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## Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science

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## Abstract

Graphic novels and comics have a rich history and have long served as a medium for both education and entertainment. Although we live in an increasingly technology-rich era which offers abundant visual stimulation to compete with comics, graphic literature is arguably a more immediate and robust resource than ever before. The following paper highlights specific applications of graphic literature to pedagogical purposes, including implications for the use of comics in teaching history, world languages, English as a new language, science, and mathematics. Across these areas, a wide degree of application exists for teachers, in both K-12 and post-secondary settings. In addition, we draw upon the history of comics itself and the relationship between graphic literature and other popular media to demonstrate how the study of comics is itself a powerful lens through which to study history and sharpen skills for critical inquiry that hold utility across academic disciplines. The potential of graphic literature to be both a vehicle for teaching and learning academic content, as well as a topic that is itself worthy of deliberate study, is an essential theme explored by this paper with an emphasis on concrete examples which may be applied to educational practice.

*Keywords:* graphic novel, pedagogy, critical inquiry, history education, comic book history, History, Literature, ESL, Foreign Language Instruction, Math, Science

## **Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science**

Contemporary classrooms are busy places, with a premium placed on time and discernable objectives (Keller-Schneider, 2018). With a limited number of minutes per class and a limited number of classes per week, teachers must make use of every minute. Therefore, the instructional materials for use in classrooms are driven by a number of influences, both internal and external. In this article, we will discuss modern vehicles of curricular delivery across several academic subjects and argue that time and energy spent teaching and learning would be better served and longer lasting with the purposeful incorporation of graphic titles, namely graphic novels and comic literature (Bernadowski et al., 2013). The value of this addition would deepen and expand the literacy experiences of students, thus making learning more rewarding, effective, and long-lasting. We will propose several graphic titles across a range of academic subjects that may serve as a starting point for professional educators.

### **Modern Vehicles of Current Curricula**

Across a range of subjects and grades, textbooks and readers serve as the traditional workhorses. While there are several forms of peripheral materials that often accompany these, the textbook is an institutional inevitability (Barbre, 2018). One of the primary reasons for this comes in the form of an efficient use of space. Textbooks are structured to pack voluminous amounts of summary information into a relatively small space (Behnke, 2016). With textbooks, readers are provided with a canon of essential definitions and fundamental concepts considered essential and in alignment with educational standards (Apple and Christian-Smith, 2017). While this article does not seek to delegitimize textbooks, we will argue that an over-reliance on these forms do not provide the kind of experiential aesthetic that engages students and makes the

memory worthwhile. To the modern student and the ever-expanding presence of social media, visual experiences carry capital, hence an aesthetic experience.

### **Historical Context**

While different iterations of comics have been around since the mid-1800's, they have undergone substantial phases of evolution (Rhoades, 2008). Historically, readers became aware of comics through political cartoons in newspapers and through the comic strips published in newspapers, but this evolved quickly (Eisner, 2008). Sunday comics soon became a fixture with readers, both young and old, as they were designed for mass audience appeal and consumption. Stein, Meyer, and Edlich (2011) observe that “The early comic strips were more than the result of technological and social changes. They also constituted an aesthetic response to these changes and, in turn, also took an active part in the cultural transformations of the time” (p. 511). In the 1930s, when comic literature engaged in wider distribution, teachers viewed this medium opportunistically as a means to engage their students in the intrinsic cultural discourse these works generated or contributed to. Even students with little interest in formally study of the visual arts have found the comic medium to be a viable mode of expression and point of entry for historical exploration (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001). Engaging this medium in classroom settings represented a challenge to the establishment status quo and soon drew condemnation by scholars of the day. In the book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Frederick Wertham argued that comic literature was incompatible with the goals of education. Amongst others, concerns were expressed that the substitution of literature for this medium would dilute the academic rigor considered appropriate for the day, which included classical literature. Concern was also expressed that the use of this medium would bring about substantially lower cultural norms, and so present a deleterious influence on the youth reading them (Nyberg, 1994).

The different genres of comic books during this time used the graphic medium as a unique method of storytelling, beginning with the advent of the superhero comic, but genres of publication were varied and artists dove into forms of storytelling that challenged the norms of the day. Ultimately in 1954, the issue came before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (United States Congress, 1955). With readership in superhero comics beginning to wane, and the rise of crime, horror, and other genres, questions were raised as to the cultural and moral impact these titles would have on a younger generation of Americans. Wertham decried the medium as a contaminated manner of storytelling and argued that they would embed themselves and create new norms for a lower caliber, even arguing that it would lead to misbehavior through mass indoctrination. Several scholars and authors of the day took similar positions and their arguments set a tone of rejection for comic literature as a tool of education, and ultimately, this led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority with a list of provisions for what could and could not be included (Adkinson, 2008). This precedent exercised enormous influence over the content of comics for decades and was slow to lose this influence (Nyberg, 1994).

With the advent of the Comic Code Authority, various series, *Classics Illustrated* and *True Comics* are two examples, sought to fill this market share with adaptations of classic literature into comic book format. In this format, they adapted various works of classic literature into comic book format in an effort to bring this literary high culture to the masses (Jones, 2017). The intent of these titles was to influence popular culture and make the graphic medium more accessible to readers from a variety of backgrounds (Perret, 2004). This included works by Shakespeare alongside *Moby Dick*, *Davy Crocket*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and many more (Jones, 2017). While these graphic titles were and are a part of our cultural history, they still

exemplified a particularized cannon of literature and literacy. Graphic novels and comic literature are built to go beyond the confines of these cannons. While the political motivations of the 1950s and their outcomes carried a larger influence across education, the resilience of teachers and the creative nature of this medium did not stop (Buhle, 2007).

