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CHRIS WARE'S *JIMMY CORRIGAN*: HONING THE HYBRIDITY OF THE  
GRAPHIC NOVEL

by

DALLAS J. DYCUS, JR.

Under the Direction of Michael Galchinsky

ABSTRACT

The genre of comics has had a tumultuous career throughout the twentieth century: it has careened from wildly popular to being perceived as the source of society's ills. Despite having been relegated to the lowest rung of the artistic ladder for the better part of the twentieth century, comics has been gaining in quality and respectability over the last couple of decades.

My introductory chapter provides a broad, basic introduction to the genre of comics—its historical development, its different forms, and a survey of comics criticism over the last thirty years. In chapter two I clarify the nature of comics by comparing it to literature, film, and pictorial art, thereby highlighting its hybrid nature. It has elements in common with all of these, and yet it is a distinct genre.

My primary focus is on Chris Ware, whom I introduce in chapter three, a brilliant creator who has garnered widespread recognition and respect. His magnum opus is *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, the story of four generations of Corrigan men, most of whom have

been negligent in raising their children. Jimmy Corrigan, as a result, is an introverted, insecure thirty-something-year-old man.

Among comics creators Ware is unusual in that his story does not address socio-political issues, like most of his peers, which I discuss in chapter four. *Jimmy Corrigan* is an isolated tale with a very specific focus. Ware's narrative is somewhat like those of William Faulkner, whose stories have a narrow focus, revolving around the lives of the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha county, rather than encompassing the vast landscape of national socio-political concerns. Also, in chapter five I explore the intriguing combination of realist and Gothic elements—normally at opposite ends of the generic continuum—that Ware merges in *Jimmy Corrigan*. This feature is especially interesting because it is another way that his work explores aspects of hybridity.

Finally, in my conclusion I examine the current state of comics in American culture and its future prospects for development and success, as well as the potential for future comics criticism.

INDEX WORDS: Acme Novelty Library, Alternative comics, Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, Comic books, Comics, Comics Code Authority, Comics criticism, Confessional comics, Family dysfunction, Fredric Wertham, Gothic literature, Graphic narrative, Graphic novels, History of comics, Hybrid art forms, Jimmy Corrigan, Literature, Realist literary characteristics, Rhopography, Sequential art, Underground comix

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2009

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2009

CHRIS WARE'S *JIMMY CORRIGAN*: HONING THE HYBRIDITY OF THE  
GRAPHIC NOVEL

by

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August 2009

## DEDICATION

I would not have been able to manage the rigors of full-time employment and successful pursuit of the Ph.D. were it not for my wife. Thanks, Tammy, for your support and patience.

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## CHAPTER 1.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO COMICS

#### *Introduction*

The proclivity for finding patterns in nature and ascribing meaning to them seems to be as old as *Homo sapiens*—it is an integral aspect of human nature; when looking up into the night sky humans saw shapes in the stars and created stories to go along with them. This was most likely the beginning, but examples of visual forms of communication span every continent and every culture and every century since this beginning: Paleolithic cave paintings in Lascaux, France; Egyptian hieroglyphs; Doric and Ionic friezes on ancient Greek architecture; Trajan’s Column from the Roman Empire; Mayan temple carvings; Asian screen paintings; Gothic stained glass windows; the Bayeux Tapestry; and the Book of Kells.

Just from these few examples, it is evident that “illustration has been an element of design throughout all mankind’s civilizations” (Perry and Aldridge 11). The importance of images certainly holds true for the twenty-first century as well. To a greater extent than any other point in human history, our field of vision is constantly bombarded with pictures in one form or another: magazines, television, advertisements on everything from buses to billboards, computer icons, posters, tee shirts, coffee mugs, calendars, greeting cards, book covers, camera phones, tattoos—the list goes on seemingly *ad infinitum*. In her article on William Blake’s works and how he significantly altered the reading experience, Carol Bigwood describes how he attempted to “bring the eye to a mode of fuller sentient contact” with the text, which “has become especially crucial in our postmodern times, for the principle [sic] way that we normally relate to the world is not only with the eye, but more specifically with the *reading* eye” (307).

This increased element of graphic communication is affecting every aspect of our lives. And although its origins are not a recent development, images have even begun to creep into one of our most non-visual art forms: literature. Some might see this development as the end of Western civilization as we know it, but comic books have started showing up in public libraries, best-seller lists, and even college curricula. The “dumbing down” of America seems to have reached a new height—or low, as the case may be. Where can we place the blame? Have we simply let down our guard? Is this all Andy Warhol’s fault and the advent of pop art? Who’s supposed to have been keeping watch over our cultural standards? Does the blame lie in our country’s apparently floundering—according to so many accounts—educational system?

What I honestly find amazing today is that there aren’t nearly so many people asking these types of questions as there were even five or six years ago. I don’t imagine that most of the adult population of the U.S. is familiar with the term *graphic novel*, much less with what it has come to mean, but these works are being reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, they are being used in college courses—even outside of the English department, and they are being read by people who might have never read a comic book before in their lives. I came to the same conclusion as Joseph Witek did in 1989; he writes that the “surprise is not that serious stories can be told in comic-book form but that such work took so long to attract attention of the general culture” (10). A philosopher interested in the field of aesthetics, David Carrier also expresses astonishment that comics haven’t generated more interest, “for they have a much larger audience and raise problems as interesting as paintings” (2). And although there seem to be a plethora of new works coming out on comics and graphic novels, as recently as 2000 Mila Bongco wrote that the “broader and more penetrating approach to communication and media studies, while having been very constructively applied in studying cinema, television, and the genres of

melodrama, romance and detective fiction, is not yet as prevalent in studies of comics” (10).

However, nine years later, this oversight is in the process of being corrected at this very moment.

My primary focus, as a means of exploration of and a demonstration of the capability of comics, is a creator who is already well established in the field: Chris Ware. His *magnum opus*, to date, is *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. This story begins with the eponymous “hero” as a late-thirty-something-year-old man living in Chicago; Jimmy suffers from an insecurity that is crippling. He has no real social life outside of work, phone conversations with his mother, and his rich fantasy life. Jimmy’s debilitating condition arises, in part, from the fact that he was abandoned by his father; and in the course of the story we also discover that Jimmy’s grandfather was abandoned by *his* father. So, negligent parenting is a legacy of the Corrigan family that has had long-term consequences. Ware has written an intricate story that not only weaves past and present in a multi-generational story, but it also weaves together fantasy and reality, verbal and visual narratives, and Gothic elements and realist traits.

In this first chapter I am going to examine the essential components and workings of comics. Although it is an artistic genre that is underestimated by most people, comics is a narrative form that is effective, powerful, and complex.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in its history, only in the last fifteen or twenty years, comics “is now being chosen as a form by serious writers” (Witek 5). And while Witek made this observation twenty years ago based upon relatively little evidence, today I could reproduce that evidence a hundred times over. Even well respected, well established authors are beginning to write for the comics genre. After several false stops, comics’ time has finally come.



