WATCHING THE STARS. HALLEY'S COMET TUMBLES THROUGH THE SOLAR SYSTEM ON ITS GREAT SEVENTY-SIX-YEAR ELLIPSE.
MY FATHER ADMIRED THE SKY FOR ITS PRECISION. HE REPAIRED WATCHES.
IT'S 1945. I SIT IN A BROOKLYN KITCHEN, FASCINATED BY AN ARRANGEMENT OF COGS ON BLACK VELVET. I AM SIXTEEN YEARS OLD.
IT IS 1985. I AM ON MARS. I AM FIFTY-SIX YEARS OLD.
THE PHOTOGRAPH LIES AT MY FEET, FALLS FROM MY FINGERS, IS IN MY HAND.
I AM WATCHING THE STARS, ADMIRING THEIR COMPLEX TRAJECTORIES, THROUGH SPACE, THROUGH TIME.

Figure 13

of their exploits. This is when readers learn of the Vietnam involvement, for example, as Dr. Manhattan roams the Vietnamese landscape in a form over a hundred feet tall, vaporizing the Vietcong fighters (Fig. 11). During this chapter, the reader is presented with intermittent images of the photograph falling through the air, evoking a non-linearity that mimicks Dr. Manhattan's perception of time. The disjointed, time-shifting narrative, all from Dr. Manhattan's atemporal perspective, allows the reader to directly experience this character's abilities and understand the motives behind his choice to drop the photograph on Mars, which symbolizes a rejection of the life represented by the photograph. The trip to Mars is Dr. Manhattan's effective abandonment and rejection of life on Earth.

The complexity of the narrative is vast, including the scene with Dr. Manhattan on Mars, a pervasive Doomsday countdown clock, and an overzealous former Watchmen member's plot to violently bring about world peace. Moore's writing is aggressively and tactically political, pitting governments and their agents (the Watchmen) against a populace which lacks confidence in their leaders' interest in the people's wellbeing. The phrase, "Who watches the Watchmen?" appears numerous times in the book. Interestingly, this phrase has been evoked in current news surrounding political connections with police in the Occupy movements. *Watchmen* explores super heroism in a dystopian and cynical light. Similar to Miller's Batman, the Watchmen are losing their popular support. *Watchmen* interrogates the results of violence on individuals and their personal psychology and, with *The Dark Knight Returns*, shows heroes with very real problems for perhaps the first time in a mainstream comics series.

Publisher DC Comics, best known for the Superman and Batman character franchises, released the *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* as regularly-published serials to some acclaim, but it wasn't until the two series were collected into book form that their popularity peaked. Both books regularly appear high on "the best graphic novels" book lists, and *Watchmen* was listed by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 best novels of all time—not graphic novels, *literary novels*. *Maus*, in its dust jacket, is described as "a new kind of literature." Cinematic interpretations of Batman, including this year's *The Dark Knight Rises*, have been admittedly influenced by Miller's take on Batman, including *The Dark Knight Returns* and his 1988 book, *Batman: Year One*. Current depictions—both in comics and other media—of Batman include the troubled, tortured soul as an integral part of the character. This is a far cry from the verbally-quippy billionaire socialite of the 1960s *Batman* television show, arguably the other largest influence on mainstream perception of Batman as a character. The 1990s Tim Burton *Batman* films, as well as the recent Christopher Nolan trilogy, all rely on a brooding Batman as their standard. Exploring the dark side to superheroes, and examining their flaws and problems all began with *The Dark Knight Returns.* As Stephen Weiner, author of *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, says of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, they have "at least one message in common: don't get caught in a dark alley with someone choosing to wear a mask and fight crime. He wouldn't necessarily turn out to be a nice guy or anyone that you could depend on. In fact, his sanity is probably held together with masking tape" (Weiner 34).

These three works mark a turning point in how comics have been perceived, and how widespread acceptance of comics finally began. In the coming years, more comics and popular media would continue to be inspired by the success of these comics. The appeal of these seminal works is in their adept understanding and use of the form in which they are composed as well as the willingness to push the limits of what readers might be willing to believe about their characters and settings. In my next chapter, I will discuss how comics can be included in some existing English courses. In a few cases, I will address how comics might best fit with or relate to “important” literary works of a particular period. Essentially, I mean “established,” or “canonical.” If I were to design a course on “important” comics, the three comics described above would be essential. It is my firm belief that the cultural significance of *Maus*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen* earns them all a right to be included in a variety of ways and in a variety of courses. It is clear that the ways in which a teacher could incorporate comics to achieve course outcomes is only limited by their imagination, which is to say: teaching the comics medium is limitless.

Chapter 3: Comics in the Classroom: Three Examples

Armed with the critical vocabulary for discussing properties of comics supplied in chapter two, teachers should be well prepared to incorporate comics into their classrooms. In deciding what comics will work best for each teacher, it is important to consider each teacher's course goals and how comics might be used to meet those goals. Rather than identifying specific courses and specific goals, in this chapter I will describe how a selection of comics could be used in a variety of courses. I have chosen three comics that are suited to teaching in literature classrooms to discuss in this chapter. I will summarize each text, analyze its potential merits for possible English courses, and provide several possible assignments or activities which could be arranged to support the incorporation of the text in a given course. I hope to show how teachers can draw upon skills and values which they already possess as literature teachers, blending these skills with their new critical vocabulary to effectively teach comics.

With these examples, teachers will see how specific comics could be incorporated into existing courses. I will also discuss an example of a course built exclusively around comics by one author. The comics I will discuss in this chapter are powerful works of art, and the pleasure I experienced reading them led me to develop ideas for teaching them. The guiding principle in selecting comics to include in this chapter was diversity and breadth. I am necessarily limiting the number of examples here to allow myself to be specific in these applications, but I want to encourage teachers to find further texts that meet their needs using whatever methods come naturally to them. A particular comics text's value will be different for each teacher, and the process of identifying appropriate texts will be similarly diverse among teachers and topics. These three examples are neither exclusive nor exhaustive of the possibilities for different comics and could easily be applicable to situations and courses I do not identify here. Ultimately, comics can be effective additions to courses that already exist as well as the foundation for entire courses, and teachers should seek them out the way they seek out additional literary texts for courses. What follows is a set of exemplary texts and descriptions of how they might be incorporated into some courses and situations.

Using *Fables: Legends in Exile* to Discuss Revisionist Fiction and Cultural Relevance

For this first example, I will use Bill Willingham's *Fables*' first volume, *Legends in Exile*. *Fables* is in its thirteenth year of publication (at the time of writing, monthly issue #130 is forthcoming) and has provided the basis for a number of spin-off series. In *Fables,* characters from folktales and myth live in contemporary New York. New characters appear frequently in *Fables*, but the main characters in the first volume include Snow White, the Frog Prince, Rapunzel, Bluebeard, Little Boy Blue, the Three Little Pigs, Cinderella, Old King Cole, and the Big Bad Wolf. These well-known characters and others from international legends form the fable community in "Fabletown," a city block magically hidden amidst New York City from the "mundys," or mundane, non-fable human population. Willingham’s revisioning of international folkloric characters in a present-day American setting is a clever update to characters from popular children’s stories, but Willingham's *Fables* is not at all for children. *Fables* explores these characters with a mature and adult eye, exploring their frequently dark and deeply flawed private lives. What results is an engaging and complex series about the struggles of fictional figures forced to live in the non-literary, real world.

The fables live in New York as a result of losing their "homelands" to an unnamed “adversary." They were forced to retreat, emigrating to Fabletown centuries ago. They use magical enchantments to disguise themselves from the mundys, and the fables spend most of their time protecting that system of enchantments from humans and dealing with internal issues within their community. Mortality is an important issue in Fabletown, as the first issue of *Fables* centers on the murder of Rose Red, Snow White’s sister. The fables are aware of their existence as characters from myth and legend: they rely on the popularity of their stories among the mundys to survive. As long as mundys continue telling their stories, a fable cannot die. Even those who are killed through physical violence can be resurrected by the prominence of their stories in the mundane world. Thus, well-known characters like Snow White and Bigby ("the big, bad") Wolf are rarely in any danger of dying because of their relative importance. Fabletown has existed for hundreds of years when the story begins, and the group has attempted to organize their community harmoniously around a central governing body of elected officials. They get along fairly well, and their community has developed the politics, infrastructure, and economics of any reasonably well-developed society. Fables have jobs, pay taxes, develop relationships, and experience the everyday dramas of mundy life, though always in the context of their magical or fairytale abilities. Of course, the attempted normalcy of the everyday is constantly under threat of disruption, both by internal and external forces. This threat drives the plot in *Fables*’ first few volumes.

In *Legends in Exile*, myth and reality are destabilized as numerous characters from traditional folk tales, legends, and nursery rhymes attempt to survive as displaced refugees. There is no hope of return to their homeland, so they have put down permanent roots in Fabletown. Willingham's universe is a tightly woven revisionist world complete with politics and discrimination (the human fables can live in Fabletown, but the animal fables must live under magical "protection" on "the farm" upstate, far from the curious eyes of mundys). Each of the eighteen currently collected *Fables* volumes contains an adventurous tale of the successes and failures of this fragile system. The episodes center around a small group of characters and some problem relating to the inner-workings of Fabletown as a community. Fabletown’s stability seems to always be at risk, as tensions grow between the exiled fables. Once rich and famous in their homelands (many are princes and princesses, after all), they are now asked to work within the Fabletown structure to keep their magical or otherwise mythical status concealed from the mundy world.

In Fabletown, money is tight, and the governmental budget is of chief concern. The events of *Legends in Exile* begin shortly before an annual "Remembrance Day" celebration commemorating the anniversary of the fables' exodus from the homelands. It is an elegy for those who died in the battle with the adversary and is used to solicit annual donations that provide the fable government with an operating budget. Each fable, good or evil in their corresponding tales, was granted a general blanket amnesty for crimes committed before the exile. This is key for characters like Bluebeard, who figures prominently in *Legends in Exile*. He is accused of murdering Rose Red, Snow White's sister, following their romantic affair, which follows fabled murders of his wives on their wedding nights. Bigby Wolf (aka the Bid Bad Wolf), Fabletown's sheriff, has similarly benefited from the amnesty, as the Three Little Pigs at the farm never let him forget.

The mood in Fabletown is generally tense; the threat of pursuit by the mysterious adversary always hangs over their heads, as does the risk of being revealed to the mundane population. Most fables also experience a high degree of financial instability. For instance, Lord Beast (husband to Beauty) is having trouble maintaining his human appearance at the story's outset, and the magical "glamour" which would help conceal his horns and fangs is too expensive (Fig. 14). These princes and princesses of legend are forced to acclimate to the economic pressures most humans are all too familiar with. In these ways, *Fables* blends archetypal characters from legend and fables (and more clearly from myths in later books featuring characters like the North Wind and Darkness) with a contemporary timeline and social structure.

The Fabletown residents form a social structure that mimics the structure of their respective stories. In Fabletown, powerful magical characters like Frau Tötenkinder, the witch from "Hansel and Gretel," are granted the same general amnesty as everyone, despite her relative danger to the others. She is feared by all, given her penchant for violence and taste for flesh. But she keeps her threats to a minimum and is given a leadership position over other magical characters who collaboratively keep Fabletown’s many enchantments and “glamours” functioning. But the danger of powerful characters remains. This potential for trouble produces a self-policing unity among fables and a shared commitment to keeping Fabletown hidden from the mundy world.