This questionable state of perception was and still is a reflection of the tensions that exist(ed) between teachers and the policies that influence the teaching profession, namely the leadership and opinions of laypersons. While the modern push towards ever-increasing accountability, educational standards, and continuous standardized testing mostly bemoan the professional judgment of teachers, most go into the profession for the purposes of building others up and imbuing them with excitement at the idea of learning and thinking critically.

### **Strong Potential for a Value-Added Reading Experience**

What then, is the potential contribution of a graphic novel or comic book in a given academic subject? Bucher and Manning (2004) argue that, “Graphic novels can contribute to interdisciplinary thematic units or can serve as an introduction to a specific content area. In social studies, they can help students develop an understanding of history and/or an appreciation of differing cultures. In the sciences, they can help adolescents explore complex and sometimes confusing topics. In addition, graphic novels offer subject matter and viewpoints that students might not otherwise consider” (p. 71). Given the initial and increasing complexity of numerous fields of study across a student’s academic career, a beginning context is essential in that it must be more than mandatory if it is to capture the student’s interest, and so the devotion of their attention. Interest is seldom captured by boiled-down facts and summaries. Students always have more questions, and an effective narrative, especially a visual one, has the potential to capture that (Bernadowski et al., 2013). Gallo and Weiner (2004) offer a better description of their

substance: “Graphic novels vary in type, but they may be viewed as long comic books, bound so they might be read like prose books. The books range in length from 48 to 224 pages, and there may be as many as 180 words on a page. Therefore, a 175- page graphic novel might contain approximately 31,500 words” (p. 115). These features, alongside complex forms of storytelling, elevate the potential for immediate interest and impact. Citing these and other strengths, Williams (2008) writes, “Teachers who skillfully use comics and graphic novels in their curriculum present numerous opportunities for students to deconstruct these texts on multiple levels. This layered deconstruction may include examining the story; the creator's intention, characters, and context; as well as the relationship between the design, words, and images. While words, images, layout, and story are all elements in these texts, none dominate the act of “reading.” Students are usually comfortable decoding (reading) the visual system of letters and words” (p. 13). Becoming intimately familiar with their academic subjects and the interests of their students, teachers utilize a pragmatic approach and choose a curriculum that engages and motivates learning. This is a feature of learning that does not always fit within a specific recipe, or is a reflection of the generation or two that comes before. This is also representative of the means by which sequential art engage the senses, provided the right framework of support exists. Gluibizzi (2007) goes further in asserting that “Graphic novels and comics push beyond the boundaries of illustrated books to the point where illustrations and text are equivalent, each driving the other, rather than the illustrations supporting or attempting to explain the text” (p. 28).

The adoption of graphic novels and comic literature has exploded in recent memory and one will regularly find school library shelves from elementary through postsecondary stocked with graphic novels (Finley, 2015). The impact of comic literature and graphic novels on

American culture can hardly be refuted (Buhle, 2007). The reader need only review a plethora of movies that have come from their various adaptations. The question that arises from the vantage point of education and teaching must be the potential contribution of these graphic novels toward the learning process of students. “The pedagogy behind graphic instruction is built on the framework of critical literacy. Further, it incorporates the standards and goals of more than one academic subject, namely through the addition of pedagogy in art instruction and inquiry. The academic subject incorporates a tiered framework of instructional resource and support. These tiers are: 1) art theory, aesthetic education and inquiry, 2) critical pedagogy through facilitation of analysis, writing, and reflection, and 3) creation of meaning through assessment” (Barbre & Tolbert, 2021, p. 44).

In the early and formative years of schooling, children’s picture books often account for a substantial presence in developing literacies. As time goes on and students edge toward the middle grades, this declines significantly in favor of the standardized textbook. Schumm et al. (1992) also asserted that older students’ experience with textbooks are shaped by both the resource itself and the instructional methods utilized by the teacher. One may argue that textbooks represent a more efficient means in the delivery of information, but that argument falls short when compared to the ways that modern readers experience literacy. “Graphic novels and comics in general require a different type of literacy from their readers, a literacy that can incorporate not only written words but also visuals, movement between panels, and different types of transitions. The possibilities for classroom use are limited only by our imaginations, and there is no shortage of excellent works from which to draw” (Letcher, 2008, p. 94). Whether for entertainment or information, readers enjoy graphic depictions of events and this is in keeping

with modern media with the likes of YouTube, meme art, and a variety of other visual presentations.

