

Instances of Narrative Techniques in the Graphic Novel *Sensitive Creatures*

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ABSTRACT

The graphic novel represents a relevantly new format of comics on which very limited scientific literary research has been conducted. This research paper intends to promote the analytical approach to graphic novels as a source of visual and literal literacy which is demanded on the readers' side to fully understand graphic novels. This might be challenging for many readers, but it can be achieved for experienced learners when literary graphic novels are incorporated in classrooms which can ultimately upskill students and enhance their performance. Hence, this article analyses instances of narrative techniques that Mandy Ord has integrated in her graphic novel titled *Sensitive Creatures* and how the recognition of such techniques enhance reader's comprehension drastically. The narrative techniques discussed here are visual as well as written techniques and seemingly opposing messages which are intentionally used to offer dramatic, comic or critical effects. Upon the analysis of such features, it is concluded that *Sensitive Creatures* is a piece of literary work with unity wherein all elements are incorporated purposefully which is worthy of close analysis in classrooms as a significant instance of graphic novels.

1. Introduction

The choice of graphic novel is due to the fact that, "graphic novels are researchable and can be analyzed and evaluated just like any other source of information... because these titles deal with real-life events, and provide potentially valuable information, issues related to their authority, bias, methods of presentation, and intended purpose and audience present special challenges for students and educators" (Hoover, 2012). Hence to play a role in removing such obstacles for students and educators, this research paper analyses an Australian graphic novel titled *Sensitive Creatures* written by Mandy Ord which focuses on two main issues. First, there will be a close study of the visual aspects of graphic novels and the relevant techniques to present visual as well as written narratives. For this section, four techniques have been considered: handwriting technique, panel borders, speech as well as narrative captions and silence. Second, an analysis will be conducted on those written and visual narratives which present seemingly opposing messages which result in intended dramatic, comic and critical effects. These elements are highly significant when studying graphic novels since they demand a "visual literacy [which] focuses around the ability to create, read, and/or understand visual messages" (Burmark, 2002). Therefore, "graphic novels require both visual literacy and critical literacy, as readers to take an active role in reading by questioning the author's motives and analyzing particular viewpoints" (Carter, 2007). "As a result, graphic novels can [themselves] be tools to sharpen visual literacy skills" (Jewitt et al., 2001). This literacy cannot be achieved unless the reader takes an active role in understanding the graphic novel through a "two-way process involving a reader and a text" (Rosenblatt, 1982). Hence, the reader should go beyond the mere drawn images as "what you see is seldom what you get if all you are seeing is just ink and paper. In the end, what you get is what you give" (McCloud, 1993).

Before beginning this analytical approach, it is noteworthy to give a description of graphic novel, since comic books and graphic novels are sometimes mistaken for one another. Tabacknick explains that, "The graphic novel is an extended comic book, written by adults for adults, which treats important content in a serious artistic way and makes use of high quality paper and production techniques" (Tabacknick, 2010). In other words, it is a "book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of the comic art, a collection of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line (or arc), or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative" (Carter, 2007). To extend this description, Martin's opinion can be added here. He states that "graphic novels have developed innovative, thought-provoking, and entertaining new relationships between texts and images that have made them

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especially attractive to readers who are increasingly oriented to images”. In graphic novels, “sequential art also expresses time and can control tempo through repetition or the relationship of large and small images” (Martin, 2011).

1.1. Instances of Visual and Written Narrative Techniques in *Sensitive Creatures*

The first visual and written technique incorporated by Mandy Ord is the significant use of handwriting which is integrated to introduce the “voice” of narrator. In traditional novels, the voice of narrator can be captured through words, lines and even paragraphs. As every person has his or her own handwriting, every narrator also has his or her own way of telling a story in graphic novels. Therefore, in graphic novels the handwriting is important in written narrative, since it is not a “metal type” font used in “printed text”, instead it is “consistent and flexible” (Drucker, 2008). In this novel, handwriting or in other words font, is consistent throughout the novel and is intact which suggests that the point of view remains to be Mandy Ord’s. This is shown in Figure 1 which is a collection of texts/ handwritings chosen randomly from different stories of the novel. Furthermore, in graphic novels there are limitations imposed on the number of words being used to describe feelings. Instead, the reader must look for written styles, gestures and body language to perceive feelings. To reflect this, the writer exhibits feelings by creating a link between alterations in font sizes or styles and words so that the reader can effortlessly imagine the tone and pitch of the characters as he/ she is reading the words while being attentive to such alterations. This claim becomes clear in Figure 2 which illustrates two intentional font sizes. In the left image, the reader perceives that the uttered line is in a low unconfident voice because the text size is intentionally small compared to the right image which is delivered in a loud tone since it is written in a bigger font size.