This restructuring of legend is nothing new to popular and literary genres, including television and theater as well as fiction and cartoons. Indeed, the very act of

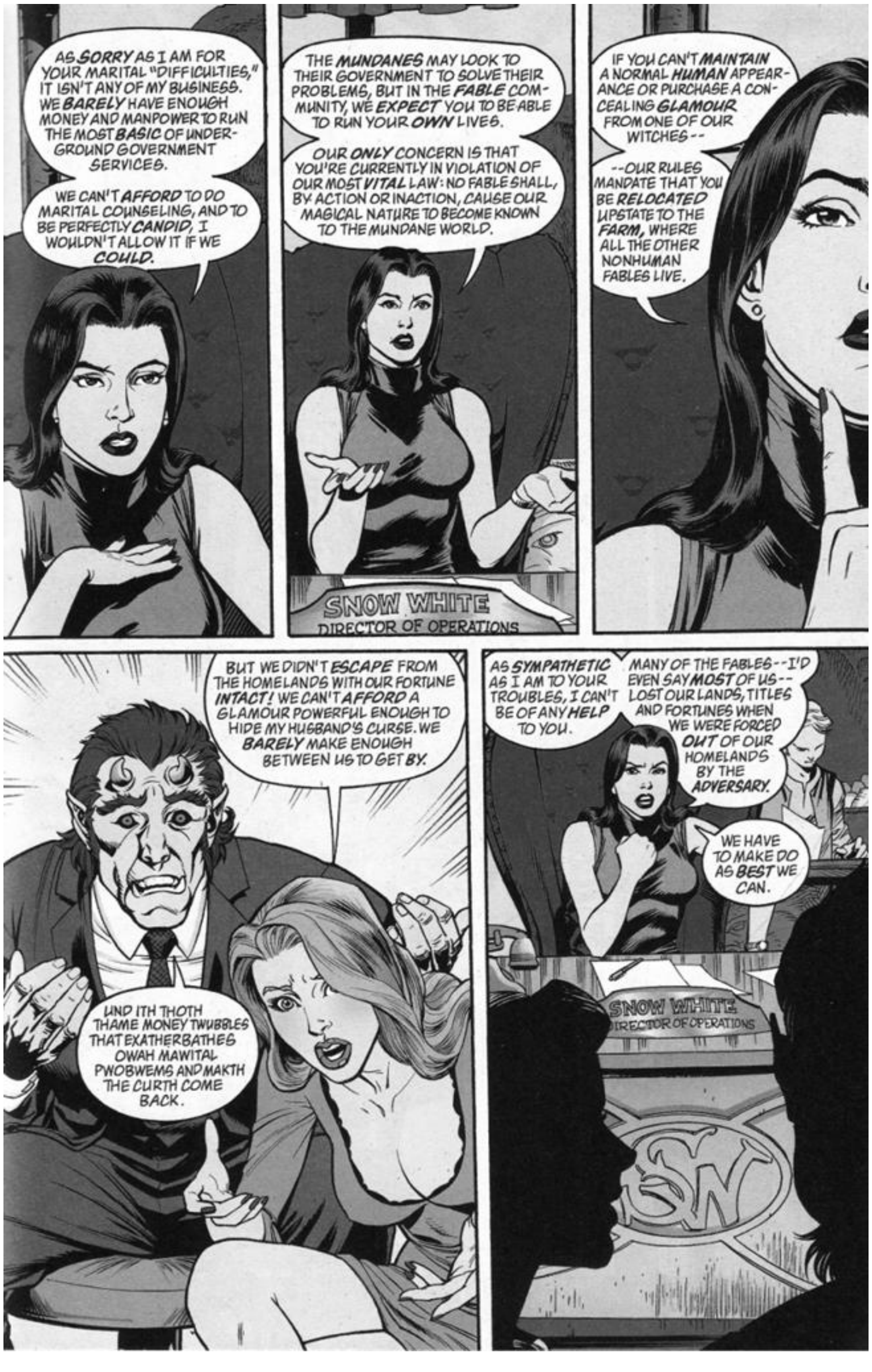

AS SORRY AS I AM FOR YOUR MARITAL "DIFFICULTIES," IT ISN'T ANY OF MY BUSINESS. WE BARELY HAVE ENOUGH MONEY AND MANPOWER TO RUN THE MOST BASIC OF UNDERGROUND GOVERNMENT SERVICES.
WE CAN'T AFFORD TO DO MARITAL COUNSELING, AND TO BE PERFECTLY CANDID, I WOULDN'T ALLOW IT IF WE COULD.
THE MUNDANES MAY LOOK TO THEIR GOVERNMENT TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS, BUT IN THE FABLE COMMUNITY, WE EXPECT YOU TO BE ABLE TO RUN YOUR OWN LIVES.
OUR ONLY CONCERN IS THAT YOU'RE CURRENTLY IN VIOLATION OF OUR MOST VITAL LAW: NO FABLE SHALL, BY ACTION OR INACTION, CAUSE OUR MAGICAL NATURE TO BECOME KNOWN TO THE MUNDANE WORLD.
SNOW WHITE
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
IF YOU CAN'T MAINTAIN A NORMAL HUMAN APPEARANCE OR PURCHASE A CONCEALING GLAMOUR FROM ONE OF OUR WITCHES--
--OUR RULES MANDATE THAT YOU BE RELOCATED UPSTATE TO THE FARM, WHERE ALL THE OTHER NONHUMAN FABLES LIVE.
BUT WE DIDN'T ESCAPE FROM THE HOMELANDS WITH OUR FORTUNE INTACT! WE CAN'T AFFORD A GLAMOUR POWERFUL ENOUGH TO HIDE MY HUSBAND'S CURSE. WE BARELY MAKE ENOUGH BETWEEN US TO GET BY.
UND ITH THOTH THAME MONEY TWUBBLES THAT EXATHERBATHES OWAH MAWITAL PWOBWEMS AND MAKTH THE CURTH COME BACK.
AS SYMPATHETIC AS I AM TO YOUR TROUBLES, I CAN'T BE OF ANY HELP TO YOU.
MANY OF THE FABLES--I'D EVEN SAY MOST OF US--LOST OUR LANDS, TITLES AND FORTUNES WHEN WE WERE FORCED OUT OF OUR HOMELANDS BY THE ADVERSARY.
WE HAVE TO MAKE DO AS BEST WE CAN.
SNOW WHITE
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
SW

Figure 14

collecting "original" fairy tales implies a kind of collective spirit of retelling. Willingham himself has responded to the suggestion that the current television series, *Once Upon a Time*—a dramatic series that portrays characters from fairy tales living in a contemporary environment that resists their magical and mythical origins—“stole” material from *Fables* for its premise with a decidedly diplomatic and literary dismissal: "The Brothers Grimm didn't collect one version of every folktale; they discovered dozens of versions of each one, because it's the nature of folklore to be altered to suit every different folk who wants to make use of it. Why should today be any different?" ("Bill Willingham on *Fables* Vs. *Once Upon a Time*" n.p.). Willingham’s statement is part of a longer response to the impossibility of separating the material of fable and myth from the collective patterns both the television series and *Fables* follow. This impossibility could be a crucial point for students considering the intertextuality of *Fables* with its source material.

This kind of meta- and intertextuality is useful in the context of many different literature courses, as it displays the cultural currency of earlier tales in contemporary contexts. For example, students in a folklore or mythology course could benefit from seeing how *Fables* actively combines past myths with present settings. Students in typical mythology courses might associate myth with ancient stories that are primarily serious. A collection like *Fables* could challenge this association and introduce a new kind of myth in the making. Drawing on revisionist contemporary backdrops to these “timeless” classics, *Fables* could be used to help students reconsider the fluid nature of myth and its cultural relevance.

Another course that could potentially incorporate *Fables* is a children’s literature course. Students could write about the decidedly more “adult” versions of these “children’s” characters. The ways *Fables* confronts traditional ideas about these characters—placing them in uncomfortable situations; revising their context to include contemporary issues like debt, social pressures, and community; making wild changes to characters' history (Cinderella is a "007"-type secret agent)—provide avenues to discussing the relevance of children's literature. A revisionist narrative could be valuable in showing the staying power of older stories, a topic useful to a number of English courses, including those with a focus on contemporary popular culture. Certainly the longest single author series cited in this thesis, *Fables* provides multiple options for teachers, as many volumes are available beyond *Legends in Exile*.

In the courses listed above, a teacher could ask students to perform an in-class writing assignment on whether characters like Bigby Wolf deserve to reap the benefits of the general amnesty. Another interesting activity for using *Fables* might be to identify revisionist choices in the many versions of Snow White from Grimm to Disney to *Fables.* Many similarities and differences exist between the different available versions of characters, and a teacher could assign a character to a group of students who would chart the different ways each character is presented by different authors. This activity could give students insight into a character's present cultural relevance using *Fables* as the standard. By exploring the ways setting changes readers' perception, students can incorporate their own experience into their critical reading. This interaction could be reached by assigning essay or group discussion questions, such as: which version of Snow White is most relatable to students' experiences? Or, how does *Fables* present-day setting alter Snow White's power relationships when compared to older versions?

If a teacher is interested in literary theory, *Fables* could provide interesting opportunities to discuss its connections between myths and concepts of modern identity, postmodern pastiche, and (on some levels) postcolonial identity. Later volumes in the *Fables* series detail the war in the homelands which first exiled the fables. This provides narrative context for the fables' present situation that goes beyond readers' common knowledge of fairytales. Students could respond to the possibility of this postcolonial criticism, and whether the fables' refusal to fully assimilate with mundys reflects postcolonial identity, including hybridity and mimicry as the fables live their lives on the diasporic brink of mundane discovery and persecution, with New York City as the fables' Metropole. These and many other fascinating applications of theory could be explored. *Fables* is an enriching text to work with because it provides a contemporary retelling of familiar classic stories through which to experience the cultural relevance of folktales.

Experimental Narrative in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*

My second example text is Chris Ware's dizzyingly complex and experimental 2000 book *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth.* As a text in a literature course, it could be used to discuss many important literary concepts like point of view, subjectivity, and an author's self-awareness of form. Experimental artists of any sort are frequently defined by their resistance to the conventions of their medium. These artists may choose to expose, subvert, interrogate, exaggerate, or mock conventions—testing their medium's limits.

Of course, a teacher could proceed without revealing the often nuanced relationship to convention many experimental authors take. But in the case of *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware's relationship to literary and comics convention is of great importance, as I will describe shortly. The "rules" of convention are generally understood to be expectations for what a form, genre, or style will provide from the perspective of contemporary readers. Obviously, these expectations and "rules" change over time, and an important work is often declared important because of its interaction with those rules. Some examples of experimental narratives might be Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* o Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which flout the conventions of the realist novel and provide secondary, meta-narratives for their principal characters, or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, which employ visual and pictorial elements to compose extra-textual characterization and motive for their characters. The ways experimental narratives employ convention, as these last examples suggest, can relate to visual design as well. *Jimmy Corrigan* exhibits all of these experimental concepts. Specifically, the temporal complexity, unreliable narrators, and frequently jarring visual design perfectly represent *Jimmy Corrigan*'s use of experimental narrative.

