

# A Graphical and Structural Exploration in Joseph Lambert's *Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller*

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## Abstract

The paper analyses the structural patterns requisite for sub-genre fiction like graphic fiction where its integral details provide a unique platform for blending the creative expression through pictures and words. The paraphernalia of graphic fiction like panel, frame, gutter, bleed, graphic weight, caption, speech bubble, thought bubble, layout etc., can produce a deep impact and give insightful experience to readers which have been created by the conventional verbatim novel forms. The enhancement of digital and modern technology has rendered such textual pictures to emerge by the juxtaposition of textual and visual narratives. The study wants to analyse whether the word picture narratives are compatible enough to replace and sustain the interest of the readers? This requires a clear examination of its ability in crossing over the boundaries of varied narrative structural forms. This genre thus invites the inherent challenges against the conventional and established format of narratives of novels. Since graphic narratives are transformed as picture texts to express the notions and ideas through actions of characters beyond one's lived experience, the impact is deliberated through a hybrid text, which renders all the special effects required to qualify the textual-visual narration of graphic fiction. The study observes the appropriateness of graphic novels to suit the modern reading attitude of the millennial. This study is done by examining the internal gears of graphic fiction by dissecting the structural panel of the novel Joseph Lambert's *Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller* selected for the study as a sample.

**Keywords:** graphic, panel, framework, gutter, bubble, Helen Keller

## Introduction to Graphic Novels

Graphic novels provide a quintessential platform and myriad ways to express ideas, it is a medium much like film and painting i.e they use a form of the format defined by images in sequences. They are mostly comic narratives that are similar to prose novels in form and dimension. The graphic novel is one of the most exciting forms of storytelling mechanism available today for all groups of readers, especially for children. The juxtaposition of art and text when done skillfully offers endless possibilities for creative expression and can produce narratives just as rich and complex as that of a traditional novel. It adheres closely to the prevailing culture often drawing on both modern sensibilities and traditional styles, combining and reshaping them to create something new. Graphic novels can be considered as the important conduit for better reading development and exploration of ideas as the experience gained from this medium can propel even the unwilling readers to hunt for more challenging texts. Graphic novels cover a range of genres from fiction to non-fiction, such as autobiographies, memoirs, true stories like *In the shadow of No Tower: 9/11* by Art Spiegelman in 2004 tells the

story of the terrorist attack on the twin tower in America and the traumatic experience of Americans during the attack. *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* by Samath Banerjee written in 2009 narrates the story of eighteenth-century Calcutta and its exploitation of the myth of a wandering Jew called *Maus*, and other novels are *Persepolis*, *Smile*, *March*, *Papercutz' Dinosaur* series just to mention a few. The age of visual literacy, in which society is becoming more and more steeped in visual media through the application of technological devices like mobile phones and tablets, reflects that reading behaviour has developed to take into account the powerful role of images in meaning and interpretation. The popularity of fusion or 'hybrid' text in series like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Tom Gates*, which mixes text and illustrations to form a unified narrative, which offers graphic novels, of course, a commercial platform.

According to Scott McCloud, graphic novels juxtapose the pictorial and other images in sequence, intended to convey information and the context to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer (understanding Comics 9). The pictures in the graphic novels are arranged in sequences in image portals and dialogues are

given in speech bubbles. The following stuff is integral to the graphic novels like panel, frame, gutter, bleed, graphic weight, caption, speech bubble, thought bubble, layout, close up etc., It encourages the readers to interact with the text as they anticipate or fill in the blanks between the image panels since graphic novels is a combination of book and screen, its impact on them makes them imagine the actions portrayed in the text. For a detailed study, Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller is selected.

Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's text *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* offers many examples that communicate a true story and while other models of stories are still drawing on the personal experiences of the author. Jan Baetens of University of Leuven and Hugo Frey of University of Chichester have pointed out that it is the ability of the graphic novel "to work on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history-from-below, and oral history, as well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning (and vice versa) that makes it so fascinating and important body of work" (13). This blending of fictional and non-fictional genres is one of the most fascinating characteristics of the graphic novels. As mentioned before, this draws on the history of the underground comics, where creators began producing deeply personal stories that blurred the line between fiction and autobiography.