Concepts of literacy have also evolved over time and gone beyond the strict meaning-making associated with reading a text. In a landscape saturated with images, where most work to convey a message of one sort or another, the definition of literacy has been revisited. “Expanded definitions permit scholars and practitioners to refine and improve instruction, such that students learn to construct meaning from a variety of text types, including visual images” (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey, 2011/2012, p. 23). In the context of graphic novels and comic literature, the instructional value for various graphic titles then becomes *does it have merit?* Chute (2008) argues that a “comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn't drawn as by what is: it is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments” (p. 455). Of notable importance are the distinctions between the images represented and the inference required by the student in meaning-making. Bucher and Manning (2004) point out that “...graphic novels actually fuse text and art, which offers value, variety, and a new medium for literacy” (p. 68). Nesmith, Schwarz, Cooper, and Walker (2017) offered the results of a research study incorporating feedback from students and parents on the instructional value of graphic novels and concluded that they offer a valuable potential resource when utilized (Gorlewski and Schmidt, 2011; Hansen, 2012). While students are not meant to experience graphic novels as the ‘silver bullet’ for learning and engagement, graphic titles offer a powerful pedagogical tool as a part of an educator’s repertoire. “Because graphic novels require the reader to make meaning from the structures of sequential art, including visual, spatial, and linguistic cues, they are a form of multimodal text. The reader must use multiple cueing systems to construct the meaning by using the graphic elements, and

instruction cannot simply mimic instruction designed for traditional print texts, which require the reader to primarily focus on the printed word to construct the meaning of the text” (K. Meyer and Jiménez, 2017, p. 153).

Pagliaro (2014) goes further in his analysis of merit by drawing on numerous sources and in offering a set of five rules to establish this standard. Modern instructional choices are driven by a range of criteria and teachers regularly make use of rubrics in their evaluation of student work. While the criterion for each academic subject varies, Pagliaro’s rules are general in their nature: 1) Make sure the criterion to be assessed is significant, 2) Make sure the rubric’s evaluative criteria can be assessed while reading, 3) Employ as few evaluative criteria as possible, 4) Provide a succinct label for each evaluative criterion, and 5) Match the length of your rubric to your own tolerance for detail (p. 38). The development and use of these rules provides a valuable tool for teachers who desire to utilize this medium for a variety of valid instructional ends. Whether they utilize a body of educational standards, as in K-12 settings, or program objectives and outcomes at the postsecondary level, a structured approach in evaluation will provide the necessary ‘cover’, so that these instructional choices do not appear arbitrary or ill-conceived.

### **Applied Use of Graphic Novels**

In this section, we will discuss examples of several graphic novels with direct application to the classroom setting. While the mainstay of our focus is toward the use of graphic novels in history, social studies, and the use of analysis of popular culture, readers should be reminded that most graphic titles have numerous applications across a range of different academic subjects, and so should be regarded as such. This feature, coupled with the creativity and professional judgment of the teacher will reveal their own uses.

## **Social Studies and History**

Perhaps the area with the greatest focus on textbooks, social studies is highly canonized and concentrates mostly on the distillation of essential concepts and facts, rather than the chain of human events that brought them about. As a result, students are often left with the mandatory nature of remembering disembodied sets of facts. While there may be arguments against this position, we have found that history can be studied and understood as possessing strands and threads that connect to different bodies of information and experience; an essential component for historical understanding. It also has the potential to be presented in reductionist terms for the sake of space and convenience.

A recent multi-lingual study conducted in October 2020 by the American Historical Association (AHA) discovered that nearly 66% of the American adults it surveyed defined History as "names, dates, and other facts about what happened in the past" (Burkholder and Shaffer, 2021, p. 9). This sentiment, the study argues, reflects "a simplistic understanding of the past, one that is at odds with that of practicing historians" and points towards "an education system that often reinforces simplicity" (p. 13). In elementary and secondary schools, social studies and history courses rely on textbooks that are often highly canonized and concentrate mainly on distilling essential concepts and facts at the expense of approaches that foster "historical thinking" or "history-as-inquiry." Instead of leaving classrooms with a clear sense that History is a craft that relies on analysis, debate, and interpretation to construct meaningful, complex, and evolving narratives of the past, students are presented with the stultifying, disheartening, and mandatory nature of remembering disembodied sets of facts for some abstract purpose. Far from being discouraging, this data reflects a real opportunity for educators, professors, and scholars to rethink their approaches and incorporate new ways of thinking about

the past into their classrooms. Comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can play an essential role in these renewed pedagogical efforts.

Building off Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* insights, historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery suggest educators should target their efforts on fostering the essence of historical thinking by focusing on what they call the 5 c's: change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity (Wineburg, 2001). They argue that "these concepts offer a fluid tool for engaging historical thought at multiple levels" but caution that these concepts should not be considered a "checklist" but rather serve as habits of mind when approaching and contemplating the past (Andrews and Burke, 2007). In discussing the potential uses of comics, sequential art, and graphic novels in the classroom, it is helpful to employ these concepts to highlight the medium's probative value and explore what it presents to the ongoing process of learning. Far from fluff or popular culture ephemera, comics can serve as intense sites of historical contemplation and analysis that can have life-long meaning (Buhle, 2007).