Comics, as discussed in previous chapters, have their own conventions and form available to creators to reinvent and reject. *Jimmy Corrigan* consistently confronts and inverts expectations for readers, destabilizing conventions from fiction and comics to achieve a level of complexity perhaps unmatched in contemporary comics. *Jimmy Corrigan* is an effective case study in how authors interrogate the "rules" of their time because of the many different ways in which Ware constructs and deconstructs the puzzling narratives and non-linear, doubled stories of his characters. The book oscillates between two father-son relationships: present-day Jimmy (James III) and his relationship with his father James (II), and James (I), Jimmy's grandfather, and his father William (Jimmy's great-grandfather). This repeated name cycle reinforces the inherent difficulty in even telling this story, as generations overlap and become muddled. Ware's precise artistic style somewhat eliminates this difficulty by presenting each character—though some bear a family resemblance—as visually distinct. As critic Gene Kannenberg says in “The Comics of Chris Ware,” Ware “attempts to render images as instantly recognizable shapes *à la* words themselves” (318), recalling McCloud’s icons and semiotic image-meanings. This applies to the characters, as well. Though the names in *Jimmy Corrigan* risk confusing its readers, Ware typically provides visual signposts. I have created a comparison chart (Fig. 15) that shows (from left) Jimmy (III), James (II), and James (I) as a child in the top picture and at present in the bottom picture. James (I) and Jimmy (III) are nearly identical in appearance, but a few small details like clothing allow readers to tell which is which, even if it takes a few seconds. Jimmy is almost always wearing the black sweater vest, as a child and in the present, while James’ outfit changes.

Jimmy Corrigan’s greatest complexity stems from the suddenness of each transition between flashbacks, dreams, and reality. Each of the two distinct narrative threads fluctuates between dream and reality. Because these different temporal or mental

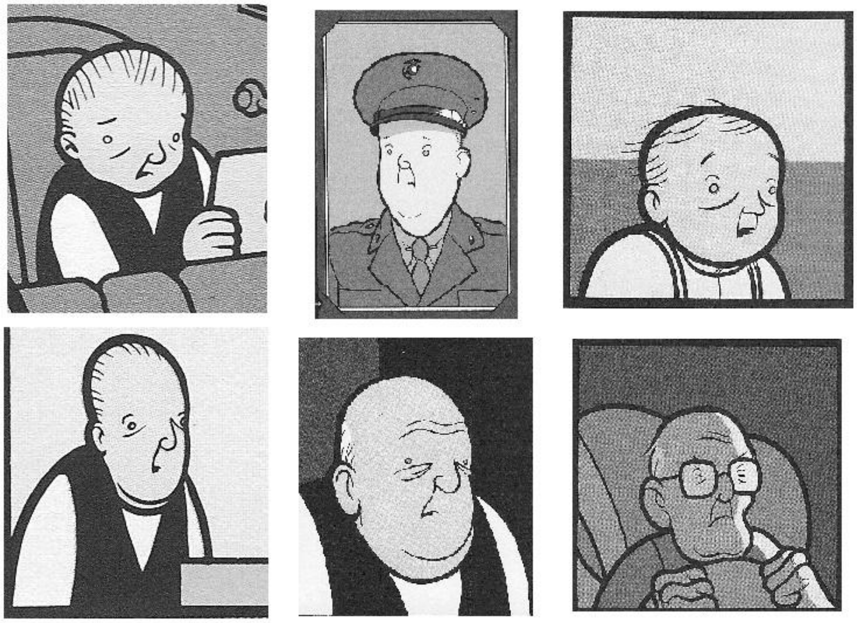


Figure 15

loci are treated the same visually, it is often difficult for readers to track the events in a logical or linear manner. This is similar to modernist's stream-of-consciousness writing: the reader sees Jimmy (III) dream, fantasize, and observe reality through the same persistent visual composition, just as a single line of text in a James Joyce novel can incorporate internal thought and verbalized dialogue.

Due to its challenging experimental narrative, *Jimmy Corrigan* requires a somewhat elaborate summary. The primary narrative thread in *Jimmy Corrigan* begins as Jimmy (III), an excessively meek mail clerk in his mid-30s, is contacted by his father, who he has never known. From the book's first pages, Ware seems to revel in Jimmy's awkwardness and unhappiness. Jimmy gets frequent nosebleeds, is regularly caught staring at women's breasts in non-romantic encounters, and has difficulty navigating even basic personal interactions. The people in his life make him uncomfortable—from his mother calling him multiple times each day to ask whether he loves her or not, to his co-workers who barely understand his mumbled and halted speech, to uninterested women misinterpreting his romantic advances. The book's first pages culminate in Jimmy's contemplation of his estranged father's sudden invitation: James (II), in their first communication since Jimmy was a child, has sent Jimmy a plane ticket as an invitation to visit for Thanksgiving. At this point, the narrative frequently switches between Jimmy's fantasized versions of how things might play out and various stages in Jimmy's ultimate acceptance of his father's proposal. The reader doesn't see Jimmy make the actual decision to accept the invitation. Rather, Jimmy appears as a robot who spies on another robot family in a daydream. Robot-Jimmy watches as a robot child (named Jimmy) receives a birthday present and says, "G-gosh Mom, I thought you forgot!" Suddenly, Jimmy wakes up on the plane which is taking him to see his father (26-32). From the reader’s perspective, all the inner turmoil and angst Jimmy undoubtedly experienced while making this decision is replaced by a daydream, and a confusing one at that.

The sense of Jimmy’s social insecurity and interpersonal ennui is depicted in this and other dream scenes where dream-Jimmy is chronically disappointed and surprised by human contact. Jimmy regularly fantasizes about potential positive outcomes to his misadventures, as in a scene where, in reality, Jimmy is sitting at a restaurant with his father. In the next panel, Jimmy is shown captaining a sailboat with his father, drinking gin and tonic after a morning swim before they “go belowdecks and wake the ‘ladies’” a fantasy that is audibly interrupted when, in the next panel, Jimmy’s father is swearing loudly about the restaurant’s mistake in putting ketchup on his hamburger (46-48). Based on the stark differences between Jimmy's fantasy and reality, it is no wonder he so often retreats into fantasy.

As if Jimmy’s story weren’t complicated enough, Ware introduces a second narrative thread. Here, James (I) is a similarly ineffectual person, but unlike Jimmy (III), James (I) is a child. Some of the details are different, but their characters’ visual appearance and emotional destitution are strikingly similar. Rather than having an overbearing mother, James is raised by his abusive, distant father, his ’ mother having died in childbirth. At no point in the book does any character exhibit awareness of James’ story. Only the reader is aware of James’ childhood, told through first-person accounts and described in James’ narration as partially-forgotten memories of occasionally vivid detail. Thus, when Jimmy (III) meets James (I) late in the story it is of little consequence to either of them since Jimmy does not know anything about his paternal grandfather.

Their exchanges are merely more fodder for Jimmy's perpetual awkwardness. James'(I) flashbacks are interspersed with threads featuring Jimmy (III) but do not overtly intersect until the reader learns near the end of the book that James (I) was eventually abandoned by his father as a young child. As James (I) grows up in Chicago and his father works to help build the 1893 World's Fair, the story of James' (I) difficult childhood unfolds, involving insecurities with bullies, girls, and an abusive father. Near the end of the story, William takes James (I) to the opening of the World's Fair. After climbing to the balcony viewing deck of the "world's largest building," William leaves James there (285-7). Jimmy's grandfather was abandoned as an orphan on his ninth birthday. As the similarities between Jimmy (III) and James (I) unfold in this discovery of past abandonment told in interspersed moments, the narratives begin to overlap, and the full import of the narratives' complexities finally take shape. The stories of Jimmy, James, James, and William are interwoven in ways beyond filial, in that they show how individuals cope (or fail to cope) with destructive forces in their lives.

The result is surprisingly hopeful: as *Jimmy Corrigan* relentlessly attempts to reconstruct a complicated story, its characters attempt to reconstruct an estranged family, and in the telling there lies an attempt to reconstruct time itself. This reconstruction suggests the possibility of the various Corrigans' collective redemption. The results evoke such varied emotional responses as confusion, discomfort, sadness, and laughter from readers—often at the same time. However, Ware's cynicism makes sentimentality impossible. After such a complex overture, the following analysis of *Jimmy Corrigan* goes even deeper and more involved, now turning to Ware's equally complicated relationship to literary and comics convention.

Typography, for example, plays an enormous role in Ware's comics, and *Jimmy Corrigan* is no exception. Ware chronically employs transition words, such as "but," "anyway," "then," "so," "and," and "meanwhile," as superscripts—very large full-panel block text—separating and directing linear moments of scene-to-scene transition (see Fig. 6 and discussion above). Described in this way, this technique could seem commonplace or even conventional, but the effect is anything but. Ware's use of transition words is unusual and innovative, and he employs these transitions so frequently that they become a motif of their own. The following examples of superscripts show how these seemingly simple adverbs perform a more complex function.

In one section of *Jimmy* Corrigan, the adverb "meanwhile"—typically used in comics to juxtapose two events occurring at more or less the same time (see McCloud's scene-to-scene transition and Fig. 6)—allows Ware to juxtapose not only two physical scenes, but two personal moments of emotive importance. In this case (Fig. 16), William is seen from a distance being injured in a fall at work, which we only realize a few pages later when he is seen wearing a leg cast. Then, "Meanwhile" is printed vertically with a bright blue background, and takes up the entire height of the page. Next, three repeated images of a house are seen with a gradually deflating, empty speech bubble protruding from one window. In its conventional usage, "meanwhile" is placed in a very small corner of one panel in an almost invariably yellow box. On this page, "Meanwhile" visually severs these two moments. By using the normally unimposing transition word so boldly, Ware reappropriates this convention as a visually interesting part of the page, testing the limits of "meanwhile" as a scene-to-scene transition.

At first, Ware's juxtaposition of the two scenes in the scene-to-scene transition

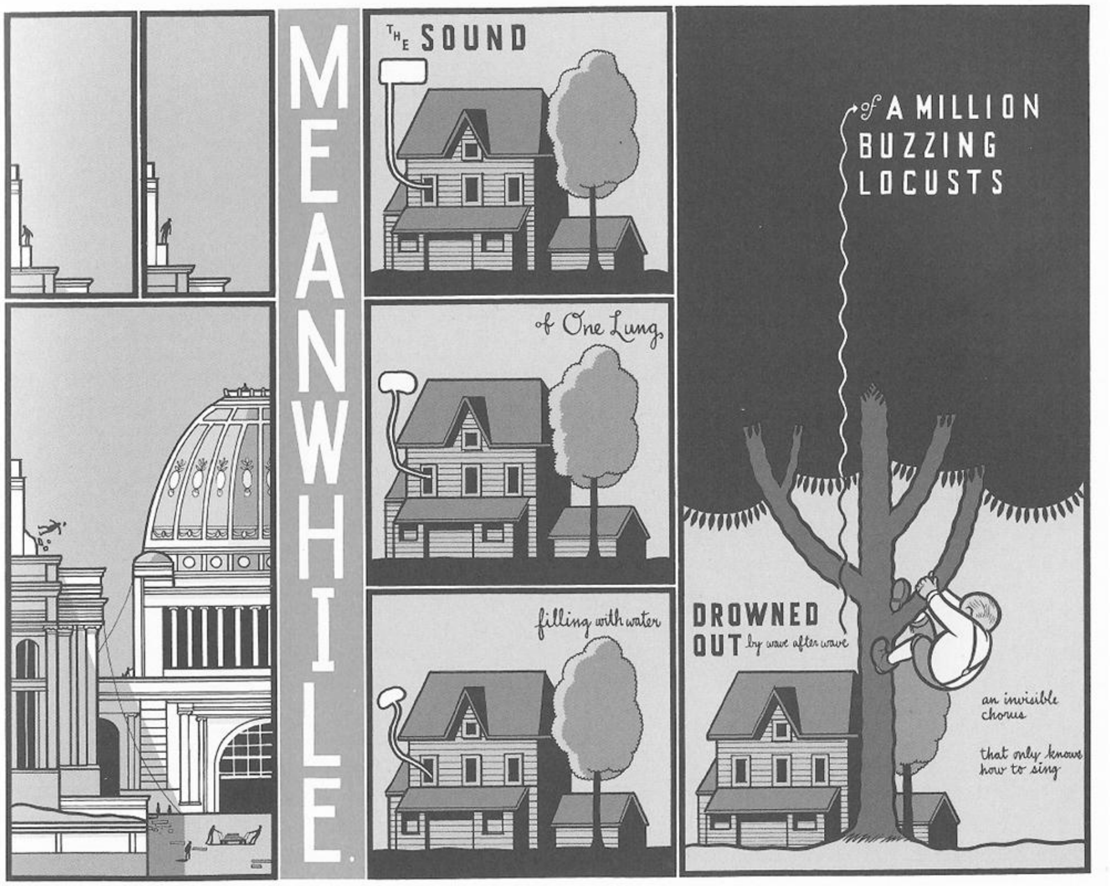

MEANWHILE.
THE SOUND
of One Lung
filling with water
of A MILLION BUZZING LOCUSTS
DROWNED OUT by wave after wave
an invisible chorus
that only knows how to sing

