

Reading between the Panels: A Closer Look at the Components of Graphic Novels

S.MANOJ

*Assistant Professor of English, Agurchand Manmull Jain College (Shift II)
Meenambakkam, Chennai*

Abstract

Comic books in general have been misconstrued by a handful few solely as a combination of pictures and words for ages. Even with the introduction of Graphic Novels - still a comic book at heart - the scenario of calling the coming together of pictures and words a low form of art remains unchanged. To counter the aforesaid, this research paper has a closer look at Graphic Novels to see if they have anything for the readers other than the much discussed about pictures and words. This study is an exploration of the components of a graphic novel. It takes the help of comic strips and panels to break that general idea surrounding Graphic Novels as a medium of no consequence to a medium of substance.

Keywords: Panels, Gutter, Splash Page, Graphic Weight, Captions, Speech Balloons, Closure.

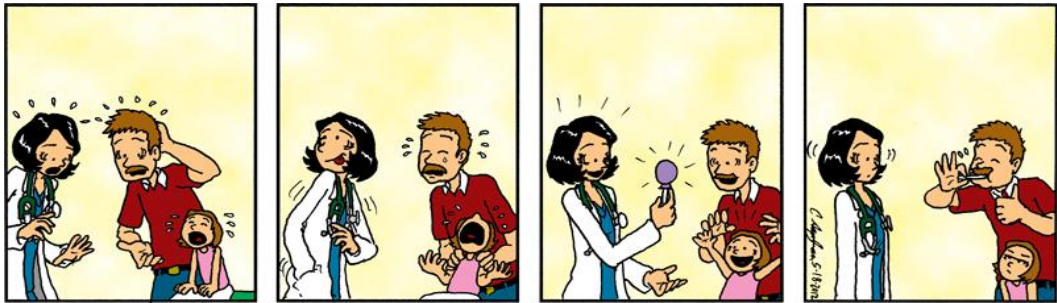
The expression 'Graphic Novel' had its origin in an article *Future of Comics* by Richard Kyle in 1964. The expression found its way to the cover with DC comics' *The Sinister House of Secret Lover*, a gothic romance comic released in the year 1971. Graphic Novel is an attempt to "bring the comic book out of the juvenile field" as Richard Kyle puts it. Graphic novel is a subgenre of comics. Comic books were considered to be exclusively for kids, they needed fresh blood to be considered as a category for adults. Then came Graphic Novels trying for a place in the literary spectrum. The most important aspect that a graphic novel strives hard is not to be childish and not to be that ordinary superhero saga trying to save the world from super villains. These Graphic Novels try all that a mainstream novel is, and tries everything possible not to fall under the tag of a comic book.

Graphic Novels are books that are novel in length and narration, illustrated in the form of a comic book. They are one of the reasons for the comic books to enjoy the popularity it enjoys today. It is very tough to differentiate Graphic Novels and Comic Books just by calling Comic Books as serialized and Graphic Novels as bound paperbacks. World-famous Graphic Novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* appeared as serialized versions originally. The aforementioned can be considered as works which helped

define the form of Graphic Novels. The following passages will be about the components of Graphic Novels.

Pictures

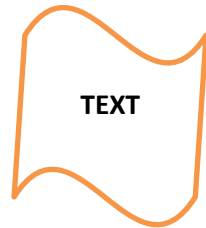
Pictures are the heart and soul of Graphic Novels. It is not without reason many say 'pictures tell stories', and in the case of Graphic Novels pictures do most of the work. The panel given below is a classic example of how pictures do the maximum narration, and the text, if used, just compliments the narrative process. The panel starts off with a father who takes his daughter to a doctor. The doctor and father have no idea about how they are going to stop her wails. The second frame captures the doctor having her right hand in her overcoat pocket with a tongue in cheek expression, with the girl's father observing the doctor keenly, while the girl continues to wail. In the third frame the doctor offers a lollipop and the little girl is overjoyed at the sight of it. The father's eyes lie fixed at the lollipop in the third frame. In the final frame to the amusement of both the girl and the doctor, the father takes the lollipop in his mouth getting lost in the taste of the lollipop. The doctor and the girl look stunned. The panel without the usage of speech balloons or descriptions does what it intends to do which stresses on the fact that 'A picture is worth a thousand words' indeed.