First and foremost, given their long and extensive history in the United States, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels are fundamentally primary sources that offer valuable interpretive windows in a complicated past. This medium evolved out the late nineteenth century in an era of cheap mass printing, competition between a free press, and widespread literacy within an increasingly democratic educational system (Meyer, 2012). Comics became a hallmark of American popular culture in the early twentieth century with the rise of superhero comics, for example, Batman, Superman, and later, Spiderman, and numerous others (Wright, 2003). The medium became so ubiquitous that, in the 1950s, fears about their "corrupting influence," particularly the horror and sci-fi comics of E.C., spawned an intense backlash and era of self-censorship (Hajdu, 2009). Far from destroying the medium, these developments created

an alternative comic scene deeply connected to the counter-cultural impulses of the 1960s and 1970s as typified by the works of Robert Crumb, Trina Robbins, Spain Rodriguez, and numerous others (Wright, 2003). By the 1980s and 1990s, traditional comics boomed and busted as overproduction for collector markets created an unsustainable bubble, and competition from new forms of entertainment pulled public interest elsewhere (2003). Nearly a century after their widespread introduction in American newspapers, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels exist in a strange paradox; they are now considered a legitimate and dynamic form of art deserving in-depth study and critical appraisal, but they are no longer preeminent culturally outside of the superhero movies they fostered. This long history of comics can provide wonderful and compelling primary sources into different aspects of American history.

Speaking of E.C. in the context of primary sources, in 2014, publisher Fantagraphics released a collection entitled *Judgment Day and Other Stories* (Orlando, Feldstein, Oleck, Bradbury and Binder, 2014). It features a reprint from 1953's *Weird Fantasy* #18 by Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando entitled "Judgment Day." The comic tells a story of an astronaut who travels to a planet run by robots; he is there to decide whether to invite this planet to join the enlightened Galactic Republic. However, the astronaut quickly discovers that the robot society is deeply segregated based on the random color of their outer metal "shell"; he denies them membership but promises his robot guide hope: "For a while, on Earth," the astronaut explains, "it looked like there was no hope! But when humanity on earth learned to live together, real progress first began. The Universe was suddenly ours" (Orlando et al. p. 35). Later, back in space, the astronaut pulls off his helmet, and the reader sees the face of an African-American man. Published a year before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, "Judgment Day" controversially placed its predominantly young, white male audience into a position where they

identified with an African American protagonist during a period of intense racial tension and strife in the United States. In fact, this comic was the last classic era comics published by E.C. due to the backlash caused by Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, Congressional hearings, and the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (Wertham, 1954).

This comic, relatively quaint by modern standards, is a fascinating primary source that allows students to engage historical concepts quickly and deeply like change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity. It asks them to consider how American society, as an example, has evolved from the 1950s to the present, and it complicates the popular conception of the era as a "golden age" in American History. In fact, many comics from E.C. in the 1940s and 1950s, while certainly bloody, gory, and over the top, offer profound insight into the social, cultural, political, and gender expectations of this period of U.S. history that can serve as counterpoints to other period primary sources like the T.V. series *Ozzie & Harriet* (1952 - 1966).

Numerous comics, sequential art, and graphic novel primary sources abound and bolster any history or social studies classroom. *Journey into Mohawk Country*, illustrated by George O'Conner, turns the early seventeenth century journals of H.M. Van den Bogaert, a Dutch explorer that sojourned among the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, into a compelling comic exploration of cross-cultural encounter (O'Connor and Borgiaert, 2006). Alternatively, educators could employ the excellent graphic adaptations of the *United States Constitution* and *The Gettysburg Address* produced by Jonathan Hennessey and Aaron McConnell (Hennessey and McConnel, 2013). These works contextualize and interpret these foundational American primary sources and employ wonderfully detailed and gripping illustrations and examples without sacrificing engaging narratives. Finally, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, an autobiographical account of her early life and coming of age during the Iranian Revolution,

offers a compelling, complicating, and deeply personal account of a historical event that continues to shape American life but also receives little critical consideration in the classroom (Sartrapi, 2007).

Secondly, beyond their potential use and value as primary sources, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels offer students new ways of thinking about the 5 c's and highlight the constructed nature of historical accounts. Students often struggle to distinguish between “the past” and “history” as concepts and tend to conflate historical monographs as stand-ins for the past itself. These struggles usually arise from the uncritical use of textbooks and the degree to which textbooks “give” and students “receive” history. Textbooks, just like historical monographs, are interpretative accounts of the past and why it matters. These accounts are conceived, crafted, and edited by historians and publishers, and while they try, to the best of their ability, to cover the gamut of relevant experience, they, by necessity, cannot. Because of the nature of monographs, evidence of their construction is often hidden, subsumed, or swept into footnotes in service of the narrative. It's rare for students to glimpse the inner workings of history.

However, the nature of the comic medium often makes the implicit aspects of historical monographs or textbooks explicit through drawn imagery, dialogue, thought bubbles, and captions (Eisner, 2008; McCloud, 2006). In other words, comics can easily broadcast to readers the complex interplay between the past, the voices of past actors, and the voices of historians crafting past narratives. In a comic panel, the author and artist can show a conversation between two historical actors, and then with captions, offer critical context and commentary. At a glance, the reader can quickly parse the various voices at play in constructing this vignette. Likewise, comic panels, in terms of varying scale and size, can capture the beautiful ways historians in