The graphic novel has a particular ability to handle the blends of genres, using stylized art that, through exaggerated figures perhaps more accurately conveys the truth of how the author experienced a situation than a purely factual account of what would have happened. Though the graphic novel is still a relatively new form, it is heavily influenced by the history of its predecessors: mainstream and underground comics, particularly through the influence of underground comics. The graphic novel has developed an immense capacity for creative expression through experimental art styles and structures, as well as an emphasis on creating complex narratives that deal with larger ideas beyond the surface of the story. The relationship between the images gives forth the language, syntax and meaning of the story than by words themselves.

### Graphic Narrative in *Annie Sullivan and the Trials of Helen Keller*

Autobiographic forms of graphic novels provide a deep sense of intimacy. The autobiographical elements of many underground comics also had a significant impact, as seen through many other authors who continue to produce graphic novels that seem to exist between genres, blending fiction with personal narratives. The fluidity of the graphic novel is a large part of what makes it so fascinating to study, as creators are constantly utilizing new styles or subverting old ones in ways that reinvent them. In a short period, the graphic novel has already changed and grown to include an expansive body of work.

Graphic novels are a form that valued experimentation with narrative structure and with stylistic elements that shape the way how the readers construe the text. Due to the unique combination of art and text, graphic novels can be used to shape the reader's interaction with the story and will emphasize certain concepts or themes. The graphic layout refers to the arrangement of panels within a page. Panel refers to the individual frame or a single drawing in the multiple panel sequence of a comic shred. A panel consists of a single drawing that usually depicts a frozen moment. Frames are lines and borders that contain the panel. The lines separate each panels. They separate the different panels (frozen scenes). The gutter is the space that lies in between the framed panels. This space between panels is referred to as the gutter.

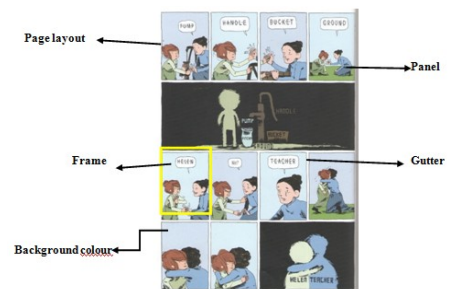


Fig. 1. Lambert, Joseph. *Annie Sullivan and the Trials of Helen Keller* (2012), Disney Hyperion, New York

Helen Keller, the very name is very inspiring and motivating to all especially among children as she remains a motivating factor, and the story of Helen Keller is being narrated possibly by all means of versions. Joseph

Lambert presents in this graphic comic the powerful bond that existed between the teacher Annie Sullivan and the pupil Helen Keller. Annie Sullivan who was herself visually impaired took all challenges in educating the blind and deaf Helen Keller and remind her as a catalyst in metamorphosing Keller into the world-famous personality by fiercely devoting her life to her pupil. Lambert has used the technicalities of graphic novels to make the story of *Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller* the most inspiring story filled with truly emotional engagements.

The story of Helen Keller is a popular one and that has been told several times in schools as a motivational course. Therefore narrating a popular story requires certain elemental features to make its texture look fresh and interesting. Lambert had this problem to resolve initially but he could mould the tale despite the fact there are many possible versions of the story, perhaps led him to fall into the trap of imitating. Yet what Joseph Lambert has created is not simply a classic illustrated retelling of Keller's autobiography but a book that lives and breathes as a graphic novel, using the medium to its full advantage. He found *Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller* should be given certain colours and designs for the setting in images to create a very specific tone that heavily influences and enrich the reader's experience of a story. At the same time, the colours and designs at the background should not over impose the flow of narrative in the minds of the readers as the most attractive feature of storytelling, but at the same time, they should play a very relevant role in controlling the way the reader approaches the text.

Joseph Lambert's *Annie Sullivan and The Trials of Helen Keller* deals with the early relationship between Helen Keller and, her teacher, Annie Sullivan. It is more real and has a capturing style with artistic features to impress the readers. The graphic novel format provides a unique perspective on Helen's world without sound and sight, which is portrayed as dark and shapeless. But when Helen learns more words from Annie, her world turns more colourful and she could define her emotions in words. Many of the panels include images of hands fingers to spell the words, which adds more dimensions to the text. The other aspect of this novel is the focus on Annie's life before she tutored Helen. Lambert made an

interesting episode often when he described the relationship between Helen and Annie, Helen was seen as the one who overcame many obstacles before achieving any success in her life. However, Annie's life too was equally challenging and filled with hurdles and difficulties, but she encountered those hurdles with great nerve.