*The Fundamental Nature of this Thing Called Comics*

Within the Library of Congress cataloguing system, scholarly works on comics are found both in the literature section (PN 6710) and the art section (NC 1320); this division of materials helps illustrate some of the ambivalence about this genre. The ambiguity of comics, in fact, seems to be one of its innate qualities, a defining characteristic unique to the medium. Even scholars have struggled to agree upon exactly what comics is. Past criticism has offered two different models for talking about the nature of comics. Earlier, ten or fifteen years ago, comics was described primarily as a blend of visual and verbal elements. So, a highly respected critic and creator like Robert C. Harvey wrote things like, “Just as surely as Gilbert and Sullivan wedded words to music, so have writers and comic book artists created stories by marrying words and pictures” (263); and David Carrier, an aesthetic philosopher and art critic, wrote things like, “What . . . the ideal comic should provide is precisely such a contact between image and word, to the point that the two form an ideal unity” (67).

More recent criticism, however, has tended to describe comics as a form with an inherent tension—a *conflict* between visual and verbal elements. Charles Hatfield, in his recent, outstanding book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, emphasizes comics as a complex and challenging medium:

From a reader’s viewpoint, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable. I submit that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other. If this is so, then comics readers must call upon different reading strategies, or interpretive schema, than they would use in their reading of conventional written text. (36)

As a result of these different types of tension, reading comics involves a “negotiation among various possible meanings,” so that there isn’t a one-size-fits-all strategy for experiencing them (Hatfield 65). Not only is there a tension in comics between its visual and verbal elements, but some have even suggested “that *all* comics necessarily leave their binary tensions unresolved. It is at heart a bifocal form, requiring a double-vision on the part of reader and creator alike” (Gardner 801).

These two opposing paradigms are both correct, of course; essentially they offer before-and-after snapshots of comics—or, after and before, to be precise. *On the page* there is tension between the words and pictures, which are processed by the mind in different ways; furthermore, this relationship between the visual and verbal elements fluctuates with every single panel. *In the mind*, however, the friction between these two media is resolved so that they are blended. Comics is a process, just like reading a book is a process and just like interpreting a painting is a process<sup>2</sup>. Only, the process of reading comics takes this one step further: after one interprets the picture, and after one translates the text into meaning, then the reader establishes the relationship between these two components—these two disparate strands—mentally resolving the tension. This process continues in every panel, because each one offers a unique relationship between the text and the image, with varying degrees of narrative authority fluctuating between each. In addition, the reader must also consider the dynamic relationship between each of the panels that are set side-by-side. This practice happens quickly and, for the most part, unconsciously, of course. What I’ve just described in an awkward fashion takes place seamlessly in our minds.

But what is the result? What is the *telos* of this hybrid art form? Narration. For those who are still tempted to view comics in terms of their respective parts, Carrier explains that the understanding of narration helps relieve this tendency: “What defines narrative in the comic strip

is that picture and text work together to tell one story. Once we focus on the nature of comics as narrative, we will cease to be tempted to think that their unity is any less natural than that of paintings or novels” (74).

Scott McCloud wrote *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, which is regarded as the seminal work that has catalyzed recent comics criticism—it is the *vade mecum* for one beginning the study of comics. He provided a comprehensive formalist examination of comics and identified most of the key issues that need examination and consideration. One of these topics is the relationship between words and images. McCloud describes it as a continuum having almost infinite points (*Understanding* 152). He then goes on to define seven broad categories for the interaction between image and word, all of which might be used in a single comic book:

- 1) word-specific combinations: “pictures illustrate, but don’t significantly add to a largely complete text”
- 2) picture-specific combinations: “words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence”
- 3) duo-specific panels: “both words and pictures send essentially the same message”
- 4) additive combination: “words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa”
- 5) “in parallel combinations, words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting”
- 6) montage: “words are treated as integral parts of the picture”
- 7) interdependent: “words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone”: most common type of word/picture combination.

(McCloud, *Understanding* 152–5)

Not only might all of these be used in the same book, but it's also possible for all of these to be used on the same page—although probably not very likely. As we see from McCloud here, the nature of comics is a complex issue. It is by no means sufficient to merely say that this medium utilizes visual and verbal elements, because there is much more to investigate besides this obvious fact.

Further highlighting the intricacy of comics is the realization that it is not always an easy task to distinguish between verbal and visual components. Although I have been treating the words on the page as a verbal element, they, in fact, serve a graphic function as well since they have a visual presence and since text can be rendered in a variety of ways—book, *book*, book, *book*—but still carry the same denotation. Text, therefore, can “function as an extension of the imagery. . . . [it offers] supportive involvement in the imagery which can provide the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound” (Bongco 72). The *text* begins to take on *graphic* qualities thereby blurring the distinction between verbal and visual elements.

Above, I used the word *hybrid* to describe comics and I want to be explicit in pointing out that hybridity is not simply one thing *combined* with another, but a completely new entity, neither the one thing nor the other—the whole is different, far different than the mere sum of its parts. Comics, to use a simplistic example, is like a Reese's Cup that blends two different taste sensations to create a unique experience. Carrier points out that this type of encounter can be perceived in dramatically different ways: we “expect the world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls in between is easily felt, depending upon our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing” (Carrier 70–1). He gives an interesting example of an adverse reaction in a 1956 work by Roger Fry entitled *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art*. In one of his essays Fry denounced opera precisely because of its hybridity.

Carrier humorously summarizes this critic's response: "Fry does not have any conception that drama, music, and sets could be working together to create one unified experience of the total artwork; for him seeing an opera is like listening to a pianist while simultaneously a juggler performs nearby in front of a painting" (71).

While comics *is* a hybrid genre, there isn't a fifty-fifty division of the narrative function. Above I pointed out McCloud's idea that the relationship between the two parts is unstable—that it fluctuates in every panel. This is a matter of pacing that the creator exerts over her story. If she wants to advance the timing of the story at a quicker pace, then images are better suited for this, and the text might temporarily be de-emphasized, because text demands "that readers process more information, the meaning of the words alone, and then in relation with the pictures, which itself initiates further re-thinking of already formed inferences" (Bongco 75). A greater utilization of images accelerates the pace because we process pictures more efficiently than we do language (Becker 4). Pictures are received information, which means that no formal education is required to decode them, whereas writing is perceived information—it requires specialized knowledge to interpret its abstract symbols (McCloud, *Understanding* 49). If I see a picture of a female reading a book, I can instantaneously grasp all of the pertinent information: she is young, she is attractive, and she is wearing elegant eighteenth-century clothing. The communication of this scene does not require that I speak the language of the artist or that I understand how to paint. Writing, however, is information that I perceive only if I have the skill to read and happen to understand that particular language—not to mention the time that it takes to process the information. Therefore, if a comics creator wants to accelerate our reading, she will rely more heavily upon images rather language.