their narratives jump across, distort, and expend time and space (Gaddis, 2002). It is not uncommon for historians to talk about significant global developments through quotidian examples and do so in a single written paragraph. Comics help make historical techniques demonstrable. They can help students demystify the skills, processes, and thinking and writing required by historical thinking.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, the first and only graphic novel so far to do so, offers students a great example of how comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can highlight, clarify, and leverage the interplay between the past, the present, and how historical narratives shape and mediate both (Spiegelman, 1996). *Maus* tells the story of Spiegelman's father, Vladek, who survived World War II, the Holocaust, the death of his first son, and later the suicide of his wife after emigrating to the United States. In peace, Vladek continued enacting the same behaviors and dispositions that allowed him to survive the violence and destruction of the 1930s and 1940s, hoarding, miserliness, suspicion, and paranoia. The reader witnesses and explores how Art's father and mother's trauma shaped him through the narrative. Despite never experiencing these horrors, Art bore the weight. *Maus* is an equally profound narrative that captures the fraught relationship between father and son in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Spiegelman employed the medium of comics, which in the late 1970s America were often considered adolescent or childish, and undoubtedly unbecoming for a serious topic like the Holocaust (Rothberg, 1994). By employing the language of this medium, cartoonish depictions of Jews, Germans, and Poles as mice, cats, and pigs, Spiegelman both literalizes and in the process of doing so renders the "racial categorization" and Nazi propaganda that underwrote the Holocaust as constructed, suspect, and absurd (De Angelis, 2005). Throughout *Maus*,

Spiegelman drives these “racial categorizations” to their absurd conclusions; characters start wearing pig masks to pass as Polish, Spiegelman struggles to draw his wife, Francois Mouly, a French artist, editor, designer, and colorist, as a mouse or a frog, and later, during a scene with his therapist, both Spiegelman, and the doctor wear mouse masks. *Beyond History*, in a world where racist ideas persist and resurge, particularly in memes and other visual media, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can help students develop the critical analytic tools to parse these fraught aspects of our discourse. Given *Maus*’s recent Tennessee school board ban and the resultant controversy in early 2022, conversations are increasingly vital.

Moreover, as much as *Maus* is a story about the Holocaust, it is about how Spiegelman conceptualizes, writes, and makes sense of the past. The reader witnesses Spiegelman perform the work of a historian; he does research, conducts interviews, and transforms his father’s story into a coherent, intensely historical detailed account. The reader also witnesses the attendant struggles of being a historian; the frustrations of problematic sources and imperfect memories, the various ways the personal shapes research goals and outcomes, and the responsibility of telling a story truthfully, honestly, and with respect. A poignant moment in *Maus* highlights and crystalizes the tension of being a historian – Art learns that his father burned his mother’s diaries after her suicide in the 1970s. It is a shattering moment both as a son and a historian. Art lost his mom, and then he lost her again with the destruction of the diaries. Forever, her story would be mediated through the voices of others. In a fit of rage, he called his father a “murderer.” Every historian, at some stage, thinks about what happens when stories are not preserved or remembered or overlooked, and given the ephemeral nature of the past, Spiegelman’s reactions feel apt. This moment and others like in *Maus* open great avenues for classroom discussion about

what it means to be a historian and take ownership of the past and the consequences of writing histories.

Beyond *Maus*, Derf Backderf's recently published, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, employs rigorous historical and archival research alongside exceptional artistry and storytelling to capture and humanize one of the most fraught, tragic, and horrific moments in modern United States history (Backderf, 2020). In Backderf's *Kent State*, the narrative builds towards an explosion of violence, one that draws the reader into the story of the participants and allows the reader, on a deeply personal level, to experience the tragedy anew. Much of what makes this narrative work is the imagery, deeply grounded in interviews (past and present), witness reports, and extrusive archival records, which captures and reframes long-familiar imagery in unique and unexpected ways. He takes a well-reported subject from the 60s, and helps the reader see how it shapes and shadows our own fraught moment in time; an essential quality of effective historical writing. Likewise, Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell's graphic novel trilogy, *March*, traces Lewis's early life in Alabama to his March from Selma to Montgomery and the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, 2019). All these comics or graphic novels, and many others not mentioned, use deeply personal stories that connect with the reader in ways that textbooks and historical monographs cannot, and, in doing so, help students experience, examine, and uncover the profound interrelationship between the past, past actors, and how historians craft their narratives.

Today, students are awash in a sea of film, television, video games, YouTube shows, national monuments, memes, myths, and legends that draw upon history and narratives of the past. Beyond primary and secondary sources and the various ways historians construct their past narratives, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels help educators confront the reality that

most historical learning occurs outside the academic classroom. As both an aspect of popular culture and a vehicle through which popular culture flows, comics provide students an accessible space to explore, develop, and scaffold the skills and critical insights to appraise the various media they consume daily. Past narratives, assumptions, or expectations often remain ghost-like within these popular culture artifacts and persist in ways that pass from generation to generation. For example, before hearing of Jim Crow or segregation or even becoming aware of the sordid history of race and racial violence in the United States history animated films like Disney's *Dumbo* or *Looney Tunes Cartoons* caricatured individuals and groups in ways that reinforced certain societal stereotypes. As such, educators can easily use comic books in the classroom to highlight the complex interplay between history, historical narratives, and their popular cultural articulations and, in doing so, provide students the know-how to contextualize and parse better the media they consume.