Figure 16

seems commonsense: James' (I) father is physically falling on the left, concurrent with his grandmother's imminent death on the right, symbolized by the successively drooping shape of the wordless speech bubbles and supported by the text: "The sound of one lung filling with water" (Fig. 16). But, of course, things are not so simple. The reader is not immediately aware of the full significance of this juxtaposition/transition; they learn on the next page that James' (I) mother is also dead, beginning a theme of mutual grief and shared emotional hardship. The juxtaposition is important because of the way James grieves as compared to his father. As James' (I) father and grandmother "fall," he "rises above" their decline by climbing a tree in the next panel, his grandmother's pneumonia-stricken breathing "drowned out by wave after wave of a million buzzing locusts" (Fig.

16). This symbolic "rise" is continued throughout the book, as James overcomes his grief and difficult home life as his father is consumed and overwhelmed by it. So how does the exaggerated "meanwhile" contribute to this narrative progress?

One can't help but wonder why the text is so large, the color so vibrant among dull earth tones, the placement so visually segregating. This exaggerated typographic cue helps the reader arrive at the desired narrative conclusions, but their sheer size and imposing color provide the reader with startling visual stopping points. In an emotionally stressful narrative like *Jimmy Corrigan*, these stops might—in an unconventional way—allow the reader to set their own pace through the narrative's intense ennui; they provide pause in an otherwise relentlessly harsh story. The exaggerated text re-routes the emotional impact of this scene and others through the arbitrary conduit of the convention—"meanwhile"—delaying the full weight of the emotionally powerful scene between father and son.

Jimmy Corrigan is an immensely complex book. One could argue that Ware deliberately complicates things for his readers in order to defamiliarize the process of reading. This may seem daunting for teachers who want students to be encouraged to read comics, but I find the possibilities for teaching very exciting. For one thing, *Jimmy Corrigan* could be used to powerfully challenge students' notions that comics are easy, childish, or unimportant. In an advanced English class, where students have become fairly confident readers of traditional print texts, *Jimmy Corrigan* could be used to give them an opportunity to "start from scratch" as readers, challenging their faculties as readers and puzzling their sensibilities for what to expect from a narrative.

One way a teacher could approach this experimental book in an upper division English course might be as a pedagogical experiment that the class is undertaking together. In this case, the teacher would not claim to be an authoritative reader of *Jimmy Corrigan*, but would rather be a co-learner in the analytic process of reading such complex material. From this perspective, opportunities to discuss metacognitive concepts around reading and interpretation arise, prompting questions like: what can we learn from *Jimmy Corrigan* about reading in general?" Students in this class could keep reading journals, and course discussions could be organized in part around students' comments. Teaching *Jimmy Corrigan* could involve many different strategies and approaches, depending on the type of course and the teacher's goals. My analysis specifically focuses on design conventions and typography, but a teacher could use *Jimmy Corrigan* to discuss a number of different concepts in narrative convention and experimentation. Some examples of possible topics to introduce alongside *Jimmy Corrigan* could be unreliable narrators, subjectivity, metafiction, or ironic self-reflexivity. Metafiction and irony in *Jimmy Corrigan* are most obvious in its innovative use of "filler" like a two-page "summary of our story thus far" (93-94), cut-out paper activities like a miniature zoetrope of a robot walking with crutches (28-29), and pages of commemorative postage stamps of scenes from the book (172-3).

Jimmy Corrigan is obviously an unusual and difficult book, but I feel it is very inviting for teachers, as well. In a comparative literature class, *Jimmy Corrigan*'s multiple perspectives on fatherhood and family could invite a range of exciting comparisons from many of Shakespeare's plays to the *Harry Potter* series. I have already compared *Jimmy Corrigan*'s complexity to what is found in James Joyce, and this connection could certainly be studied more closely in its similarity to *Ulysses*: as Joyce explored the history of Ireland, so Ware explores the history of Chicago; as Joyce reenacted the disparate fantasies and realities of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom's hallucinations and visions, so Ware employs a similar pattern in relating Jimmy (III) and James's (I) fantasies; and finally, both books were serialized. Identifying and interpreting similarities like the above can provide excellent essay topics for students.

As I have said before, teachers and students can utilize their skills with traditional print texts while studying comics. The complexity of *Jimmy Corrigan* is likely better suited for students with greater experience with traditional print texts, as they will have already encountered other experimental narratives. It is not difficult to imagine some fairly typical literature courses where the addition of a challenging comics text—among other novels in an experimental style or form, perhaps—would prove to be enjoyable and refreshing. For example, in a course focused on literary theory, where various theoretical frameworks are explored and used to analyze different works, could ask students in activities or formal assignments to apply different theoretical lenses to *Jimmy Corrigan*. A student interested in Marxist criticism might discuss the workers' conditions surrounding William's employment and injuries working on the Chicago World's Fair, which appears multiple times throughout the book. A student interested in queer theory, gender, and sexuality could examine the book's indictment of exaggerated masculinity and Jimmy's (III) resounding desire to be more masculine.

In just about any course, a student interested in comics themes and tropes could compare the superhero in *Jimmy Corrigan* to other superhero characters like Superman as they are presented in either comic books or in other mainstream media. Superheroes are an undeniably significant part of comics, and Ware engages with this comics tradition and convention, too. A superhero appears in several of *Jimmy Corrigan's* early pages, with great impact. The book begins with a young Jimmy (III) visiting a classic car show with his mother, featuring an appearance by "The Superman!" What begins as an innocent autograph signing becomes a one night stand with Jimmy's mother. As the actor attempts to silently leave the next morning, he finds Jimmy at the breakfast table. He asks Jimmy to tell his mother he "had a **real good time!** [sic]," a sentiment Jimmy faithfully reports while wearing the actor's mask when his mother emerges to find the actor gone (6-9). A few pages later, while adult Jimmy is at work, he sees a man dressed as a superhero leap from a tall building, only to fall to his death on the pavement below (20-23). For a small group activity, students could be asked to respond to these appearances of a superhero as a philanderer and a suicide and to dissect their significance for Jimmy. These groups could attempt to uncover anti-heroic properties of real life heroes, or students could question the cultural purpose of superheroes (e.g., superhumans as vigilantes, gods, conceptual moral police, etc.). This kind of critical analysis of short sections of text is invaluable in literature classes, and this familiar style of close reading exercise could be put to strong use with comics texts, as well.

As a reader, one of the most interesting things in *Jimmy Corrigan* is panel differentiation. I am often enthralled by the significant difference between panels in terms of size and shape. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, it is very common to find a page with five different panel sizes, and as many as ten. I can stop on a page and study all the different panel sizes, but I can just as easily read right through a page without noticing, despite there being as many as ten different panel widths and heights on a single page. There is certainly a wide range of analytical possibilities for students to explore in determining the significance of this particular artistic decision. As I mentioned in chapter two, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is known for its *lack* of variance in panel size, following an identical nine-panel grid throughout the entire comic. Clearly, this choice bears some significance, and students could be encouraged to analyze some of the formal qualities of *Jimmy Corrigan* on this level. One interesting way for students to do this would be an activity where students cut apart a photocopied page from *Jimmy Corrigan*, separating each panel from the others. After all the panels have been cut out, students then place the panels end to end along a single horizontal line, forming a single, left to right progression of the panels from that page. This would allow students to observe the active increasing and decreasing in panel size out of the context of the original page. Figure 17 is a sample image of a page from *Jimmy Corrigan* and the resulting horizontal comparison. Students could use this new horizontal spatial context as a physical representation to analyze the impact of these panel size changes in a more immediately recognizable way.

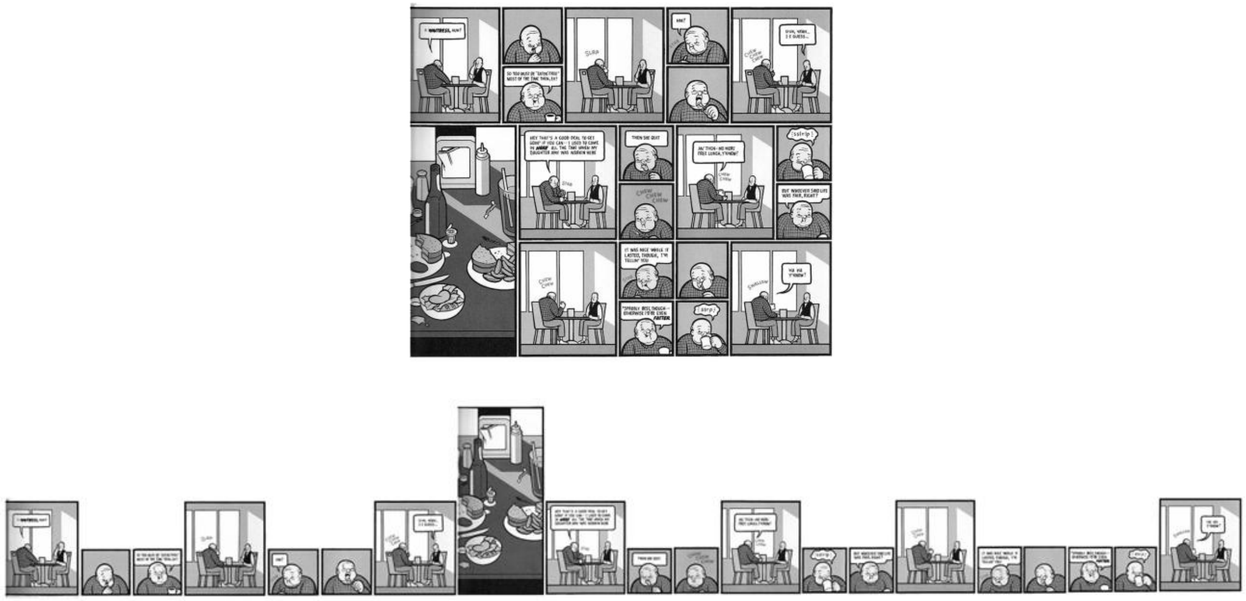


Figure 17

At the start of this section, I wrote that one must understand the appropriate conventions being exposed or otherwise employed by an artist in order to effectively study their experimentation. Ware’s unconventional use of conventional techniques, like making “Meanwhile” transitions central instead of peripheral, adds layer upon layer of complexity to *Jimmy Corrigan*. Ware breaks from traditional narrative techniques and traditional comics techniques to exaggerate a shift toward uncertainty in narrative reliability. The prominence of visual design in Ware’s comics exemplifies a break from conventional comics’ lettering, panel structure, and color in favor of an unconventional design style which responds to and comments on these conventions, often ironically. This ironic self-awareness and self-reflexive narrative and visual style makes *Jimmy Corrigan* a generous source of teachable topics in literary and comics conventions. Like literary studies of traditional print text, studying those comics creators who are testing the limits of their medium is invaluable to the general understanding of how the medium works.