Overall, though, if comics is essentially a conflicted medium, it is also a primarily visual one as well; the greater burden of the narrative load in comics is carried by the images. It is possible to have comics without the use of any words at all—the images themselves *are* capable of telling the story, even though such a work sacrifices the clarity and specificity that language provides. It isn't uncommon to have a panel, or several panels that don't contain words, but even whole works have been created using only pictures, such as Peter Kuper's *Eye of the Beholder*, Eric Drooker's works *Blood Song: A Silent Ballad*, and *Flood! A Novel in Pictures*. It is extremely uncommon, however, to find a comics work with successive pages made up entirely of text. Nick Hornby, an accomplished British writer of fiction and nonfiction, describes *Blood Song* as having “a strong and compelling narrative that works like a fancy water chute at a theme park: one has no sooner sat down to read Page 1 than one finds oneself, perhaps 20 minutes later propelled straight through and out the other side, having barely absorbed the whole experience” (10).

Language *is* a key ingredient in comics, but it is the graphic aspect of the story that differentiates this genre from literature. And the visual elements are able to accomplish extraordinary, subtle, verbally inexpressible effects that are unique to the pictorial arts. Take Craig Thompson's remarkable memoir, *Blankets*, as an example. Craig meets Raina at a church camp where they find themselves attracted to one another, so he talks his parents into letting him visit her during a long school break. When he arrives there Raina has surprised him with a gift: a quilt that she has sewn by hand (fig. 1). Because of the visual nature of comics, the reader gets a better, more concrete feel for what the quilt looks like. Furthermore, the different segments of the quilt also serve as panels, which is a clever union of the content of the story with its format. But one aspect of this page is unique to comics: Craig and Raina actually *inhabit* the quilt. Craig

immerses himself in this object emotionally, eager to mesh his life with that of Raina's, and the medium of comics is able to represent this in a literal, concrete fashion. It is a subtle, poignant



Figure 1. Craig Thompson merges content with format; from his memoir *Blankets*.

effect that doesn't require any description or explanation on Thompson's part. Talented creators like Thompson create unique effects with the very form of comics.

### *What's in a Name?*

So far I have been using *comics* in a very broad sense, but this label encompasses several different subgenres. The most simplistic form is the cartoon; this is usually one image that might or might not utilize text—either a caption, or a comment or thought by someone in the cartoon.

A little bit more elaborate is the comic strip. By employing several images in sequence the artist is now able to incorporate the element of time. A comic book is another subgenre that is much longer than a strip. This greater length allows for even more sophisticated narrative techniques—there might be multiple plots going on simultaneously, and the writer might choose to do a full-page image for dramatic effect. Comic books, then, are “not simply bloated comic strips,” but they have different goals and operate in fundamentally different ways (Witek 6). An obvious, yet significant difference, is the fact that a “strip’s unity is perceived visually, with its closure present to the reader’s sight” (Witek 9); with a comic book, on the other hand, the next twist in the plot is always out of sight, waiting for the reader to turn the next page. In literary terms a comic book is equivalent to a short story, if it’s self-contained, or a chapter in a book if the story happens to have a plot that lasts for several issues, which isn’t uncommon. Stories in comic books, however, rarely have a *definitive* end; many superhero comic books have been around for four or five decades and there’s no overall story arc, nor is there usually an attempt to maintain absolute continuity with plot developments from the past.

The fourth subgenre of comics is the graphic novel<sup>3</sup>, which is what I am primarily focusing on in my work here. Currently *graphic novel* can cover a lot of different types of works, but here are its most basic features: it utilizes the comics form, and it is longer than a comic book so that it can’t be bound by a paper cover and center staples. And that’s really just about it. A graphic novel can be fiction or nonfiction; superhero or non-superhero; it might be one self-contained story—which is most often the case—or it can be part of a longer story arc that is serialized; it might be didactic in nature or just pulp-type entertainment; it can be realist or escapist; it might be an original story, or a collection of the story arc of a comic book series. Graphic novels differ from comic books in the same way that comic books differ from comic



strips: they allow much greater narrative complexity, and they have the potential to address mature themes in greater depth that rivals that of a literary novel.

Unlike a comic book, a graphic novel can offer an in-depth study of a topic or event over the course of three or four hundred pages. A superlative example of the capability of the comics genre is *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. This story examines the enigmatic serial killings attributed to the figure that we call Jack the Ripper. In his investigation Moore explores one possible suspect and how events might have unfolded if he were, in fact, the Ripper. What he offers to his readers is an examination of Victorian England in the late nineteenth century: the economic crisis suffered by the lower middle classes, political intrigue, the known philanderings of the crown prince, and the stark disconnect between social expectations and the actual lifestyles of most everyone. In addition to this, however, Moore also invites us to consider our own cultural proclivity for conspiracy theories and our assumptions about the corrupt nature of politics and government. Finally, he not only looks at nineteenth- and twentieth-century behaviors, but he also addresses universal themes: how people deal with crushing poverty, the manner in which society responds to a crisis, and through the protagonist, Dr. William Gull, Moore explores the fine line between genius and an eroding mental state.

Within the last twenty years writers have begun using comics—primarily the format of the graphic novel—to create substantial, meaningful works. Despite the negative associations that many have regarding this format, comics is just as capable as prose or film of serious examination of the human condition. Comics has suffered a roller-coaster ride of critical acceptance and condemnation over the last century, but only in the last couple decades has it begun to gradually work its way into mainstream acceptance and even veneration.

*Broad Overview of Comics' Historical Development*

I call this a “broad overview” because I am going to focus on specific developments in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in later chapters. For the time being I merely want to offer a general historical perspective to show the path that comics has followed up through the present time. In the last one hundred years this genre has evolved from relatively simplistic, single-panel cartoons to four-hundred-page graphic novels, and the public reception of comics has fluctuated from enthusiasm to outright hostility.

The first time, historically, that one finds a modern example of comics is in the early nineteenth century with the work of Rudolphe Töpffer, a teacher, painter, and caricaturist from Switzerland. He is considered by many to be the father of modern comics because he employed the “first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe” (McCloud, *Understanding* 17). This union of the graphic and verbal was really going against the current of nineteenth-century developments with art and literature, which were moving further and further apart, instead of closer together as Töpffer was working with them. With printing and the larger available reading audience, literature, especially poetry, was becoming more specialized and abstract—more ornate and less and less like pictures; this is evident, for example, in the work of John Keats. Painting, on the other hand, with artists such as Nicholas Poussin and Jacques Louis David, began to grow in the opposite direction becoming more specific and representational—less abstract or symbolic (McCloud, *Understanding* 144). This trend began to reverse itself in the late 1800s, with literature and art moving back toward one another.

Töpffer, however, doesn't deserve credit for popularizing the medium—political cartoons had been around long before his time. What served to really broaden the exposure of comics was the advent of newspapers. Information and news were more accessible—as was comics—with an

increased literacy rate and technological improvements in printing. Comic strips first appeared in the late nineteenth century. Stephen Becker believes that “newspaper humor—comic strips and their relatives—had to wait for the development of color, an innovation sufficiently spectacular to catch readers, hold their attention and make them habitués” (5). The first American comic in color, appearing on May 5, 1895 in the color Sunday supplement, was Richard Felton Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid*, which was immensely popular. This comic strip actually gave rise to the epithet *yellow journalism* because it appeared in William Randolph Hearst’s *New York World*, a paper that was noted “for its sensationalism, exaggeration, and vulgarity” (Inge, *Comics* 17–8).