Text

The text in graphic novel adds to the narration, describes the setting, heightens and lightens the course of events according to the need. The panel given below from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* has two frames, one that of a group of people holding a protest. With no description the reader would have no idea of the reason or the aim of the protest. The reader comes to know it is "THE ISLAMIC

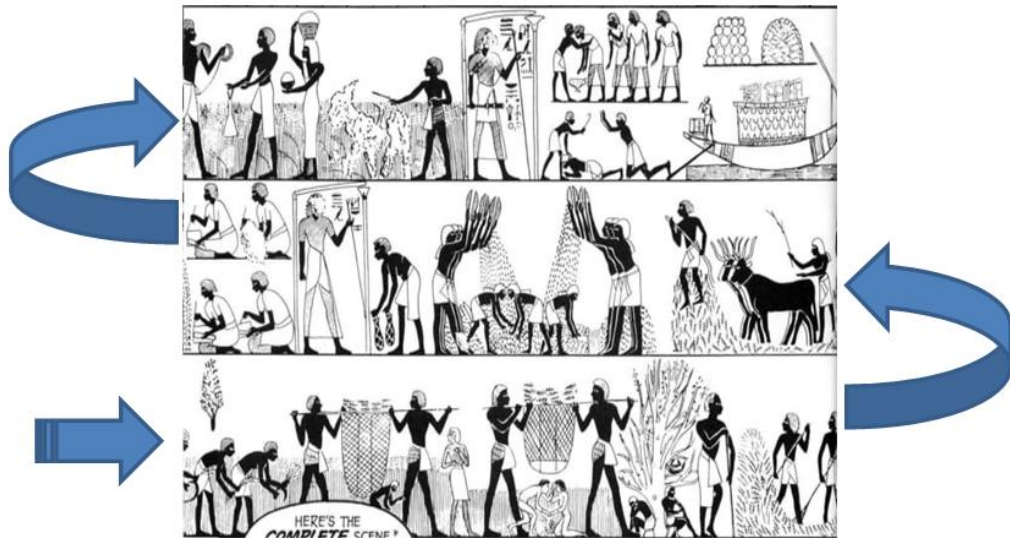
REVOLUTION" which took place in 1979 as it is mentioned in the description box. In the next frame a woman hands over what looks like more of a hood, one comes to this conclusion as the woman asks the little girls to wear that. One gets to know that it is veil only through the description in the frame. This explains that the usage of text avoids confusion and provides clarity over things that are shown in the picture.



Panels

Graphic Novels employ panels (frames) to narrate stories; every page has a layout in which panels are arranged in different numbers, patterns, and sizes. The panels in the layout are freeze frames that aid the narrative process. Panels are read from left to right going from top to bottom. There are few exceptions, and the panel given

below is one such exception. This one has been painted over thirty-two centuries ago for the tomb of 'Menna', the Egyptian scribe himself. The panel below has to be read from the bottom left traveling to the right and to the panel above from its right, and finally to the topmost panel from left to right; the reading pattern takes a zigzag route.



Gutter

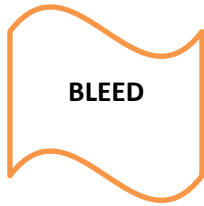
Gutter is the space between panels which marks the shift of time, place, and action. The panel given below is from *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore. The action in the first panel takes place in a broadcasting office named as “the voice of fate broadcasting”. The second panel is a shift

from the office of broadcasting to the “shadow office” where the titular character ‘V’ resides. The changes in time, place and action is taken care of by the gutter. Gutter minimalizes wastage of time and is an integral part of graphic narratives.



Bleed

Bleed is a frame which extends beyond the edge of the page. The fully spread frame which is given below is from *Alice in Sunderland* by Brian Talbot and it goes right to the edges of the page.



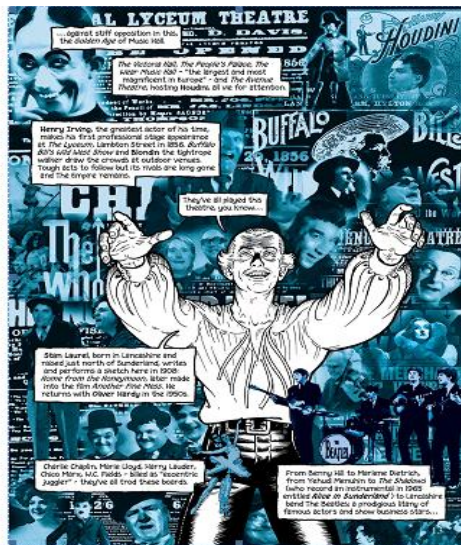
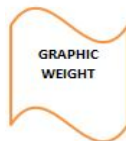
well, there's this guy, right...