A Major Figures Course on Harvey Pekar

For this final example, I have envisioned creating a specific course for English majors that focuses entirely on comics instead of discussing the many courses that could benefit from including a comics text. The structure for this upper-division course borrows from traditional English courses in the "major figures" format. Obviously, selecting an appropriate author for any course of this style would require expert-level knowledge of their history, their work, and the body of criticism that focuses on the selected work. I've chosen to focus this course on Harvey Pekar, author of autobiographical and nonfiction comics. One could not possibly teach his entire oeuvre in one ten-week course, so I have chosen to focus on four books: first, an anthology of the series *American Splendor*, followed by three original graphic novels (OGN), *Our Cancer Year*, *The Quitter*, and his most recently published work, *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*. These books are listed here and would be presented in the course in chronological order. In a course like this, students would be expected to engage with multiple examples of Pekar's primary texts and critical essays on his most famous works. Thus, this section will be different from this chapter's previous sections, as it will attempt to create a hypothetical course, address multiple works by the same author, and include more secondary texts than other sections in this chapter have done. I will also need to address practical ways to have students work with comics who are presumably used to working primarily with traditional print texts. Finally, up to this point I have discussed a single text and then described some practical teaching applications, but in this section, at least some teaching issues will appear earlier, as I attempt to navigate how an entire course on comics might logically work, building on previous texts as the course moves forward.

Pekar is an influential force in comics, and his work has inspired numerous other artists in the recent boom of autobiographical comics. While cartoonists like Robert Crumb and Justin Green had published some autobiographical comics in the 1970s underground comix world, it was Pekar who was dedicated to the genre, beginning the first autobiographical comics series. At least one issue of *American Splendor* was published each year until 2008, spanning four decades of Pekar’s life. Though Pekar has repeatedly claimed that he had to constantly “hustle” to sell his books and receive publicity, he gained large amounts of fame rather quickly: enough fame to become a regular guest on *The Late Show* with David Letterman in the 1980s. These appearances gave a voice to the Harvey Pekar his readers had become familiar with in his comics, *American Splendor*. The first anthology of *American Splendor* won an American Book Award in 1987. A 2003 film adaptation of *American Splendor* mixed documentary filmmaking with adaptation, starring both Harvey Pekar as himself, and Paul Giamatti as Harvey Pekar. The film was nominated for an Academy Award and won ten other film awards. Despite his fame, Pekar maintained a position as a file clerk at the Cleveland Veteran's Administration Hospital from 1965 to 2001, refusing all promotions while he worked there. This job provided material for many of the episodes of *American Splendor*. Pekar's major contribution to the comics medium has earned him several comics awards, and he is regularly listed by critics as a "founding father" of underground comix, along with Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman.

Besides being first invested in Pekar's work, teaching this course would require that a teacher also be invested in the critical and cultural history out of which Pekar's work comes. Someone teaching Pekar's comics would also need to be familiar with the history and significance of underground comix. Students could benefit from a series of mini-lectures on the underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which provided the background for *American Splendor*. This underground movement is described in great detail in several historical volumes such as Roger Sabin's 1993 *Adult Comics* and his 2001 *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art.* Pekar was welcomed as an important contributor to the underground movement, but *American Splendor* resisted their undeniable penchant for sex, violence, and drugs (see page 36 above). Instead, he told the stories of his admittedly boring life.

As one of the medium’s leading figures, Pekar’s work is regarded as ground-breaking for its style and content. Mainstream comics of the day contained plenty of “splendor” in their display of fantastic settings and superheroes. But Pekar’s comics have never been about fantasy. *American Splendor* features Harvey Pekar in the lead role. In fact, one of the first things any critic writing about *American Splendor* must do is devise some method for distinguishing between and referencing Harvey Pekar, the author, and Harvey Pekar, the character. When referencing the author, I will use “Pekar.” When referencing the main character, I will use “Harvey.”

Pekar’s comics are about his life which, by most accounts, was neither particularly exciting nor inspiring. But in “Autography’s Biography: 1972-2007,” Jared Gardner's 2008 essay in *Biography* about the history of autobiographical comics, Gardner claims that Pekar made use of his unique personal insight to become an innovator and key influence on the future of comics memoir:

> Pekar’s favorite word to describe his subject matter is “quotidian”: a fancy word for the everyday life we all inhabit, the life we work hard not to think about, because it is often exhausting, or painful, or dull—but mostly because it stars ourselves. And we are not Stars. In telling his own quotidian story in a form dominated by tales of the most Super of Superstars, the comic book superhero, Pekar offered a roadmap to a new generation of comics diarists and memoirists to address their everyday with the same microscopic attention that the mainstream media directs to its celebrities and public figures. (16)

In a completely anti-heroic reclaiming of personal identity, *American Splendor* made Pekar's mundane personal life a spectacle, turning a potentially uninteresting subject into the source of thousands of pages of published material about the same man, living his life in Cleveland.

I have said that autobiography offers some of the most sophisticated comics available. Other critics have claimed that comics and autobiography go hand in hand. Charles Hatfield’s dissection of autobiographical comics and ideology in his 2005 *Alternative Comics* briefly—and necessarily—relies on existing scholarship on traditional print autobiography, and his interaction with established critics aids his credibility in approaching Pekar’s *American Splendor* from a comics studies perspective. Through combining established critical strategies in autobiography to address comics, Hatfield reveals some of the strong opportunities available to comics creators regarding two inherent subjects in autobiography: authenticity and identity. As with any autobiographical work, the intersection of factual information with fictive storytelling is paramount. Hatfield suggests that as a genre, autobiography “applies the narrative techniques of fiction to stories implicitly certified as ‘true,’ insofar as they defer to a level of experience ‘outside’ the bounds of the text” (*Alternative* 112). In other words, non-fiction comics like Pekar’s employ a narrative literalism to portray “real” experiences. These stories are delivered by an intentionally subjective yet verifiable self. Literary critic Stephen Shapiro has stated that autobiography presents an attempt to “persuade the world to view one’s self through one’s own eyes” (qtd. in Hatfield *Alternative* 114). Comics make this somewhat tricky.

The “self” in autobiographical comics appears as a cartoon, a caricature. Herein lies the importance and uniqueness of autobiographical comics, as Hatfield writes:

> Prerequisite to such caricature, it would seem, is a form of alienation or estrangement, through which the cartoonist-autobiographer regards himself as *other*, as a distinct character to be seen as well as heard. Yet, as Paul Jay has suggested, such a process of becoming an object, indeed a parody of oneself, may enable a subject “to choose, and thus control, identity.” Objectification of the self, through visual representation, may actually enable the autobiographer to articulate and uphold his or her own sense of identity. (114-5)

In comics, Hatfield continues, the promiscuous blending of fact and fiction “inevitably has to do with appearances” (114), and is mirrored in the cartoonist’s artistic ability, as they project and objectify their “inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance” (115). Additionally—and unlike the traditional autobiographer, who may intentionally describe their “self” in a single, descriptive page or chapter—the cartoonist must *repeatedly* recreate their visual self, in *every panel* in which they appear. For Pekar, these claims are troubled by the fact that he did not draw himself, but was assisted by various artists, who each drew Pekar’s Harvey in their own style. Nevertheless, the “sense of self”—both “intimate” and “critical”—remains in each successive artist's representation of Harvey, reflecting the autobiographical phenomena Hatfield describes. In *American Splendor*, the attempt to visually uphold identity occurs in what could be described as obsessive repetition. One page from an episode of *American Splendor* shows Pekar’s likeness in all eight of its panels. Most of Pekar’s work is like this, with page after page of Pekar monologuing to the reader. Acting as narrator, main character, and central visual element, Pekar's work is perhaps chiefly concerned with the multi-faceted appearances of Harvey Pekar.

Therefore, as an autobiographical comic, *American Splendor*'s central character is somewhat paradoxical: it is always an autobiographical representation of Pekar himself, but his name and appearance sometimes change, if only slightly. When Pekar's work is its most direct, his protagonist is named Harvey Pekar, but different stories feature characters named Our Man, Jack the Bell Boy, Carl, and Herschel. There is rarely any question whether this protagonist is Pekar's avatar, due to their visual consistency. Joseph Witek describes the undeniable "Pekar character. . . recognizable by his distinctive characteristics; he is dark haired with sideburns . . . casual if not downright slovenly in dress, usually stoical in expression, and he works at what the persona often calls a 'flunky job'" (*Comic Books* 123). The "everyman" persona Pekar developed in *American Splendor* played a large role in its success and may even have informed how Pekar's collaborating artists chose to draw his avatar.

Since its beginning, *American Splendor* has been illustrated by many different comics artists, unlike most other autobiographical comics like *Maus, Persepolis,* and *Fun Home*. Pekar's collaboration with different artists makes him a minority among autobiographical comics creators, who typically write and draw their own comics. But Pekar's collaborative method is actually more consistent with the overwhelming majority of mainstream comics. For example, both DC and Marvel employ large teams of creators to micro-manufacture seemingly every detail in a single comic, with separate artists credited for writing, penciling, inking, lettering, and coloring. In this process, the writer composes a script of text and rough outlines or sketches of planned visual space, to be interpreted by a penciller. These two artists receive the most attention in comics and are generally seen as equal contributors. This creative collaboration, and the environment of competition collaboration can inspire, causes these relationships to range from symbiotic to hostile, and many instances of unhappily dissolved comics teams fill the history of mainstream comics.

Pekar had relatively high control over his scripts and delivered them hand-written with stick-figure drawings that describe placement and posture, if little else. Pekar was not a talented illustrator (in the film adaptation of *American Splendor*, Harvey notes that he can barely draw a straight line), making collaboration with other artists a necessity. But the ensuing procession of famed comics artists who worked with him (Robert Crumb, Dean Haspiel, Gilbert Hernandez, Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, Jim Woodring, and Chester Brown, to name just a few) lent immediate comics credibility to Pekar's work. Some stories of the relationships Pekar developed with his artists have appeared in unexpected places. Understandably, after his death in 2010, online tributes—some in the form of obituaries—appeared from several of his collaborators, describing Pekar's life and their experiences working together. But some depictions of working with Pekar came much earlier. In "A Fantasy," from the very first issue of *American Splendor*, Robert Crumb illustrated a two-page story of how Harvey threateningly convinced Crumb to illustrate a two-page story after Crumb asked to stay at his house.

Each different artist who drew Harvey did so in their own distinct style, as any artist would for a portrait. This visual inconsistency could potentially create difficulties for readers: for most, a portrait may only be as effective as its subject remains clear.

However, the self-described “neo-realism”—a result of the noted influence of realist writers like Emile Zola and Pekar's quotidian focus and his use of the comics medium—of Pekar’s work allows Pekar to consistently address this visual discrepancy. Harvey, and no one else, speaks directly to, makes eye contact with, and appeals to the reader in Pekar’s comics. What could be called visual inconsistency is a non-issue because of Pekar’s writing consistency which, as Witek says, makes it nearly impossible *not* to recognize Harvey in each story. This is not only true in *American Splendor,* but in Pekar’s other autobiographical works as well.