*The Yellow Kid*, though, wasn’t technically a comic strip—at least initially—because it first appeared as a single drawing rather than a series of drawings, and it didn’t utilize speech balloons (Daniels 2). These developments came rather quickly, however, as comics creators began to experiment with the form to discover the most successful combination of elements. The first comic strips were zany characters placed in madcap situations, such as *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1896) and *Mutt and Jeff* (1907). Next came strips devoted to domestic situations: *Bringing up Father* (1912) and *Gasoline Alley* (1919). The next wave told adventure stories—even one featuring a female protagonist, *Little Orphan Annie* (1924)—followed by *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers*, both appearing in 1929. After this, popular comic strips dealt with several different genres including crime (*Dick Tracy* (1931)), science fiction (*Flash Gordon* (1934)), and even the Arthurian tales (*Prince Valiant* (1936)) (Daniels 4–7).

Comic books appeared thanks to a capitalistic motivation: seeking to garner even more revenue from their properties, publishers began collecting comic strips into anthologies and reprinting them in the 1930s (Witek 6). It wasn’t until the end of the decade, however, that the future of comic books was to be defined and determined; the success of the comic book as an

independent entity is marked by the first issue of *Action Comics* in June 1938, introducing the character of Superman (Daniels 9). And this line took off: when most comic book titles were publishing between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue, *Action Comics* was regularly selling out its 900,000 copies per month (Wright 13). And comic book sales overall grew tremendously: by December 1943 twenty-five million comic books were being sold per month (Wright 31). The appearance of the superhero genre created a market explosion—a “second phase in the development of American comics . . . [that] established the form as a mass medium” (Sabin 145). Following the success of Superman, Batman and Captain Marvel both came along in 1939, Green Lantern and Captain America in 1940, and Wonder Woman in 1941. This period—from the late 1930s through the mid 1950s—is often referred to as the Golden Age of comics because of the widespread popularity of comic books.

This period also experienced a cultural explosion as well, due to several factors: a recovering economy, educational reforms, and increasing urbanization. Bradford W. Wright, in his examination of American pop culture, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*, describes it this way:

Comic books emerged at a critical moment in the evolution of youth culture. Progressive education reforms combined with Depression-era unemployment kept an increasing percentage of adolescents in high school during the 1930s. As young people spent more time in the company of their peers, they acquired new personal independence and a generational consciousness that struck some alarmed adults as evidence of diminishing respect for authority and declining traditional values. (27)

As the economy began to rebound in the late 1930s and early 1940s, kids for the first time had disposable income and could afford to spend five or ten cents on a comic book. Publishers quickly caught on to this fact and “bypassed parents and aimed their products directly at the tastes of children and adolescents” (Wright 27).

These were businessmen who were eager to cash in on this cultural boom, which means that they weren’t striving for quality but quantity. They were aware that “they could fob off any old thing on the children who were their audience” (Wolk 5), and this resulted in stories whose main ingredient was sensationalism. Anyone who failed to take advantage of the “maturing tastes of postwar youth denied themselves an increasingly lucrative market” (Wright 59). Beginning as early as the start of the 1940s, the comic book had serious detractors—and for good reason, unfortunately. At the top of the list of perpetrators who were pawing scurrilous material off on children was E.C. This company was founded by M. C. Gaines and originally its initials stood for “Educational Comics,” which featured topics in science, American and world history, and stories from the Bible. After the elder Gaines passed away in 1947, however, his son, William, took over the company and changed E.C. so that it stood for “Entertaining Comics.” He began new titles such as *The Haunt of Fear*, *Weird Science*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Vault of Horror* (Witek 14–15).

Recent critics describe many of the comic books at this time as “shocking, lurid, push-button stories” (Wolk 37), and as having “stupendously gruesome excesses” (Witek 14). Horror comics “offered the most horrific, grotesque, and gruesome images available anywhere in American mass entertainment” (Wright 149). And, probably hard to imagine today, comic books were achieving a surprising degree of social saturation in a variety of genres. After the mid-1940s the superhero genre was no longer sufficient to ensure the growth of the industry, and

publishers began to dramatically expand their offerings to include romance, war, crime, and westerns, just to name a few. In *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, Roger Sabin writes that by 1948 there were thirty-eight different crime titles (150), by 1949 there were 120 different romance titles (152), and by 1953 there were around 130 different horror titles (154). Never before nor since were so many adults reading comics (Daniels 63). And although many of these titles were labeled “adults only,” they easily made their way into the hands of young kids, of course—which is what started the trouble for the comic book industry. More so than any other medium in America, “the comic book has been obscured by the terms of its own success” (Hatfield 6).

An early critic of these cultural developments was Sterling North who published an article in the *Chicago Daily News* on 8 May 1940 entitled “A National Disgrace.” He called comic books “a poisonous mushroom growth” (qtd. in Wright 27). North was well ahead of his time in his reproach of comics, but a virulent wave of criticism was making its way toward shore in what would quickly grow into a tsunami of fear and disparagement of this genre. The man who came to be the leading figure in this advancing tide was Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German émigré with a background in psychology. He had impressive credentials and extensive experience in working with troubled youth, but he also rejected the Freudian perspective of many of his contemporaries and instead emphasized sociological motivations as the source for psychological problems in kids (Wright 93).

And there *was* cause for concern. Following World War Two adults became alarmed at the sharp increase in juvenile crime; instead of dealing “with issues within society or the family, they looked for an easier cause and a found a perfect scapegoat in comic books” (Gravett 102). Wertham was the primary champion of this claim—that comic books were the primary source of juvenile delinquency—which he had been arguing for six years when he published *Seduction of*

*the Innocent* in early 1954. He objected to the salacious representation of women; the stereotyped roles and portrayals of minorities; he claimed that comic books carried latent messages that promoted homosexuality—most infamous is his questioning of the nature of the relationship between Batman and Robin; and, finally, Wertham stated that comic books deteriorated reading skills, which would contribute to a decline in Western civilization if unchecked. There's no doubt that comic books contained objectionable material that was not appropriate for young children, but they were merely a reflection of contemporary tastes: "it's a racist and sexist culture that makes racist and sexist comics, not the other way around" (Heer). Wertham, however, was not culturally savvy enough to realize this.<sup>4</sup>

Because of Wertham and others that had joined his cause, the federal government got involved. In 1953 the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency convened to investigate the causes behind the increase in juvenile crime, and on April 21, 1954, the subcommittee met in New York City to investigate the comic book industry (Wright 164). This wave of criticism was the result of a trifecta of factors that converged, causing devastating consequences for comic books: excessive graphic content in comic books that wasn't being monitored; a noticeable rise in juvenile crime; and Wertham with his skewed perspective on comic books and their influence on kids.