The story of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller is an excellent piece of example to suit to be articulated as graphic novels under the nonfiction story category, particularly in its ability to communicate the element of subjectivity inherent in memory and the influence that it can have on accounts of the past. Lambert employed perfect organization of the texts and stylistic elements to engage with this concept of subjectivity.

The novel is part of a series of comics autography presented by the Center for Cartoon Studies and published by Disney for young adult readers. For Lambert, he had the task of creating visuals panels to show how Keller would have perceived the world as a blind and deaf woman. He had considerable skill and art to engage in this task as an artist to illustrate within the graphic framework to navigate with the narratives for young as well general readers. This novel is wildly successful, among young readers, both as a visual treat and as an inspiring biography, without touching upon the controversial issues he wanted to deliver her story as a source of inspiration. It is a known factor that the stories of Keller and Sullivan are greatly celebrated in a variety of media, like in books, on stages, and in films. It is a compelling story, depicting the narrative of the young and partially blind teacher who was finding a means to teach Helen Keller how to communicate and brought her out of the darkness. Lambert has explored Keller's story by including Sullivan's teacher from the Perkins Institution for the Blinds by exaggerating Keller's accomplishments to raise money for the school.

Lambert made every page a visual treat and preferred to evade any extra dosage of details. He neatly tied together with the narratives with requisite characters. The protagonist Keller was the element of agency as she learnt to communicate gradually and then was inclined to quench her unquenchable thirst to know about the natural world and the people around her. Sullivan's, the teacher had a reason for her fierce temper as she was driven by a

childhood experience living in a wicked and pitiable house with no education but had the fire within to prove herself. Her success was her pride and her temper which seemed to be her powerful tools for her victory in her life.

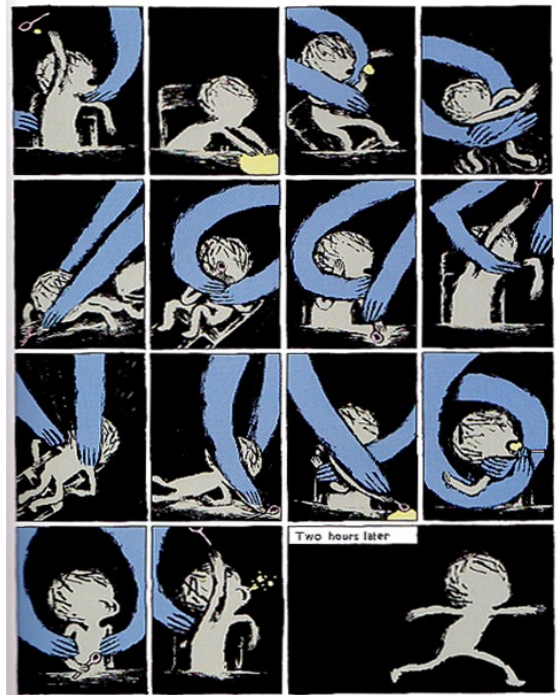
Lambert has employed a tight and close 4 x 4 grid on nearly every page. He requisitely collapsed a couple of panels on the same page as a point of emphasis and preferred even larger panels preferably to express when something is emotional and normatively powerful stroke has occurred, for instance when Helen was able to spell out the word "water" for the first time, Lambert made use of his panels very closely to seamlessly feature upon it without missing the point of reference here. In the case of engaging with tiny panels, he kept his figures very simple and used a thin and delicate line to make them appropriate to the panels to maintain his narrative sequence. He was drifting loosely towards a more cartoony style which permitted him to use all sorts of shortcuts like dark scribbles over the head of the characters to indicate their anger and a scribble line on a face for anger as to be done in proper cartooning.