Fig 1. The use of consistent handwriting to emphasize a solo point of view



Fig 2. The use of two intentional font sizes to convey different narrative messages

The second visual technique is in reference to the panel borders; a technique which Ord has also used to present both the visual narrative as well as the written one. “Frame relations are the basic structure of articulation, the format that constitutes the foundation of meaning production in the graphic mode”. In this regards, there are “panel-by-panel sequence simply to advance the narrative. We have a series of conversational exchanges between characters, or [we] watch an action and hear a character’s inner voice, and through a fairly efficient disposition of graphic means, the story appears to be told” (Drucker,

2008). To fully understand graphic novels, the reader must understand that in panels and frames “the text requires traditional decoding skills, while the images require the reader to interpret facial and body language as well as the use of white space and shading, and be oriented to the flow of panels as they carry the narrative forward. In addition, one must work within both literacies at the same time, approaching the text with facility to apprehend word and image synchronically.” This requires an active imagination since “the panel images are static” (Goldsmith, 2010). An outstanding use of panel borders is used in the story of “Giants” where borderless images illustrate her dream while those in borders are her discussions with Johd in her dream. Figure 3 evidently shows this distinction. This instance is quite interesting since no words have been used to suggest this distinction, it is just the mere use or omission of borders. Regarding the written aspect of panel borders, it can be argued that this technique has replaced transitional words used in traditional books; by offering 6 replacing varieties as stated by McCloud. To clarify this point, two instances have been taken from the novel as in figure 4. The left set of frames show an Action-to-action movement which is a term used to signify “transitions [to] show a single subject progressing through a specific movement”. Another method is illustrated in the right frames to emphasize Scene-to-scene transitions that “take place across significant distances within time and space” (<https://understandingcomics177>).



Fig 3. The use of panel border to create conceptual distinctions



Fig 4. The use of panel borders to emphasize written narrative

The third visual technique is regarding speech balloons and narrative captions, “which are the shapes that encompass the texts [that] are added to the images” (Baetens, 2008). In regard to the visual narrative aspect of this technique, it would be worthy to focus on the images portrayed on plain black

pages which are put between stories. The whole story of these black pages revolves around Mandy's search for ideas. A close analysis of these pages illustrates that the speech bubbles are not completely located inside the picture frames and instead they bleed. This implies that she needs to "think outside the box" in order to find an idea to write on. This concept is clearly shown in figure 5. As for the written narrative presentation of this technique, speech balloons and narrative captions assist the advancement of narrative. Figure 6 illustrates a part of the story called "The Future is certain". Two methods have been incorporated in the written narration; one is the use of caption and the other is in speech balloon. The former informs the reader of the story Mandy is thinking about- a background information- and her inner thoughts while she is in the shop. The latter is what she hears while she is working. Therefore, with the use of these features, Ord is putting together two stories that are happening simultaneously; at the same time and at the same place.



Fig 5. Speech balloons as a presentation of visual narrative



Fig 6. Speech balloons and narrative captions as a presentation of written narrative

The last visual method to analyse here is silence. "Silence occurs, mostly, when the narrator promotes the showing over the telling (within the frame) and when...creating a sequence, the reader/observer is devoid of information (either visual or textual)... the reader/observer has the opportunity to experience various modes of reasoning that may be applied to support or justify conclusions... [hence he/she is] intensely involved in the process of constructing meaning" (Adler, 2011). In this regards, Figure 7 portrays an instance of silence taken from the story "The Right Ticket", where a set of frames are put together with no accompanying texts. This intentional use of silence emphasizes the end of Mandy's busy exhausting day by portraying all the steps she took to finally get on the train. This visual illustration offers a better understanding of all the details and as a result evokes a sense of sympathy in the reader to better understand what Mandy went through. This sympathy is ultimately followed by a relief when Mandy gets a quality time on the train reading the comic book she bought earlier that day.