What followed in the wake of these Senate inquiries would forever change the development of comic books in the United States. Rather than be censored from the outside, the industry formed its own oversight panel later that same year, which instituted the Comics Code Authority; the CCA became the new standard for decency and kid-friendly material with a set of stringent restrictions. Every publisher was now expected to submit its pages for approval, prior to publication, and once they passed muster, the comic book would feature the CCA seal of

approval on its cover. This move was intended not only to delineate appropriate material for children versus adults, but also to appease the public backlash that had resulted from all of the media attentions—it was a public relations strategy (Gravett 102).

The result was a steep decline in sales as well as quality. In the two years following *Seduction of the Innocent*, a dozen publishers went out of business and hundreds of cartoonists left the industry (Heer). Comic book historians describe the shift that took place as a falling off of spirit, enthusiasm, vitality, verve. Rather than utilizing small enclaves of artists, publishers began to use production methods similar to those found in factories—everyone doing his own small part and then passing it along to the next person in the process (Harvey 24). A system that had been designed to protect the industry wound up having the opposite effect—squenching the talent and innovation that had created an artistic and cultural phenomenon (Daniels 84). A small publisher of crime comic books experienced a reduction in sales from 2,700,000 issues per month in 1952 to around 800,000 in 1956 (Harvey 43)—a 70 percent decline.<sup>5</sup>

Even though the rapid expansion of comic books had been dampened after the mid-1950s, there continued to be important developments in a period commonly referred to as the Silver Age of comic books. First, in the mainstream, what had been a fairly broad and diverse industry coalesced into two main entities: DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Both of these companies strove to galvanize the superhero genre, which had fallen off significantly after the Second World War. DC tapped into the burgeoning cultural interest in science and science fiction in the early 1960s and re-introduced characters like the Green Lantern, the Flash, Hawkman, and Atom (Gravett 76). With the success of DC's Justice League of America—including these characters as well as others—Marvel decided to get back into the superhero business. It had been severely affected by the establishment of the Comics Code, because it had



primarily featured horror and war comic books (Sabin 165). A large part of Marvel's revival and success was due to Stan Lee. He had worked with comic books in many different capacities, as a script writer, letterer, editor, director, and he also created or co-created the following characters: The Hulk, Fantastic Four, Silver Surfer, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Iron Man, Thor—not an exhaustive list, by any means, but a few of the highlights. Lee not only helped introduce new characters, but he also brought a new sensibility; he, and others at Marvel, “made the superhuman human” (Gravett 76). Marvel characters, like Peter Parker, struggled with real problems and had to adjust to super-powers that often complicated their personal lives. Needless to say, this was a breath of fresh air to the entire superhero genre. The changes at DC and Marvel continued to manifest themselves throughout the 70s and 80s, and on up through the present.

A second important development at this time—one that necessitates the qualifier *mainstream* above—was the appearance of what came to be called Underground Comix. The Comics Code caused juvenile material to flourish, so that there was a resurgence of superheroes, “goofy teenager” stories like *Archie*, and titles featuring funny animals (Sabin 163). One response to the oppression and stifling atmosphere resulting from the CCA—rather than walking the tightrope of conformity—was rebellion. Beginning in the early 1960s, underground comix were initially produced independently by artists and writers from all over the country. There was no real business model, no real plan, no type of coordination. These comics creators were simply interested in using the comics genre in order to express the spirit of revolt of that generation.

The most widely recognized figure of this movement is Robert Crumb, but others include Jack Jackson, Justin Green, Kim Deitch, Gilbert, Shelton, Bill Griffith, and Art Spiegelman. Even though there was not a large segment of society that was aware of these developments, these artists were instrumental in fundamentally altering the function of comics. They broadened

the scope of the genre by exploring counter-cultural issues like experimental drug use, racism, sexual taboos, and alternative communities. Comics was offering social commentary in a way that it never really had before. But comix were not somber, serious products; most had a strong dose of zaniness and psychodelia—they used humor and shock as a means of exploring topics that were treated far more delicately by most others. Another important contribution of comix was extending the reading audience to include young adults who might well have grown out of the comics medium otherwise. Crumb and others definitively demonstrated that comics could be for adults as well—it was in no way limited to kids' fare or even just mainstream topics like romance or crime. By the end of the decade alternative publishers arose who were putting out entire lines of titles: Last Gasp, Rip Off, and Kitchen Sink (Sabin 41).

The next wave of development was to turn the focus of comics from a sociological emphasis to a psychological one. Justin Green is credited with spearheading confessional comics with the publication of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* in 1972. This work—through his alter ego, Binky Brown—describes Green's Catholic upbringing, the guilt and anxiety that he struggled with as a result, as well as his challenges with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Through his honesty and transparency he paved the way for artists like Harvey Pekar who garnered considerable mainstream attention. The tone of Green's work is very similar to that of underground comix, but Pekar's work relies much less on humor and absurdity. *American Splendor* portrays Pekar's life—his work, friends, frustrations, shortcomings—in a manner that is simple and straightforward; he also offers his insights about himself and the world. Pekar introduces a revolutionary degree of realism that, again, had never really been seen before. Both underground comix and confessional comics, although not widespread, mainstream phenomena, significantly altered the potential for the genre.

In the mid-1980s a new manifestation of comics came to the fore: the graphic novel. This term first gained common currency in 1978 with Will Eisner's *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories*, which stated on its cover, "a graphic novel." Eisner's goal was to create a work of artistic merit and credibility using the comics form, but his desire was ahead of its time. It was not until eight years later that Eisner's efforts really bore fruit in three very different works: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*. All three of these works are intended for an adult audience—even though two of them are superhero stories; all three of these works *are* important works of narrative. In *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* Frank Miller and Alan Moore have brought the superhero genre into the real world. Moore realized that these had always been stories of "immutable, immortal icons," from which a key element was missing: time (Gravett 77). Even after three or four decades these characters had never aged. *Watchmen* portrays heroes who are well past their prime and beginning to question their place in regulating and dispensing justice; Moore introduces real-world complexities. And Miller's *Dark Knight*, likewise, opens with a jaded, somewhat geriatric Bruce Wayne who has retired the cape and cowl and is unable to find meaning or purpose in life.

Art Spiegelman's two-volume *Maus* advanced this new dawn for comics still further. Like Green and Pekar he explores personal problems that he struggles with, but something that no one else had done with comics before was to examine the atrocities of the Holocaust. Spiegelman balances two different narratives: his childhood and relationship with his parents as well as his parents' experiences as Jews in Nazi Germany. He demonstrated once and for all that comics is capable of examining any topic, regardless of the magnitude, depth, or gravity. In 1991 Spiegelman won the Pulitzer for the two volumes of *Maus* and laid to rest any doubts that comics could be a viable artistic medium for seriously addressing the nature of the human condition.

These three works awakened in other artists and writers a new appreciation of the potential of the genre. Critics have recognized and acknowledged the fact that these superlative works require “a high degree of cognitive engagement” (Chute 460), that maybe, as Nick Hornby has suggested, “we need lessons in how to read books like this” (10). These views are the exact reverse of Wertham’s accusations in the 1950s.