A typical episode of *American Splendor* revolves around a quotidian aspect in Harvey’s life, and the depicted scenes in the episode oscillate between showing the described action of the scene—from going to the grocery store or trading jazz LPs with a friend—and full panels of Harvey in soliloquy, addressing the reader face-to-face, narrating and commenting on the content of the episode (Fig. 18). The two threads here, one plot-driven and one narrative, are both essential in *American Splendor*. The theme of each episode varies fairly widely, though consistently grounded in the quotidian. Often the plot involves some activity in Harvey’s daily life, such as going to work or riding the bus, and the focus remains primarily on Harvey and his conversations with those around him. There is no consistent thematic material other than Harvey’s life in these comics. But Harvey’s direct commentary, either before or after the plot- driven threads, provides a consistent autobiographical context. It may sound strange, but each of Pekar’s stories feels like it is told by Harvey, not Pekar; hence the need for distinguishing the two.

Harvey’s presence on the page, separate from the plot-driven sections, can be intensely personal for readers, like a relationship with a confidant. There is an element of

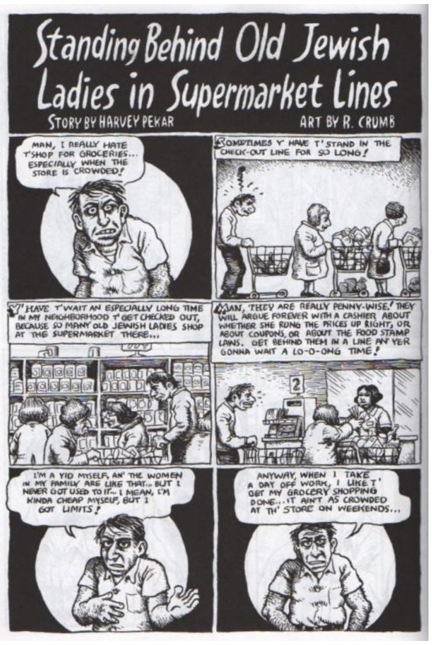

Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines
STORY BY HARVEY PEKAR
ART BY R. CRUMB
MAN, I REALLY HATE T'SHOP FOR GROCERIES... ESPECIALLY WHEN THE STORE IS CROWDED!
SOMETIMES Y' HAVE T' STAND IN THE CHECK-OUT LINE FOR SO LONG!
Y'HAVE T'WAIT AN ESPECIALLY LONG TIME IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD T' GET CHECKED OUT, BECAUSE SO MANY OLD JEWISH LADIES SHOP AT THE SUPERMARKET THERE...
MAN, THEY ARE REALLY PENNY-WISE! THEY WILL ARGUE FOREVER WITH A CASHIER ABOUT WHETHER SHE RUNG THE PRICES UP RIGHT, OR ABOUT COUPONS, OR ABOUT THE FOOD STAMP LAWS. GET BEHIND THEM IN A LINE AN' YER GONNA WAIT A LO-O-ONG TIME!
2
I'M A YID MYSELF, AN' THE WOMEN IN MY FAMILY ARE LIKE THAT... BUT I NEVER GOT USED TO IT... I MEAN, I'M KINDA CHEAP MYSELF, BUT I GOT LIMITS!
ANYWAY, WHEN I TAKE A DAY OFF WORK, I LIKE T' GET MY GROCERY SHOPPING DONE... IT AIN'T AS CROWDED AT TH' STORE ON WEEKENDS...

Figure 18

trust and cooperation, or sometimes a co-conspiratorial aspect to these repeated asides that make *American Splendor* and Pekar's other comics unique and enjoyable. I have provided the text from the above example of Pekar's writing from an *American Splendor* story, "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines," illustrated by Robert Crumb (Fig. 18):

> Man, I really hate t'shop for groceries… especially when the store is crowded! Sometimes y'have t'stand in the check-out line for so long! Y'have t'wait an especially long time in my neighborhood t'get checked out, because so many old jewish ladies shop at the supermarket there… Man, they are really penny-wise! They will argue forever with a cashier about whether she rung the prices up right, or about coupons, or about the food stamp laws. Get behind them in a line an' yer gonna wait a lo-o-ong time! I'm a yid myself, an' the women in my family are like that… but I

> never got used to it…I mean, I'm kinda cheap myself, but I got limits! Anyway, when I take a day off work, I like t'get my grocery shopping done… it ain't as crowded at th'store on weekend [sic]. (*American Splendor* 80)

Everything written appears as narration, but the depicted panels show both Harvey delivering these lines as speech, encircled by white in what looks like a stand up comedian's spotlight, and Harvey at the grocery store, behind some women in the checkout line while the text runs above the scene in separate, internal narration. This page is a typical example of Pekar's work because its dialogue maintains Harvey's conversational tone, Harvey alludes to his own shortcomings, and he incorporates his own Cleveland dialect and Jewish slang.

This formulaic approach to *American Splendor* is the reason I would teach these comics first in this course on the work of Harvey Pekar. Not only is *American Splendor* Pekar's first work, but it provides the format which his later standalone (not serialized) work generally followed throughout his life. Much of this first reading selection could be used in classes to identify the common trends among *American Splendor* episodes. While teaching *American Splendor*, I would ask students to dissect why Pekar's "quotidian" representation is fascinating enough to supply Pekar with so much material (there are nine collected editions of *American Splendor* in print, in addition to seven original graphic novels including the three listed here). Is this simple narcissism or is it evidence that supports the validity of the quotidian as a subject for art? Students could consider if Pekar's fascination with the quotidian reflects something about the nature of media in America, as well. Pekar chose to use the comics medium, typically reserved at the time for superheroes, to craft everyday stories. Of course, newspapers and documentary films often focus on quotidian subjects, as well as working class literature from Tilly Olson and Theodore Dreiser. Why should comics be any different? Comparable phenomena in other media have regularly been valuable additions to literature courses, and *American Splendor* invites an attempt to render interesting and valuable stories from the quotidian and mundane, which students could easily access.

The first OGN I would use in my course on Harvey Pekar is also his first OGN, *Our Cancer Year*. It follows Harvey and his wife, Joyce Brabner, through their year-long battle with Harvey's cancer. Harvey collaborated more than usual on this 1994 book, with Brabner receiving writing co-credit and art by painter Frank Stack. As is typical of Pekar, his character is persistently doubtful about his recovery, and the depiction of chemotherapy treatments provide excruciating detail of his suffering. This book is as much about Joyce and Harvey's marriage surviving Harvey's cancer as it is about Harvey's survival, and the oscillation of both Joyce and Harvey's spirits between hopeful and pessimistic is compelling. As ever in Pekar's comics, the reader can relate to Harvey's self-deprecation and lack of self-confidence. Harvey is consumed by pessimism and doubt, and he and Joyce are forced to learn to cope with the struggles of Harvey's illness. Harvey's medical developments are often discouraging, and he and Joyce must alter their personal lives to adjust to these developments. The cyclic pattern of bad news and waiting that develops drives Harvey to despair. As *American Splendor* does with a trip to the grocery store or a day at the office, *Our Cancer Year* makes Harvey's cancer seem almost normal. As dealing with cancer becomes a regular part of his life—as regular as going to the grocery store in *American Splendor*—Harvey's experiences with illness show readers how humans confront difficulty in their lives. In other words, Harvey's (and Joyce's) survival is an unimposing testament to human survival, an encouraging tale that could be inspiring to other cancer victims and their families. It is a poignant tale of a family in distress, but one which explores how families do, in fact, carry on in the face of disaster.

The next book for this course on Harvey Pekar follows the present order of chronological publication, but shows its readers a time from before even *American Splendor*: Harvey's childhood. In 2007, Pekar published *The Quitter*, an OGN about growing up Jewish in Cleveland and living with crippling self-doubt, with art by Dean Haspiel. Pekar's detailed descriptions of fist-fighting, school days, and job searches are often retellings of stories from *American Splendor*, but the consistent context is of a man whose fear of failure traces a pattern through his life. Through Harvey, Pekar returns to his life-long anxiety about success and failure as represented in many of his earlier comics. But he had not exclusively dwelt on the symptoms of his self-doubt before *The Quitter*. He explains his condition through many descriptive scenes where a single, sometimes only marginal failure envelops his entire thinking about an activity, causing him to quit. This usually occurs without warning, and Harvey admits the irrationality of his fear of failure. For example, Harvey finds great success in geography classes in high school and college. His grades are excellent in the subject, but when he gets a C+ on a college geography test, he withdraws from the university. He disregards encouragement from the professor and the dean that he should continue his studies, choosing to quit instead of face future possible failures. By the end of the book, Harvey acknowledges his many successes (by this time the aforementioned feature film, *American Splendor*, had already won several festival awards) but remains doubtful that he will find continued success. In a strange way, *The Quitter* is a kind of open letter from Harvey to Pekar. By identifying his hyper-sensitivity to failure, Pekar seems to be willing Harvey, and therefore himself, to overcome it. This self-reflexive tone could generate very interesting topics for written assignments, such as an exploration of the relationship between Harvey the narrator and Pekar the author. I will return to this idea with more detail shortly.

Pekar was working on new comics up until his death in 2010, and a few of his OGNs have been published posthumously. With artist JT Waldman, Pekar's final book, published in 2012, is *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, and is the final book that would be included in my course on Harvey Pekar. Portraying the last years of Pekar's life and his increasing interest in the conflict in Israel, much of the book shows Harvey in conversation with JT, who is also a character in the book. Harvey had become increasingly critical of Israel during the past two decades of the conflict in Gaza and had written several anti-Zionist opinion pieces. Working with Waldman, Pekar set out to discover and portray the reasons behind his controversial feelings about Israel. The book is split into three parts, each drawn in a distinct style. The first part shows Harvey and JT's research and conversations about how the book will be created. The nature of these sections is another new kind of self-reflexivity for Pekar and is particularly interesting. In his other work, Harvey does talk about books of his that are already published, but does not reference the book that he presently appears in. In the first section, Harvey and JT discuss Israel, their publishing process, and their Jewish identities. The feeling is one of a conversation being recorded and related in real time rather than a retroactive account. I think this is because Pekar and Waldman collaborated on the writing for this project as well as the art. In a presentation at San Diego Comic Con 2012, Waldman described the process of creating the book as more collaborative than Pekar's other projects. Waldman was, of course, the book's artist, but also a central character, and his involvement with writing the book took on a larger role than other artists' roles in the past.

The book's second section contains flashbacks to Harvey's childhood. His parents had different opinions about Zionism, and their political and religious expression (his father listened to Talmudic records nightly, his mother passed out Socialist tracts) affected Harvey's early opinions of Israel. The third and most elaborately conceived part is an attempt by Pekar and Waldman to create a thorough history of Israel, from pre-Biblical times to the present. Each part features a different artistic style, from a black line drawing in the research sections, to a clear line style with grey inkwash in Harvey's childhood sections. The art which appears in the Israeli history sections is what makes it so elaborate. As time progresses, Waldman's art changes to mimic the artistic styles of the described time. For the story of Abraham, the art matches ancient tablet drawings. In ancient Jerusalem, the art is a mosaic, with thousands of small squares on each page. During World War II, the state of Israel is inscribed on a mock propaganda poster. Two examples are shown in Figure 19. This chronicle of Jewish history also chronicles art history, acting as a testament to the survival of Jewish traditions and culture.