In 1998, Frank Miller, one of the most influential comic artists of the 20th century, published an Eisner Award-winning graphic novel entitled *300* (Miller and Varley, 1998). It is an over-the-top and historically suspect retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) during the Second Greco-Persian War. In his narrative, Miller traces King Leonidas and 300 Spartans as they make their way north to waylay and stall the momentum of a massive Persian army led by their Emperor Xerxes. The Spartans held a narrow pass for two days against overwhelming force until a deformed Spartan showed the Persian military an alternative route through the hills. On the third day, the Persians surrounded the Spartans. In the heroic climax of the graphic novel, King Leonidas rejects surrendering to Xerxes, and the Spartans die in a hail of Persian arrows. The graphic novel ends its narrative a year later, as the lone Spartan survivor of Thermopylae

recounts the brave sacrifice of the *300* to the arrayed Spartan army on the eve of the decisive Battle of Platea.

Years later, Miller's work became indelibly stamped on American culture in 2007 with Zach Snyder's intensely violent, stylized, and historically inaccurate film adaptation, *300* (Snyder, 2007). The film broke box office records, and critics excoriated it (Finke, 2007). It became a lightning rod. Between the publication of the graphic novel and the film's release, the United States experienced 9-11, the War in Afghanistan, and the second Iraq War (Hatem, 2003/2004; Freeman, 2006). In this context, US citizens and influential politicians during George W. Bush's administration engaged in a fraught debate about civil liberties, Islamophobia, and the very nature of how democracies wage war (Casselberry, n.d.). The graphic novel and film became fuel for renewed discussions over "the clash of civilizations" and the efficacy of multiculturalism, which persists in various forms in some segments of American society today (Bell, 2002). Meanwhile, *300*, film and comic, filtered into everyday aspects of American life. For example, Michigan State University used numerous lines of dialogue from the movie during Spartan football games, and by 2008, *300* became the grist for a surprisingly successful parody film called *Meet the Spartans*. The graphic novel and film remain popular and often get referenced inside and outside history classrooms across the United States. Despite being inaccurate, *300*, because of the visual mediums of comics and films, has incredible power in shaping how people think about the past and, just as importantly, imagine and conceptualize History.

Miller's *300* and the historical narrative it offers readers create spaces for educators to braid the various strands of historical thinking discussed earlier in this section together with prevalent cultural concerns. This comic helps students see History as more than an abstract

pursuit but something fundamental to their daily lives. *300* can anchor discussions about ancient Greece, often through the breach. This strange addition to the narrative highlights, for students, how the past is often used to assert a particular authority or ideology, particularly in contention periods of History, like the late 1990 and early 2000s, as LGBTQ rights were simultaneously under attack and making progress (Stout, 2004). Likewise, Miller and Snyder's presentation of the Persian Empire and its subjects can foster a stimulating discussion about how History can perpetuate the stereotyping of "others." In their work, Xerxes becomes an androgynous, lecherous, and hedonistic representation of a "decadent" East. The Persian military becomes a faceless, expendable, fantastical, and vastly inferior order compared to their Spartan counterparts. The graphic novel's applicability to discussions of the American "War on Terror" (2001 – 2021) and the role Muslim-Americans play in American society is self-evident. However, educators can further these discussions by connecting his work to more extensive conversations about "Orientalism" and how, historically, the "West," through art, literature, poetry, and novels, continue to stereotype and marginalize the peoples and cultures emanating from Asia, African and the Middle East (Said, 1979).

However, paired with newer graphic novels exploring ancient Greece, Miller's *300* can serve to highlight the complex and evolving nature of discourse, academic or otherwise, for students. *300*'s narrative ends with a retelling of the heroic sacrifice of the Spartans at Thermopylae. Meanwhile, *Democracy*, a graphic novel by Abraham Kawa and Alecos Papadatos, begins with an anxious Athenian soldier recounting to his fellow citizen-soldiers the origins of their democracy on the eve of the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE during the First Greco-Persian War (Papadatos, Kawa, and Di Donna, 2015). Kawa's and Papadatos' narrative offers a fascinating, albeit semi-fictionalized, discussion of the origins of the preeminent

democracy of the classical world and does in a way that invites an engaged classroom discussion about Spartan and Athenian societies and how we idealize them for good or ill. *Democracy* also helps contextualize Sparta's later actions at Thermopylae. The Spartans shamefully missed Marathon, and the Athenian victory saved the Greek world (Brouwers, n.d.). Moreover, Kieron Gillen, Ryan Kelly, and Jordie Bellaire's *Three* explore the social structures that undergirded Spartan military power by focusing on the helots, or slaves of Laconia and Messenia (Gillen, Kelley, & Bellair, 2014). The narrative explores the decline of Spartan might and authority after the pivotal Battle of Leuctra, which saw the first significant defeat of the entire Spartan army (Brouwers, n.d.). The graphic novel highlights the ugliness and brutality of Spartan society, which can juxtapose the heroics of Miller's *300* for students.

History, when presented as a visual narrative, offers the reader a chance to locate themselves in a unique space. While any reader will always try to reconcile the message with their own imagination and/or experience, a visual representation of historical experience comes closer than a simple reading of any textbook, especially as it relates to the necessity of asking questions.

## **Literature**

Narratives associated with literature focus on developing the meaning-making skills of readers and in developing an appreciation and understanding of the importance of nuance. They go much further in that what students read serves as an exercise in empathy, critical thinking, comprehension, evaluation, understanding story elements, developing understanding for a global community, and many others. Historically, schools have privileged certain texts over others, and this can and does create an unnecessary disconnect between the goals of teaching and the nature of worth created by students (Moeller, 2016).