Graphic weight

Graphic weight is the aspect wherein some images in the panel draw the reader more. The single panel page given below *Alice in Sunderland* by Brian Talbot has N number of images to it, but the man in the middle, in loose

top, bald, arms extended, with a wide grin stands out of all the other images in the panel. This standout feature, this weight has been given by the illustrator by careful choice of colors and placement of the character which has to appear unique from its counterparts.



Captions

Captions show transition of time and space. In the frame below - from *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini- there is a jump of space and time that is announced to the

readers through captions. The scene shifts from San Francisco to Kabul and goes back to the lead character's younger days -about 30 years earlier- in a matter of frames.



Special-effect lettering

Special-effect lettering adds flavor to the panel to make it more endearing. There is unrest among the siblings in the panel given below; they are fighting it out for the blanket, one falls on the floor which is marked by the

sound 'CLUNK'. That is followed with the father coming up the stairs which is denoted by 'THUMP THUMP THUMP'. When a reader reads out these onomatopoeias, they pause to see if the words correspond to the action that takes place in the panel.



Speech Balloons

Speech balloons vary in shape and size. The shape of the speech balloon varies according to the emotions expressed. Balloons have a tail which points to its speaker.

External Dialogue

The speech balloons given in the panel below is from Raina Telgemeier's *Smile*. There are two types of speech balloons in it, and the two are external dialogues. One is a plain dialogue uttered by one of the characters which is shown as a spherical balloon. The other balloon which is spiky in its appearance has a character teasing the other. Animated responses, emotions and special-effect lettering are recorded as part of spiky balloons.



Internal Dialogue

It reflects thought, intention and other things that run in the mind of the character. The below panel from Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* exposes the mind of the character.



Motion lines

Motion lines are often used by illustrators to denote movement. It adds to the viewing pleasure, participation, and also adds more realism to the panel.



Motion lines as seen in the panel above from *Pride of Baghdad* (2006) written by Brian K. Vaughan. The motion line of the aircrafts can be seen. It pictures the forward motion of the aircraft, the way it tears through air and it also helps denote the speed that it takes.



The motion lines given above are from the panel of *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. The motion line of the hand of the man who throws the ball is drawn, the line where the ball is released and the path which the ball takes is marked as dotted line.

Splash Page

Splash page is a fully illustrated page that is used at the start of a graphic novel to introduce the story to its readers. The splash page given below is from Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina*. It is the first ever graphic novel to be long listed for The Man Booker Prize 2018. This page sets the tone for the graphic novel which is about the kidnapping and eventual murder of a 27-year-old young woman named Sabrina Gallo. The person in the splash page is none other than Sabrina Gallo herself who switches to a defensive mode when the murderer tries to launch an assault. She is pushed to the lawn and tries to defend.



Colors

Colors play an important role in setting the mood. Right from the mourning black, passionate red, vibrant yellow, every color has been given meaning. Graphic Novels use color wisely as comic books by employing four major colors yellow, cyan (blue), magenta (red) and black. This is commercially profitable to the publishers and pocket friendly to the readers.

Closure

Closure is the act of leaving things to the readers' imagination. It can be anything from, not showing a murder, love-making, drug-usage and many which may be inappropriate for a segment of audience. It employs the technique of 'part representing the whole'. In the panel below from *Shortcomings* by Adrian Tomine, the central character taps the door and enters the room as he finds it open. The audiences are merely shown a couples' leg in bed with only a sheet covering them above their ankle, it is more than enough for the readers to assume what would have happened in bed. It is completely left to the imagination of the readers. Closure provides censorship too, to make the graphic novels cater to all types of audiences.

Conclusion

In this fast paced world, reading books are given a miss owing to time constraints, that's where graphic novels come in as a blessing. They are less time consuming than conventional novels; cutting down page-long descriptions to make it more engaging and an interactive prospect too. It is also visually and linguistically inviting to the readers. Graphic Novels fill the gap which a novel has. It presents the action in the panels, while one has to read the text in conventional novels to visualize the action. Timeless literary classics such as *Jane Eyre*, *The Stranger*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and many have

their illustrated versions. Graphic Novelists Will Eisner, Alan Moore, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Gene leun Yang, Daniel Clowes, Marjane Satrapi and many other have taken the genre to new heights. It will continue to scale new heights as it is the one which is bestowed with the quality of engaging the readers; and with the amount of detailing it has got it is surely a complex form to decipher.

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