As I've said before, both teachers and students can apply their existing knowledge from their areas of interest when approaching comics. Approaches to teaching these four books could vary widely among teachers, who might incorporate the theoretical frameworks or literary periods in which they are primarily interested as a parallel to analyzing Pekar's work. In this section, I do not offer these comparisons specifically but

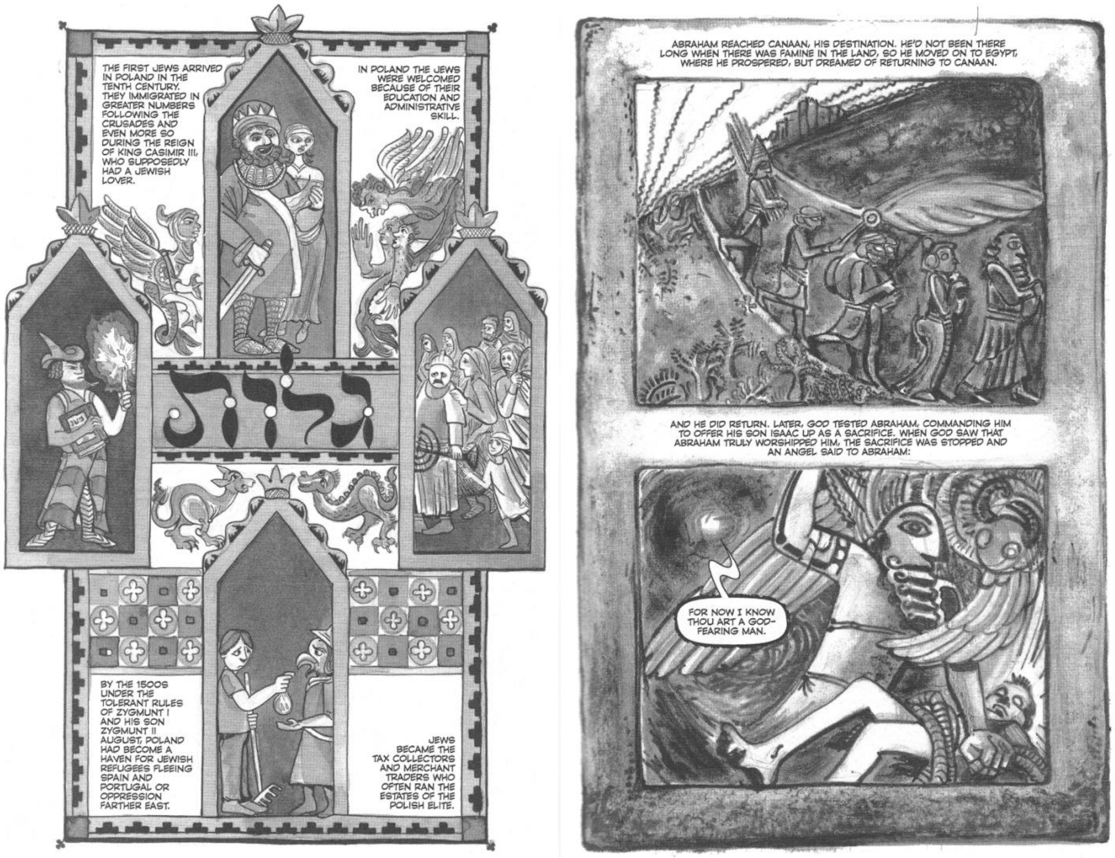

THE FIRST JEWS ARRIVED IN POLAND IN THE TENTH CENTURY. THEY IMMIGRATED IN GREATER NUMBERS FOLLOWING THE CRUSADES AND EVEN MORE SO DURING THE REIGN OF KING CASIMIR III, WHO SUPPOSEDLY HAD A JEWISH LOVER.
IN POLAND THE JEWS WERE WELCOMED BECAUSE OF THEIR EDUCATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE SKILL.
גלות
BY THE 1500S UNDER THE TOLERANT RULES OF ZYGMUNT I AND HIS SON ZYGMUNT II AUGUST, POLAND HAD BECOME A HAVEN FOR JEWISH REFUGEES FLEEING SPAIN AND PORTUGAL OR OPPRESSION FARTHER EAST.
JEWS BECAME THE TAX COLLECTORS AND MERCHANT TRADERS WHO OFTEN RAN THE ESTATES OF THE POLISH ELITE.
ABRAHAM REACHED CANAAN, HIS DESTINATION. HE'D NOT BEEN THERE LONG WHEN THERE WAS FAMINE IN THE LAND, SO HE MOVED ON TO EGYPT, WHERE HE PROSPERED, BUT DREAMED OF RETURNING TO CANAAN.
AND HE DID RETURN. LATER, GOD TESTED ABRAHAM, COMMANDING HIM TO OFFER HIS SON ISAAC UP AS A SACRIFICE. WHEN GOD SAW THAT ABRAHAM TRULY WORSHIPPED HIM, THE SACRIFICE WAS STOPPED AND AN ANGEL SAID TO ABRAHAM:
FOR NOW I KNOW THOU ART A GOD-FEARING MAN.

Figure 19

instead suggest some helpful ideas for addressing the course as a whole, including some ideas for macroscopic assignments that address all four books in the course as well as some specific ideas for activities which apply more closely to one particular book over others. These ideas and techniques are outlines of possible assignments and activities and are suggestive of what I have found to be good teaching tools in my experience.

In any of Pekar's work described here, students might address its "everyman" qualities in the context of other figures in literature who exhibit everyman characteristics. A student with strong interest and background in medieval literature might consider writing an essay comparing Harvey to Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress.* A student interested in modern American literature could compare Harvey with Willy Loman in

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. By identifying the character traits which make each character an "everyman," students could analyze the inherent qualities which make Harvey's "quotidian" subjects seem emblematic of typical American adulthood. Some of these qualities could easily relate to Harvey's "flunky job" (as a hospital file clerk) or his reaction to cancer treatments. In *The Quitter*, Harvey's compulsive retreat from possible failure is presented as a relatable "everyman" quality as well. In it, Harvey fears the uncertain and responds in anti-heroic fashion. If the classical hero never fails, Harvey's anti-hero never *allows* himself to fail, representing a postmodern everyman's fascination with individual and systematic self-deprecation. The self-reflexive nature of *The Quitter* is another example of Pekar/Harvey's "everyman" qualities, especially because Pekar never offers an authorial solution to Harvey's doubtfulness. Harvey does not change by the story's end. He is merely self-aware enough to publish this book about his internal struggles with failure. The combined elements of autobiography and personal growth form a kind of ironically literal self-help story, but one which offers no conclusive solution other than self-awareness.

Students interested in race, identity, or the "other" could craft an essay discussing the importance of Harvey's Jewish identity as it appears in *The Quitter* and *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*. Pekar's fascination with Jewish identity in America and Israel is clear in the thematic content of his later work, and his autobiographical work on this theme (he also contributed to non-comics and comics texts about Jewish identity) focuses on his own, often conflicted, opinions about Jewishness. A student interested in queer theory could make a claim about Harvey's hyper-masculinity in *The Quitter,* specifically in reference to "street credibility" and Harvey's penchant for violence and fist fighting.

Students with an interest in historical and biographical criticism might perform further research and write about the significance of Cleveland to Pekar and Harvey—it appears at least visually in all of his books as the typical setting—and as an influence on Harvey's decisions about his career. This approach might be particularly suited to *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me,* which has become an increasingly controversial book because of its criticism of Israeal and Zionism's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this case, however, I would not ask students to focus on and research the controversy but to analyze the book's artistic style. The distinct art in this book's different sections invites very interesting analysis of the effectiveness of the period art in conjunction with the intentionally different art of the present and past of Harvey's experience with the book's subject: Israel.

Another interesting matter for teachers and students to address is the variety of artists who worked with Pekar. This adds depth to an aesthetic analysis, allowing students to juxtapose different artists' interpretations of Harvey and providing a visual variety unavailable to traditional print autobiographies. Students could interrogate the idea of authorship in terms of Pekar's collaboration with artists. As I said before, Pekar typically had significant control over the art in his books and wrote scripts for his books which included descriptions of the necessary art. However, Frank Stack's process of creating art for *Our Cancer Year* was collaborative, with Harvey willingly repeating particular movements or actions to allow Stack to capture the visual essence in its most effective manner. As Joyce Brabner recalls in the afterword for *Our Cancer Year*:

> We sent him script pages, photographs, and video tapes. He moved in with us for a while, discreetly clicking his camera, watching, and sketching. It

> was a little like being tailed by *National Geographic*. Sometimes a bit of business had to be re-enacted or staged. . . Frank is soft spoken. Frank is also a tough professional: “Ummm… I need Harvey to collapse again, but this time, fall down on your left side, OK?” He made us remember things we wished we could forget. (*Our Cancer Year* n.p.)

This elaborate exchange may not have been typical for Pekar’s work, but definitely cements the possibility that a partnership and truly collaborative approach was used to craft each book’s art. This information could invite students to explore the relationship of art to writing in Pekar’s comics. His artists did not merely follow Pekar’s direction but co-created these important works. As I said before, a study of Harvey Pekar must also include a careful attention to the collaborating artists who made his work into comics instead of solely traditional print texts.

In *Our Cancer Year* and *The Quitter*, Harvey reveals personal details about his life, often unpleasant and deprecating truths about his depression. But Harvey also acknowledges when he has done a good thing and makes explicit references to situations where decisions reflected a conflict in his character. Especially in moments when Harvey recognizes his own bad behavior, a kind of “fourth wall” is broken. “Breaking the fourth wall” is a theatrical term for when actors speak directly to the audience, which easily applies to the sections of Pekar’s work where Harvey turns to the reader and narrates his thought process or reasoning behind a given situation (as in Fig. 20). At these narrative points when Harvey reveals his flaws to the “audience,” the difference between Harvey the narrator and Pekar the author is especially blurred. Through reader response activities and assignments, students could express how Harvey’s direct interactions with audience affect their opinion of his actions. One way to do this might be to ask if Harvey's acknowledgement of "bad behavior" relieves him of its consequences.