Unfortunately graphic novels did not immediately continue to build upon this foundation. There are probably several reasons for this. First of all is the eagerness of others to capitalize on their efforts, but who lacked their genius. Moore and Miller had created “a so-called ‘Dark Age’ of unprecedented questioning and experimentation”; what followed in their stead, however, were “lazy creators who, rather than learning and advancing from the books’ examples, pounced on only their grim, violent surface” (Gravett 77). Another reason is that graphic novels of this caliber can take several years to develop, so even after Miller, Moore, and Spiegelman showed the way it took some time for others to begin putting out works of similar quality and aspiration.

Eventually, though, just as these artists grew out of Eisner’s early efforts, other comics creators began to emerge as a harvest of the seeds that had been planted in the mid 80s. Douglas Wolk, a journalist who writes about comics for *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, *Salon*, and the *Washington Post*, has suggested that if “there’s such a thing as a golden age of comics, it’s happening right now” (10). And I agree. Wholeheartedly. Critics and scholars are paying more and more attention to these new and exciting graphic novels that are also beginning to make their way into the mainstream. But, from an academic perspective there is still much work to be done. Hillary Chute points out that the “field hasn’t yet grasped its object or properly posed its project” (452). Just as comics has gone through a tremendous amount of development in the last century, criticism has also fluctuated dramatically with the changes that this genre has undergone.

*Brief Survey of Recent Criticism*

Comics criticism has been in a state of tumult. Opinions and theories abound, historic precedents are cited, different sides are taken on even the most fundamental issues, and although scholars are clamoring to make their voices and views heard, so far there has been very little consensus—only that the comics form is still around, it’s changing, and that it needs to be addressed. While this is a challenge for the person coming along who is trying to engage in the dialogue, it is also very encouraging and an exciting time to be thinking and writing about the future of literature and this new hybrid genre.

As an example of the current state of affairs, I’d like to consider briefly the introduction to *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, a collection of essays edited and introduced by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons; they offer an informal survey of sorts that is revealing. In their discussion of McCloud, Varnum and Gibbons point out that he treats the hybrid nature of comics in two different ways: “He contends on the one hand that in comics ‘words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading.’ His very metaphor here suggests that although the partners move together, each retains its individual character. He argues on the other hand that comics operates as ‘a language all its own’”—as an element that is, essentially, coherent (xiv). “Each view,” they write, “is represented in the present anthology. David Kunzle, David Beronä, Todd Taylor, N. C. Christopher Couch, Robert Harvey, and Frank Cioffi argue that in comics, words and pictures are much like partners in a dance. Kunzle, Beronä, and Taylor see pictures as the more important of the two elements, but Couch and Harvey see words and pictures as equally important” (Varnum and Gibbons xiv).

Varnum and Gibbons continue for about the next page—and-a-half describing the many different ways that these writers are divided in their opinions. It is evident that they don’t see

their collection of essays as any sort of attempt at consensus—merely an effort to interject different views and opinions into the public discourse. And right now this is where comics scholarship stands: it is a great conversation, with many voices and opinions, which has only just begun to really get underway.

As I was researching this chapter, I realized that I had fallen prey to a false impression: just because one finds people writing and publishing works on comics fairly consistently from the mid-1980s through the present, this doesn't mean that comics criticism has a vibrant twenty-plus-year history and already has a rich intellectual background upon which to draw. Simply because there is *a* book out there during those years doesn't mean that there was yet widespread attention. Often that book is the only one of real substance that was published during that time, and during the early years these critics that I'm going to survey here are largely relying upon and responding to one another. An important point here: comics criticism is an emerging, a nascent field—top-notch criticism of comics is still a fairly recent development.

Early on, scholarship adopted a defensive posture in response to attacks that comics is harmful and a facile and worthless form of entertainment. Criticism became so firmly entrenched in an examination of neutral, formalist matters, that it has taken a long time to pull out of that mode. Formalism shouldn't currently occupy a central position in comics scholarship, but it *is* still important because of the complexity of comics. For the most part, current criticism of specific works is too often divorced from its real-world cultural context. We need to be careful of actually diminishing the cultural importance of comics by treating them as something precious, outside of the rough-and-tumble world of reality. Rather than the community of comics scholars ranting about the fact that comics is here and important, we might better serve the genre by spending more time discussing why it is valuable and important to people outside of

academia; and comics creators can contribute by continuing their work of quietly getting down to the business of making great art. Let's move on to examine how scholarly discussion of comics arose.

Comics criticism reflects and reacts against developments in literary criticism from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Coming out of the nineteenth century, literature was predominantly occupied with social and moral concerns; the standards applied to its study were Eurocentric, and reflected the "great man" conception of literature; this approach adopted Victorian ideals of the social responsibility of the arts and progress as well as Modernist notions of excellence and elitism.

Several decades into the twentieth century the ideas of Sigmund Freud began to take root and become prevalent due to works like *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Literature and the visual arts responded in various ways such as surrealism, evident in the works of André Breton and René Magritte, and stream of consciousness in writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. And within the medical community and society in general there was a new concern and appreciation for psychological responses to the arts. For example, Orson Welles' 1939 broadcast of his infamous radio drama, *The War of the Worlds*, caused widespread panic. It was also in this environment that Fredric Wertham emerged; a German-American psychiatrist, he was concerned about the harmful effects of mass media on children. In 1954 he published *Seduction of the Innocent*, which laid much of the blame on comics for juvenile delinquency.

As a result of this zeitgeist, comics criticism focused on issues related to the form and mechanical workings of comics, starting in the 1960s but lasting even up until the present. This was a means of avoiding entirely the issue of moral content, which wasn't a topic open for

discussion after Wertham's attack, and focusing instead on more neutral aspects of the medium. Early comics criticism by and large chose to ignore concerns about harmful effects on children, because these led to calls for widespread censorship.

One of the best examples of this type of criticism—a culmination of decades of effort by others, really—is the work of Scott McCloud. He made the transition from comics creator to theorist—much like the renowned Will Eisner had about ten years earlier—with the publication of his outstanding work, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*—“a comic book about the theory and practice of comics” (Harvey 245). Nearly every work published after 1993 references McCloud's work, and each one does so with admiration and appreciation. Praises such as these are not uncommon: “*Understanding Comics* has great heuristic value and may have prompted more scholarly discussion on comics than any other book in the English language” (Varnum and Gibbons xiii); a “watershed” study that “changed the way the field talks about itself” and that has “given rise to a new, or newly self-conscious, breed of comics formalism, as well as a wave of sequential art curricula and pedagogically minded cartoonists” (Hatfield xi); “his book is an ambitiously conceived and brilliantly executed work of cartooning” (Harvey 246).