1.2. The Use of Opposing Messages as a Way to Create Dramatic, Comic and Critical Effects in Sensitive Creatures

The second issue to focus on is the fact that there are a few references throughout the novel where the written and visual narratives present initial opposing messages which create dramatic, comic and critical effects, since "the basic challenge for any narrative form is to work out a relation between the literal presentation of and the production of a story through a



fig 7. An instance of purposeful silence

process of enunciation. We know that a lot of slippage occurs between the telling and the told” (Drucker, 2008). For this matter, three instances have been taken into consideration. First, the written narrative in figure 8 shows that Mandy is angry about and offended by what the scammers have caused her, but the picture frame that is hung on the wall shows a happy face. This image is the only portrait besides Mandy in this frame which might initially result in a confusion, since at this moment the reader feels sorry for what Mandy is experiencing after hearing her story and reading her facial expressions. But a close analysis of this frame implies that the smile suggests how we all learn and gain experience, so a smile and its consequent happiness always follow such experiences. This opposition creates a dramatic feeling. The second instance is shown in, Figure 9 which portrays Mandy as she is petting the dog while stating that she is not embarrassed of walking him. But, the look on Mutty- his half open mouth, his hand positions which implies an attempt to move backwards and its googly eyes; all suggest his shocked feeling and implies that this might be the very first time that Mandy is petting him. This creates a comic effect in the reader when he/ she realizes how Mandy really feels and how she tries to conceal her feelings in contrast to what she is showing. Before this, there are no images of Mandy and the dogs but after this frame there are images that show Mandy while petting dogs. The last example to be discussed here is illustrated in Figure 10. The text suggests that the poor people have trouble using the machine that counts small changes, so they ought to seek help; but in the picture there is a sign of “closed” stuck on the machine’s screen. This emphasizes a criticism on social hierarchy and economy since the officials are in fact hidden “behind a screen” which suggests a “wall” that separates them, and as a result has made them inaccessible. This can also create a dramatic feeling in the reader, and it can get intensified because he/ she does not expect the lady to help the poor man, but surprisingly the lady approaches the poor man and helps him. Mandy Ord’s addition of this second frame can also mean that she intended to create an underlying criticism rather than an explicit one. If she had finished the story with the picture having the “closed” sign, readers would have criticized her; but in this way only the literary experienced reader becomes aware of her criticism.

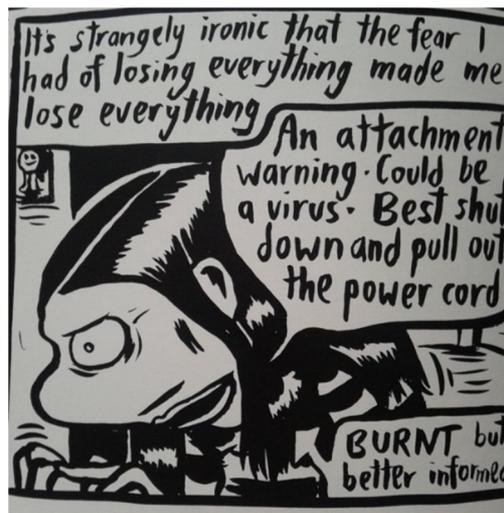


Fig 8. The opposing messages of written narrative and visual narrative creating a dramatic effect



Fig 9. The opposing messages of written narrative and visual narrative creating a comic effect



Fig 10. The opposing messages of written narrative and visual narrative creating a critical effect

2. Results Discussion

Not much has been written on graphic novels and no analysis of *Sensitive Creatures* have been recorded. But this research paper intended to encourage fellow scholars to consider notable graphic novels as valuable classroom resources for literature students which improves their visual literacy. From this article, it becomes evident that if a graphic novel has unity, all details must be put together to lead to a profound understanding even when no text accompanies a frame. Such details generally add to visual and written narratives or might serve to evoke various feelings in the reader.

3. Conclusion

On one hand, visual techniques greatly affect the reader's understanding of the story. On the other hand, the reader should be literate to understand the visual narrative as well as the written one. Handwritings, panel borders, speech bubbles and captions are used by the writer in intentional thoughtful ways to create meaning and evoke certain feelings. Furthermore, the subtle use of images creates intentional opposing meanings in order to arouse various reactions and feelings in the reader. This is quite impressive since they create a unity where all images are drawn with a purpose throughout the plot. Mandy Ord has written a unique and precious work of art as a graphic novelist, which teaches us how to read differently. In general, "the characteristics of graphic novels invite students to develop key critical thinking and information literacy skills and to challenge their pre-existing notions of the value of

non-traditional sources of information. Integrating graphic novels into classrooms and curriculum can not only be a means to address key skills and concepts but also an opportunity to introduce students to a medium that is almost always refreshing and enjoyable” (Hoover, 2012).

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5. Nomenclature

Bleed: A term used to define an image which goes beyond the borders of the page.

Caption: A box or section of text that gives details on the background and setting of the scene. It sits separately to speech and thought bubbles, often at the top or bottom of the panel.

Frame: A term used to refer to the border that surrounds and contains the panels.

Panel: It refers to the box or segment that contains the image and text.

Speech bubble: Speech bubbles contain the dialogue spoken by different characters within a scene.

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