As a major assignment, students could be given the option to create their own creative response to Pekar's work. Each student could create their own short comic telling a quotidian story where they made a mistake or reveal a possible character flaw in themselves. Similar to what Harvey does in *The Quitter*, each student would acknowledge their flaw and explain to the reader the intellectual path they took to understanding and coping with their flaw. By creating autobiographical comics, students could experience the task of characterizing and cartooning oneself, providing personal insight into Hatfield's idea about "controllable identity." A later or concurrent assignment would ask students to specifically describe the experience of self-caricature in this context, answering prompts about creative process regarding art. Today's students are certainly no stranger to the public distribution of mundane, quotidian experiences via social networking websites like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Pekar was the first to publicly distribute memoir comics, and all before this kind of instant publication was available. While accessing their perhaps familiar tendency to air their private lives online, each student's comics assignment would be a painfully slow process by comparison. By examining their own creative process in making comics, students could partly relate to Pekar's experience of chronicling his life this way, enriching the experience of reading his comics. On a personal note, I would be uncomfortable grading any student's artistic talent due to my own abysmal drawing ability, but this activity could be offered as extra credit, or could be offered as an optional alternative to a traditional research paper accompanied by a substantial reflective analysis. I find this opportunity particularly

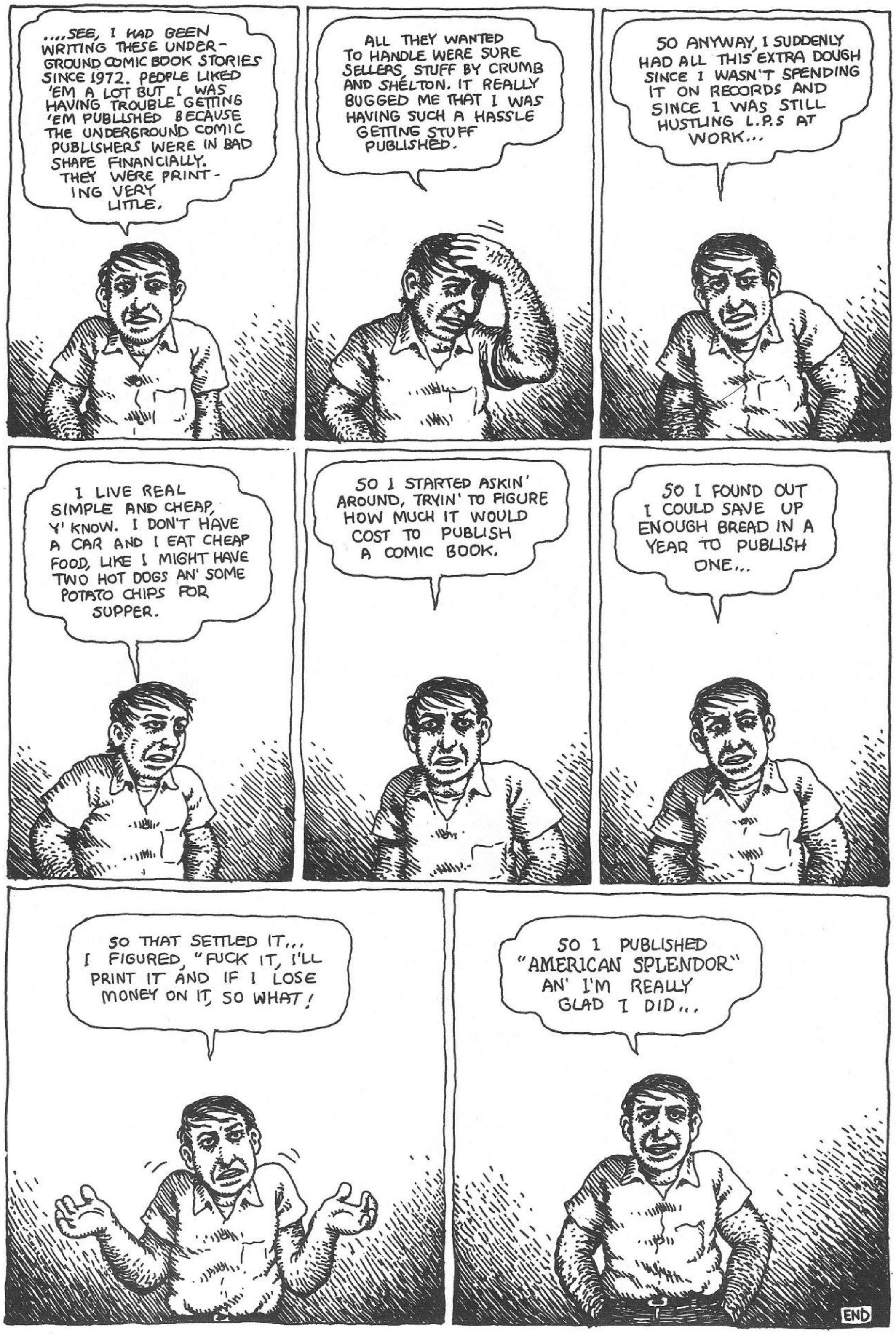

....SEE, I HAD BEEN WRITING THESE UNDERGROUND COMIC BOOK STORIES SINCE 1972. PEOPLE LIKED 'EM A LOT BUT I WAS HAVING TROUBLE GETTING 'EM PUBLISHED BECAUSE THE UNDERGROUND COMIC PUBLISHERS WERE IN BAD SHAPE FINANCIALLY. THEY WERE PRINTING VERY LITTLE.
ALL THEY WANTED TO HANDLE WERE SURE SELLERS, STUFF BY CRUMB AND SHELTON. IT REALLY BUGGED ME THAT I WAS HAVING SUCH A HASSLE GETTING STUFF PUBLISHED.
SO ANYWAY, I SUDDENLY HAD ALL THIS EXTRA DOUGH SINCE I WASN'T SPENDING IT ON RECORDS AND SINCE I WAS STILL HUSTLING L.P.S AT WORK...
I LIVE REAL SIMPLE AND CHEAP, Y' KNOW. I DON'T HAVE A CAR AND I EAT CHEAP FOOD, LIKE I MIGHT HAVE TWO HOT DOGS AN' SOME POTATO CHIPS FOR SUPPER.
SO I STARTED ASKIN' AROUND, TRYIN' TO FIGURE HOW MUCH IT WOULD COST TO PUBLISH A COMIC BOOK.
SO I FOUND OUT I COULD SAVE UP ENOUGH BREAD IN A YEAR TO PUBLISH ONE...
SO THAT SETTLED IT... I FIGURED, "FUCK IT, I'LL PRINT IT AND IF I LOSE MONEY ON IT, SO WHAT!
SO I PUBLISHED "AMERICAN SPLENDOR" AN' I'M REALLY GLAD I DID...
END

Figure 20

exciting if only because it offers students the opportunity to experience the telling of one's own "boring" quotidian story.

With *American Splendor,* Pekar inspired countless other comics creators, allowing them to find value in their own quotidian existence. Teachers could show examples of other critically-acclaimed comics creators like Jeff Lemire, Alison Bechdel, David B., Craig Thompson, and Jeffrey Brown in order to document the importance of Pekar's work. *American Splendor* is responsible for beginning the invigoration the mundane continued in these other well-known creators' work. Pekar's comics, like good autobiography, reveal the compelling honesty of a real person, creating an aesthetic experience where the distinction between private and public is obscured. Because of this, Harvey Pekar's comics could be used in an English class to accomplish what any major figures format course could: broadening students' understanding of literary and social issues during the author's life, as well as the author's aesthetic and literary merit.

Conclusion: Looking Backward and Forward

As I have said throughout this thesis, comics provide many exciting teaching opportunities for English faculty both in ways that are familiar to them and ways that may surprise them. Teachers who are most comfortable with traditional print texts may want to experiment with comics in some of the low risk ways described in chapter 1. Teachers with more exposure to and interest in comics may want to use them as part of an effort to address multimodal and visual literacies as well as popular culture. This thesis attempts to provide helpful information and advice for teachers with varying degrees of interest and experience reading and teaching comics. Comics are a capacious medium, and many have already inspired the careful, intense study that English scholars employ. The comics world is a teacher's oyster, an invitation to discover and investigate for those willing to take the plunge.

In the first chapter, I discuss the pedagogical opportunities that comics possess for teachers in detail. Teachers could use comics to suit any variety of needs in their courses, and I suggest that a continuum exists of high and low exposure to comics, reflecting the ways in which teachers can use comics in a given course. I also introduce some of the conflicting and at times confusing terms employed in comics studies for the texts themselves. In this thesis I have chosen to use the somewhat general term “comics” to denote all texts occurring in the comics medium, but I encourage teachers to use the term (such as graphic novel or graphic narrative) that makes the most sense to them and to embrace the conflict over terminology as evidence of comics’ sophistication and capaciousness. The first chapter also includes a discussion of the difficulties comics faced finding popular and academic acceptance as a result of Frederic Wertham’s 1954 book the *Seduction of the Innocent.* Largely as a result of Wertham’s book, the highly restrictive Comics Code was created in 1954. This code effectively stifled the medium’s expression of more serious or controversial subjects for a significant period of time.

In my second chapter, I describe and analyze comics’ formal qualities, a discussion that should prove especially useful to teachers who are interested in comics but have not previously studied them. Starting with Scott McCloud’s 1993 *Understanding Comics,* I discuss such formal concepts as closure, iconic images, and transition types. Then I use other comics scholars’ work to discuss such concepts such as space, contingency, and projection as they relate to comics. With these concepts, I attempt to show how comics work. I also discuss how teachers can employ these concepts in their classes. Next, I summarize and contextualize three 1986 comics that changed how comics were publicly and academically perceived. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* all called attention to the potential power and sophistication of comics as a medium.

In this last chapter, I have discussed a variety of texts that display the diversity and breadth of comics: Bill Willingham's *Fables*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and the autobiographical work of Harvey Pekar. I have also provided practical suggestions for teachers interested in including comics in their classes.

In this thesis I have made claims about the value of comics in terms of their form, theory, sophistication, and teachability. One important topic that I have not yet touched on—and would like to briefly mention here—is the fan culture surrounding comics. The comics medium has a fascinating symbiotic relationship with its fans. Considerable research in comics addresses this relationship, and scholars have explored the communities surrounding comics in various ethnographic, cultural, and fan studies in recent years. Comic book (OGNs are not affected) fans have had a powerful influence on the direction of the medium. For example, the financial well-being of any particular serialized comic is directly affected by its readers. If readers stop purchasing the monthly installments of a series, its publisher will stop paying to produce and distribute them. This very direct supply-and-demand structure is the backbone of the mainstream comics industry and is a built-in factor in guiding these comics' publication. Independent, self-published comics represent a relatively small but vital section of the comics market and are not as directly affected by this model, but an awareness of the editor-like power of fan culture could be important to nearly all contexts of studying comics.

In addition to this involvement, comics fans hold regular conventions, where hundreds and thousands of fans congregate to meet each other and the creators who supply them with their favorite comics. I attended San Diego Comic Con in 2012 and was able to meet Alison Bechdel and JT Waldman during presentations they gave about their recent work. The convention coincides each year with the Comics Arts Conference, an academic conference focusing on comics now in its twentieth year. In a round table discussion, and at an after party, I discussed the relevance of conventions to comics with comics scholars Charles Hatfield, Peter Coogan, and Joseph Witek, who said:

> There are no outlets like Comic Con for scholars in other fields. If you study popular music, you don't often have a chance to meet Bob Dylan. If you study film, you don't get to meet Quentin Tarantino. But with comics, we have this organized meeting *every year* where the practitioners of our field come together and meet with their fans, and join our academic panels as guests. They are interested in what scholars think about their work, and want to actively participate in those discussions. Nothing else is like that. (Coogan)

Other participants in this round table discussion were Steve Englehart and Trina Robbins, two well-known comics creators. How exciting for scholars to be given access to famous creators at functions like Comic Con each year, should they be interested. The relative closeness of fans, critics, scholars, and creators in comics plays a significant role in their creation and continued relevance.

This thesis began with a reflection on my personal experience with comics. In conclusion, I want to return to the power comics have had in my academic life. This expansive power can be summarized in a single sentence: reading traditional print texts and comics is mutually reinforcing. I have received training in analyzing the aesthetic and critical merits of print texts, and I have found those skills to be bountiful resources while studying comics. Likewise, I have found my experiences reading comics have made me a more careful and visually engaged reader of traditional print texts. The worlds of comics and traditional print texts may seem fairly exclusive from one another, but by living in them both I have felt an active reinforcement of my reading skills from both directions. This leads me to an entirely practical but essential point: our students, particularly in general education classes, can be engaged using comics in ways which empower them to take ownership of their reading of traditional print texts. Comics' visual appeal often attracts disengaged readers in ways that emphasize our culture’s focus on multimodality. Students who inhabit both worlds—like I have—can have their reading of traditional print texts reinvigorated by exploring comics, and their reading of comics emboldened by their experience with traditional print texts. In this combined world, teachers and students can relish the opportunities to discuss great books and to discover the capaciousness of a medium with so much to offer.

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