In *Understanding Comics* McCloud takes up the mantle from Eisner; he examines every part of the comics apparatus: he gives a brief history of comics, and goes on to discuss panels, the nature of images, the relationship of space and time, and color, just to name a few. McCloud begins with a definition of comics and a very simple idea: when a picture is part of a sequence, even a sequence of only two, “the art of the image is transformed”—this is an idea that he gets from Eisner (*Understanding* 5). McCloud goes on, however, to describe how the mind processes this type of information; he writes that the human mind automatically creates a relationship between these images, what McCloud calls “closure,” so that “the audience is a willing and



conscious collaborator”—“closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (*Understanding* 65). He writes that this is the very nature of comics: “If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. . . . Comics *is* closure” (McCloud, *Understanding* 67).

McCloud is a central figure in the dialogue of comics criticism; this is mainly due to the fact that his examination of the genre, and the manner in which it functions, is so comprehensive and innovative. He raises interesting questions, and by no means claims to have definitive answers—he encourages others to join in the conversation. Normally, if I were discussing literature or film, most would agree that the time for formalism is largely passed, but because of the complexity of comics—due to its hybrid nature—the formalist concerns have not all been satisfactorily addressed. Comics criticism certainly needs to move on to focus on current socio-political concerns—feminism, Marxism, Postcolonialism, deconstruction, postmodernism—but issues of formalism will continue to be a larger percentage of critical production than one would expect to find with literature or film. No one need do what McCloud has already accomplished, of course, but formalism will continue to be a part of most people’s work for a while.

Another valuable contribution to the area of comics formalism is David Carrier’s *The Aesthetics of Comics*. The on-going conversation of comics criticism had needed someone with Carrier’s background in art history and philosophy to provide clarity to issues and aspects of the medium that had not been well articulated up until that point.<sup>2</sup> He notifies his reader at the beginning that “[t]his book is the first by an analytic philosopher to identify and solve the aesthetic problems posed by comic strips and to explain the relationship of this artistic genre to other forms of visual art” (Carrier 1).

But why was this needed? Long after Wertham’s efforts to discredit comics, they continued to be viewed with suspicion and even fear by many. Wertham’s initial objection was

to the content of comic books which he felt was harmful to children. But even before this, they were viewed as material to be enjoyed only by children or adults with low IQs or little education. Since the 1930s, and even up to the present, comics is viewed as a medium that lacks any sort of niche or specificity—they are not well understood and therefore not fully appreciated; because comics employs both images and words, and because it combines “these two different devices is one source of the feeling that they are an awkward in-between art, neither purely literary nor just entirely visual” (Carrier 68).

Carrier, then, is attempting to answer the call by critics for a proper critical vocabulary that is unique to comics. Robert C. Harvey bemoans the fact no critical apparatus has arisen suitable to address the hybrid nature of comics: “For that,” he writes, “we need a vocabulary and a critical perspective forged expressly in the image of the form,” “we must be able to perceive comics in their own terms” (3–4). And this is where Carrier steps in: “To interpret an art, we need to know its essence, its defining qualities; and with the art of comics, that requires understanding its origin. Once we know what kind of a thing the artwork is, we are prepared to explain its history. When comics are defined, we see how to interpret them and can recognize the character of their history” (7). This is essentially the purpose of *The Aesthetics of Comics*. McCloud has effectively pulled apart the engine of comics and suitably explained the parts and what they are each doing, but he does not address the deeper, theoretical issues of literature in relation to the visual arts; nor does he consider complex political issues of race or gender. McCloud’s was the effort of a self-educated layman, which was fine as a beginning point; what was needed, however, was the expertise of an academician—Carrier.

He defines comics as having “three essential qualities”: “the speech balloon, the closely linked narrative, and the book-size scale” (74). And it’s the first of these on which he places the

greatest amount of emphasis, because speech balloons set comics apart from any other medium.

Carrier writes,

The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text . . . . Speech balloons, because they are visible to the reader but do not lie within the picture space containing the depicted characters, distinguish comics from both old-master art and the seventeenth-century broadsheets. . . . The speech balloon is a great philosophical discovery, a method of representing thought and words. . . . the speech balloon defines comics as neither a purely verbal nor a strictly visual art form. (4)

He says that word balloons serve the same function as facial expressions in painting—they communicate a character’s inner state (Carrier 40). What Carrier finds surprising is not that these should have developed as a device, but “what is now hard to reconstruct is how the seemingly complex conventions associated with word balloons were, without any explanation, mastered rather quickly by everyone who read them” (45).

Just as balloons, “neither purely verbal nor just pictorial, but both one and the other at once, bridge the word/image gap,” Carrier explores this relationship as the primary nature of the comics medium—he spends a great deal of time discussing comics’ hybridity (28). Drawing upon his philosophy background, he says that this union of seemingly disparate elements is not unlike the union of body and soul as described by René Descartes.<sup>2</sup> A question worth addressing, though, is why comics is singled out for this type of discussion. Other highly valued and respected art forms, like film and theater, also bundle different artistic genres; Carrier asks, “Once we acknowledge that all experience of art . . . involves synthesizing separate elements,

why should comics and opera, which involve more than one kind of element, be any special problem?” (72).

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a new development in comics production as well as a shift in the tone of comics criticism. What has come to be called *underground comics*, comics written for an adult audience, “emerged at the end of the 1960s [which] marked a revolutionary break with the past. For the first time in the post–First World War era, it was shown that comics did not have to be exclusively for children: instead, the new breed of counter–culture inspired titles concentrated on specifically adult themes—notably sex, drugs and radical politics” (Sabin 36). At the same time that the United States was racked by profound shifts in race relations, gender equality, musical innovations, experimentation with drug use, and a new–found sexual freedom, comics was also being revolutionized—it was evolving *with* these others parts of culture as well as serving as a transmitter for these social changes. And comics criticism adjusted according to these cultural developments as well. Rather than focusing so intently on the medium itself in the sort of New Critical approach that had predominated, the next wave of critics examined comics within its cultural context.

The name *Thomas Inge* is somewhat similar to that of Will Eisner—it is ubiquitous in the field of comics. Although he certainly doesn’t have the name–recognition of Eisner with most people, when you start reading authors’ acknowledgements, and you start paying attention to who is editing many of these works, *Inge* keeps popping up, along with the University Press of Mississippi, with which Inge is associated. He has long been recognized as a leading figure in the field of pop culture<sup>3</sup>, and his 1990 work, *Comics as Culture*, is faithful to this fact; his approach is indicative of someone who examines a novel or painting or comic not primarily as isolated *objet d’art*, but as deeply entangled cultural artifact.

Inge is primarily interested in the fact that if comic strips and comic books “have absorbed much of Western tradition, they have also had their influence on popular language and culture” (*Comics* xiv)—he is interested in the various ways that they “reflect larger cultural trends” (*Comics* xxi). He writes that his “intent is to suggest ways the comics also deal with the larger aesthetic and philosophic issues mainstream culture has always defined in its arts and humanities” (Inge, *Comics* xxi). After a brief survey of the history of comic strips, Inge’s chapters address the following topics (in addition to others): “Comics and American Language,” “*Krazy Kat* as American Dada Art,” “Charlie Chaplin and the Comics,” “Faulkner Reads the Funny Papers,” “*Peanuts* and American Culture,” “American Industrial Culture and the Comic Book.” These titles reveal, in part, Inge’s interest in comic books, comic strips, and American culture as he explores interesting connections between “high” and “low” art forms.