The concept of literacy and its experiential factors have evolved with societal changes and, as a result, students must often reconcile their own preferences and experience with the subject matter offered by the school. While the goals of literature are multifaceted according to grade level, the Common Core Standards describe the culmination of an ability by the student to decode unfamiliar terms, understand and analyze multiple interpretations of a text or source, and comprehend literature (Common Core Standards, Literacy). Graphic novels and comic literature are a natural fit in this arena. Titles too numerous to mention are included in this area, but we will focus on three: *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1980) by Art Spiegelman, *The Odyssey* (2010) originally written by Homer and adapted by Gareth Hinds, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2018) originally written by Harper Lee and adapted by Fred Fordham.

*Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is familiar to many educators. The graphic narrative developed from a survivor's account of Nazi, Germany presents a completely unique resource for the classroom. While this graphic novel is deceptively simplistic in its illustration style, it abounds with meanings and themes that are multi-layered and complex. Utilizing this title as a resource, teachers have the ability to analyze themes pertaining to history, the ethics of representation, postmodernism, trauma, and generational transmission (Park, 2011). Additionally, *Maus* presents characters and societal roles reflective of the power relationships of the time in which the stories occurred. This depictive element helps to set the tone of the story and provides an understanding of value. Teachers can use this graphic novel across a range of different subjects and assignments, from the evaluative to the reflective and autobiographical. Through this title, a strength lies in the manner by which it may be treated from one academic subject to another.

Gareth Hind's adaptation of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* (2010), presents an opportunity for students to engage in the exercise of translation itself. As any classic work

adapted for modern education must be translated, the differences between the prose edition and the vocabulary of this particular graphic novel present interesting side-by-side analytical opportunities. Additionally, the illustrative style of this particular work is grounded in the world in which it occurred, yet brings a contemporary and familiar feeling in the appearances of numerous characters. By this, we refer to the manner of familiar facial expressions and, as trivial as this may seem, the nature of normalizing, a particular interpretive mindset that is anchored in the present and not in history. While this may seem lacking in crucial importance, these details, working together, incite the imagination of the modern reader towards one of semi-familiarity, leading to greater engagement. Whether it is *The Odyssey*, or any other work considered a classic, aesthetic familiarity represents a value-added component. The graphic component, while essential, is always an accompaniment to the prose. “If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of meaning making, we do not give up the benefits of word-based literacy instruction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 21).

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee, is a traditional fixture across literature courses in both secondary and postsecondary settings. The graphic adaptation of this book, by Fred Fordham, offers a unique manner of reading experience. With the same essential characters and settings, Fordham succeeds in depicting this story in an intelligent and accessible manner. Accessibility is a strength in graphic novels and what this literary work lacks in the omission of certain sections of prose, it retains through illustration. This invitation to analysis and interpretation, then, goes beyond the dialogue and immerses the reader in the aesthetic elements of the story. Richardson (2017) reinforces this by pointing out that, “Graphic novels are more than just stories with pictures; they have engaging illustrations that help readers infer the

emotions and motivations of characters as well as more fully understand the twists and turns within the plot” (p. 24).

In order for readers to better understand and appreciate literary forms, they must be challenging. With the addition of graphic representations, especially when they are well done, the reader better understands that narratives are not strictly linear experiences, but involve a circuitous path to the finality of the narrative. Students and readers who may be challenged by the modern structure of novels are easily turned off by the idea of investing the time and energy to understand a particular story, if they do not find it invigorating or inviting. Again, accessibility is key, and this particular adaptation succeeds by inviting readers in. Additionally, modern readers may not be predisposed toward stories set in the past. Modern students often experience a world and media forms that are more complex, and graphic novels have the means to lay bare the essential human factor of the story and make a particular story timeless. Additionally, as argued previously, modern students have grown up in a media-saturated environment. “Today's students have had a childhood filled with the rapid pace and visual stimulation of television and video games, and they therefore seek the same characteristics in their reading materials” (Downey, 2009, p. 183). As this *To Kill a Mockingbird* is considered a ‘classic’ by modern standards, a graphic format helps to demonstrate why this is the case. As argued by Carter (2007), “The dearth of essays on specific graphic novel titles in NCTE journals and elsewhere suggests that the transformative power of many graphic novels to help adolescents relate to adolescent issues is still relatively unexplored” (p. 50). The use of graphic novels in literature presents several advantages in that the pedagogical impact of study can be longer-lasting for the experience. Through its use in literature, it also presents the advantage of a complementary experience for students, especially across multiple courses and/or instructors.

While there are several notable titles in this arena of education, we will discuss four. *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi, *They Called Us Enemy* (2019), by George Takei, *Sapiens: A Graphic History Volume 1* (2020), by Yuval Noah Harrari, David Vandermeulen, and Daniel Casanave, and *American Born Chinese* (2006), by Gene Luan Yang. The strength of graphic titles lie in their depiction of events and the relationships they forged, namely that of marked social change during a specific period of history or context of human experience (Park, 2016). In *Persepolis*, Satrapi expounds on the conflict and events that marked a pivotal chapter in Iranian history. The focus on these events, their causal factors, and the immediate impacts they had on her own life are presented with illustrations which are not overly complex, but succeed in relating a complex story. The banality of life is woven into the story effectively, but Satrapi's story adds situations and elements that highlight issues such as personal freedom. Through this, the reader is able to make crucial inferences that are culturally and contextually situated. "By separating people's experiences in their daily lives from the political stage, this graphic novel negotiates readers' perception and understanding of culture and promotes intercultural competence by re-defining the constructs of Self and Other through a literary text, and the visualization creates impressions which are not so easily conveyed through verbal description" (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 107).