**Fig. 2.** Lambert, Joseph. *Annie Sullivan and the Trials of Helen Keller* (2012), Disney Hyperion, New York

The above panel shows that Lambert relied greatly upon the body language and gestures to communicate emotion, for instance, the way Sullivan's back stoops when she was furious and the way her face screwed up when she cried for the first time at school is very illustrative. Lambert's other secret storytelling weapon was

his use of colour in the backgrounds of many panels was a deliberate choice that he made to attain clarity for his storytelling since he was particular in the selection of colours to fill out on those panels. The beauty of nature is a running visual in the book as Helen tried to imagine how does it look like, but Lambert's palette is incredibly reminiscent to the readers as they try to imagine how her home may look like. Of course, the readers are immediately confronted with Helen's point of view as soon as the story begins with darkness punctuated by Keller's blue, blurry conception of herself and her environment, interrupted by a pair of arms forcing her to use a spoon to eat (Lambert, Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Lambert, Joseph. *Annie Sullivan and the Trials of Helen Keller* (2012), Disney Hyperion, New York

The blurry figure flew away from this struggle, and then other characters in the book were introduced by Lambert using normal style. It is the most exciting way to begin a story and a clever method to introduce the readers to Keller and her disabilities. Lambert brought gradual changes in Keller's self-image by drawing our attention to her growing emphatic self-confidence. She associated the letters through hand signals and touching

the objects. She made her breakthrough and understood the word "water" after great struggle. Helen saw water as an object and a word on this page. Lambert opted for big panels whenever Keller's world opens up as she pats on everything in the hall and demands to know what things are called. It is a usage of language that is visual in her own mind's eye, even though she cannot see. There is a particular sequence in the novel where Helen and Annie are sitting under a tree, and Helen starts imagining animals like foxes, dogs, and pigs dancing about in the water and climbing up a tree. Her thirst to understand the environment allows her to imagine what is happening around it. The novel is driven by the most appropriate dialogues happening among the characters; Lambert packed each page with eye-popping backgrounds and subtle visual prompts. For instance, Helen's self-image has changed as time goes on, by acquiring a mouth and eyes. Lambert also used background details for showing 'laughs', for instances in the page where Sullivan winds up in the mud to answer to the question of Helen 'where do babies come from?'

Lambert is always possessed by the art of visual storytelling vocabulary, to the point that some of his comics were more flourishing than the actual story. In this case, all of his visual brilliance was used artistically to serve the story and proved crucial in telling a story. One could see how Lambert advocated the captivating art of graphic narrative complexity in some of his recent comics also, at the same time he embellishes his effort to take the mode to another level by doing this project scrupulously by engaging with critical researches on its technicalities to deliver this medium to breathe with new life.

### Findings

This paper has discussed specific elements of the graphic novel like page layout, panel design, physical structure, art style, colour, and background design within the panels to create tone in the story of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. These elements can also play an active role in shaping the narrative in the biography. This discussion also looked at how these elements can be used to control the reader's experience of a story in an innovative way. It also examined that this medium has a special ability to engage with different stories and the nature of auto/

biographies. The paper found the unique elements of the graphic novel could be used to shape the narrative to influence the reader's experience of the work. The writers of graphic novels thus take full advantage of this borderless format to tell their stories, utilizing page composition, art style, and even the physical design of the text to create meaning. This small selection of examples highlights the innovative storytelling that graphic novels are capable of, as well as the complex narratives they can create.

The use of subdued colours and space in the background of this story plays a crucial role in the pacing of the narrative as well as conveying the isolation of the characters as they try to improve their relationship. In graphic novels, the absence of an image can work just as powerfully as an eye-catching panel. The content and style of the novel provide excellent examples of the way that fictional graphic novels can utilize elements like colour and stylized backgrounds to create meaning in the text and add layers to their narrative. Colour is used much less symbolizing the way that characters relate to the world around them.

Novels speak to readers in a linear written narrative; picture books tell stories with texts accompanied by illustrations; the film does so with moving images and dialogue, and poetry can communicate on levels that no other storytelling can. The study found that graphic novels combine all these elements in their specific way. They are like prose as they are in a written printed format, but they are also like film in that they tell a story through dialogues, and through visual images that give the impression of movement. Reading all kinds of formats encourages readers to think critically about how stories work across different formats. Because of this ability to combine different styles and subvert more traditional forms of storytelling, this medium can continue to grow and reinvent itself. Thus the study has observed that graphic novels have the ability to engage with different genres and tell captivating stories in a visual art form to make it more compatible with the modern digital world of formats and thereby rearranging the attitudes of the hybrid readers to meet their prevalent challenges in art.

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