*They Called Us Enemy* recounts personal experiences during the Japanese internment of World War II. In this work, the reader is shown how shifting political beliefs can have an immediate and profound effect on people's lives. Through this narrative, the reader has an external perspective to the events of this period and the concepts of values, family, forgiveness, and patriotism are made clear. Readers unfamiliar with this period of history are shown and able to infer the necessity of empathy in human relations and the essence of resilience. One may

readily argue that empathy and resilience are universal traits, but must remember that they occur within a cultural context. Going so far as the ways in which soldiers are depicted in this work shows the power of the Other (Derrida, 1992), in taking away or diminishing one's humanity. What is the advantage in this? We would argue that these kinds of experiences are among the most deeply rooted, and so create the deepest set of meanings.

*Sapiens* is a graphic work offering a meta-perspective on human experience. Through these pages, the reader is shown overarching, but overlapping truths in human history. The advantage of this title lies in the similarity of experience it continuously demonstrates. It shows, alongside the distinctive forms of experience. A strength in this work lies in repeated examples and illustrations of experience that shape the collective perspective of individuals and populations. Through this, readers are able to construct crucial inferences about the evolution of social groups and life in general. The strength of graphic similarities along so many lines helps to draw on what may be termed common experiences. In this, readers learning language also develop cultural understandings, both contextually bound and not.

*American Born Chinese* is a story that presents the experiences of being the minority in an unfamiliar setting. Deftly exploring stereotypes, identity, and prejudice, Yang creates a space where children and young adults have the opportunity to explore themselves and their own identities. In circumstances where there are no familiar faces and a lack of others to readily connect with, the examples of identity development and confirmation become essential story themes. The experience of prejudice is one that often presents a profoundly influential force, and the ability of a younger reader to relate to this provides a sense of legitimacy for who they are and what they have to contribute. Reviewing the themes of identity, prejudice, conflict, change

and the effects they have on younger people is essential, especially if they are unfamiliar with cultural contexts and the unwritten rules that often accompany cross-cultural relationships.

In utilizing graphic novels to achieve instructional ends in these areas of study, the teacher or instructor has the option of focusing the study such materials in as broad a manner as they see fit, thus challenging students with learning and applicability. A strength in this approach lies in the commonality of experience shared by students with respect to their visual environment and the transferability of this experience to The constructs of language.

### **Science and Mathematics**

*Logicomix* (2008) written by Apostolos Doxiadis and Christos Papadimitriou represents a semi-autobiographical account of Bertrand Russell. Among the many strengths of this work are an in-depth examination of his work and collaborations across mathematics that redefined the field. In this, the reader is introduced to the beginnings of important questions and observations that take them in numerous directions. Additionally, notable figures in the fields of mathematics and logic serve to offer a path to further study. The intertwining of history, logic, and mathematics set during several periods of history also provides a sense of continuity for a much larger narrative and of larger fields with their overlapping contributions to the present day. While some of these historical figures are only briefly mentioned, their contributions are effectively embedded across a narrative for younger readers.

As numerous subjects of both math and science are irrevocably tied to particular grade levels, and even particular schools, a graphic work such as this provides the important feature of beginning accessibility for young readers. The appropriate evaluation of certain graphic novels and their uses in subjects like science always falls to the professional judgment of the teacher for relevance and applicability, but the development of criteria helps. Whether these are program or

grade level outcomes or educational standards, matters little. Nesmith, Cooper, and Schwarz (2011) remind us of the instructional and curricular attention given to this arena of schooling. “Schiro (1997) constructed an evaluation instrument for the evaluation of mathematics-focused literature, and this instrument was later revised by Hunsader (2004). While Schiro’s instrument consisted of 11 mathematics criteria and 11 literary criteria, Hunsader’s adaptations reduced this to 6 mathematics criteria and 6 literary criteria. Hunsader’s mathematics-evaluation criteria include (1) content accuracy; (2) content visibility; (3) developmental appropriateness of content for the book’s stated audience; (4) facilitation of the reader’s involvement in, use of, and transfer of the content; (5) complement between the story and the mathematics in the story; and (6) resources required for the reader to obtain the maximum benefits of the literature. Specific literary criteria within the Hunsader instrument include (1) plot/character development, (2) vivid and interesting writing style, (3) relevancy and appeal of illustrations, (4) developmental appropriateness of readability and interest level for the book’s stated audience, (5) complement between the book’s plot, style, and illustrations, and (6) presentation of positive ethical and cultural values” (p. 3).

### **Conclusion**

As experience and research aptly demonstrate, there is a valuable contribution to be made toward learning and curiosity through the use of graphic materials. While uses across different subjects vary to different degrees, the professional discretion of teachers has always utilized a pragmatic approach, based on the subject and content of the title, but also their own teaching style. In spite of history of being subjected to the academic hegemony of the day, these materials continue to show their worth in curiosity and enthusiasm across a wide spectrum of readers. While schools focus on different bodies of educational standards, it should not be forgotten that

much of what students learn and fondly remember is rooted in a particular aesthetic experience and the imaginative connection they have with it.

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