Joseph Witek is a slightly different type of critic. In *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, he demonstrates how the works by these creators are not only important examples of the genre, but are also revolutionary in presenting history in significantly new and exciting ways. Comics has addressed historical topics before: the Gilberton Company published *Classics Comics* and *Classics Illustrated* for nearly thirty years, but these early examples—what Witek calls “didactic comics”—tend to reinforce the mainstream view of American nationalism. By contrast, Jackson, in his stories, focuses on those who were marginalized and even mistreated in the sweeping events of history that took place in the American West. Spiegelman is unique in combining the horrors of the Holocaust with the fantasy element of comics that utilizes “anthropomorphized talking animals”—a blend that is “insightful and eerily effective in execution” (Witek 4). Pekar’s

contribution is the depth and detail and accuracy and candor with which he has examined his own life and the lives of those with whom he comes into contact.

Witek believes that instead of defining and defending comics, we need to get on with the business of critical analysis—and he does just that. Eric Smoodin offers this praise:

Witek hopes to discover this semiotics of comics by discussing how the comic books themselves ‘write’ history. Witek acknowledges, then, that comic books take part in the construction of ideology, that is, in the creation of a representational system that allows the individual to encounter and interpret his or her social surroundings. This plan . . . improves upon most comic book critical discourse.  
(131–2)

Witek demonstrates that graphic novels are not just telling good stories, but that they are worth our attention because they are innovative—they are pushing the boundaries of how we think about literature.

In this brief survey of critics, I’ve included one person who doesn’t seem to have received any attention for the short article that he wrote in 1992. Although Eric Smoodin isn’t a recognized figure in the field, his article, “Cartoon and Comic Classicism: High–Art Histories of Lowbrow Culture,” makes an important comment about the state of affairs in the early 90s and possibly even up through the present. Smoodin says that recent criticism is so focused on the generic issues that predominated in the past, that it ignores the political and cultural context—that comics criticism has been largely divorced from other important issues.

In particular, Smoodin criticizes Witek and Inge for falling prey to this practice. Inge, especially, discusses comics in relation to culture, but not in a theoretically or politically savvy fashion; it’s almost as if he is not aware of what has transpired in literary theory over the last

twenty or thirty years. Smoodin contrasts their work to that of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's 1975 study of Walt Disney, *How to Read Donald Duck*. Rather than merely addressing formal issues of Disney's artistic style, or historical antecedents, "Dorfman and Mattelart reinterpreted Disney's influence as a brand of cultural imperialism that reached from the US middle-class home all the way to the Third World"; recent interest in comics, by contrast, has reflected a "depoliticization of much of the discourse about these 'low' forms" (Smoodin 130). In their rush to say important things about this important new medium, critics like Witek and Inge "in the name of art and free expression, dismiss issues of racism, and misogyny, and classism" (Smoodin 131). They offer naïve cultural observations that are no longer acceptable in today's theory-laden climate. Comics scholarship needs to recognize and respond more widely to the highly politicized environment where criticism resides in general.

The excitement and celebration of comics seems almost to have led to an art-for-art's-sake approach, art-as-object, rather than a more well-grounded exposition of work as cultural artifact existing in the real, highly politicized world in which we all live. Smoodin writes that critics have expended too much effort in justifying comics by merely "finding examples of masterworks of comic book art" (132), an approach that stresses individual creators and outstanding achievements, an approach that is "indeed seductive" (138). Although Witek and Inge have done valuable work, Smoodin finds it distressing that scholars like them "have chosen to focus not on these tensions but on a debate central to popular culture studies almost half a century ago" (139). He concludes:

Lacking the eloquence or understanding of Eisenstein or Bazin, they have tried to determine whether cartoons and comics can qualify as great art, using methodologies pivoting on canon formation, inspired creation, and transcendent

aesthetic qualities. Denied consideration are those issues that Dorman and Mattelart raised 20 years ago: the place of popular culture within the context of global capitalism and domestic and international politics. In their place, Witek, Inge, and others have decided to add political terminology to these highly aestheticized approaches to history and have justified the study of popular culture by making it safe and familiar, rather than by using it to challenge the assumptions of those who take it for granted. (Smoodin 139)

Inge *has* helped advance the cause of comics, however. He has been pivotal in ensuring that new critics are getting into print; he has not, however, as Smoodin points out, challenged the status quo. His reading of culture comes across much more like that of a well-read dilettante rather than that of an academic scholar. Even today, fifteen years after Smoodin's critique of Inge, comics criticism still has yet to really immerse itself in the great dialogue taking place regarding theoretical and political concerns.

Smoodin's frustration might arise in part from his lack of recognition that critics can't simply and easily wash their hands of formalist issues and move on. Because of comics' complexity, these matters are taking longer to work out than they did with either literature or film. So, although I am comfortable categorizing Inge and Witek as cultural critics, they do continue to address the form of comics. Even though I understand there is some need for this, both critics do fail to address adequately matters of gender and race and power that have been in the air for decades now. Witek's failings—although not as egregious—are due in part to those of Inge, who serves as general editor of *Studies in Popular Culture* at University of Mississippi Press, which published *Comic Books as History*. Comics scholarship needs to tackle at least two very different types of tasks: to continue to address formal questions and examine masterworks



such as *Jimmy Corrigan*, and also to come to a fuller understanding of how comics is making valuable commentary upon the world in which we live.

To recapitulate, I entirely agree with Smoodin's assessment of the current state of comics criticism. Even in the fifteen years since his article appeared, scholarship hasn't come as far as it should have. At the same time, however, comics criticism is not the same as literary criticism, and cannot be expected to mirror exactly its same interests and emphases.

At the beginning of this section I referenced Varnum and Gibbons' introduction to their collection of essays, and, in concluding, I would like to return to that portion again to highlight a comment that they make. Despite McCloud's tremendous contributions to the discussion of comics, they perceive an inconsistency in his description of the hybrid nature of the medium:

From our point of view, the most significant contradiction in *Understanding Comics* is that McCloud treats comics as both a partnership of separate elements and as a unique language. . . . To say that comics is both an integrated language and a partnership strikes us as having one's cake and eating it too, but there are merits to each point of view and each allows us to see features of comics we might otherwise overlook. (Varnum and Gibbons xiv)

I really admire and appreciate this recognition that “there *are* merits to each point of view,” and I see this as an important perspective to keep in mind for the future of comics scholarship. Too often we rush to create definitions and rules and boundaries that ultimately confine us to a space too narrow and claustrophobic to easily allow room for different views. Mila Bongco made the sensible observation that although there is a need in comics criticism for definitions and artistic principles, “there is also the need to clarify terms without turning them into constraints” (50).

Similarly, in discussing his disagreements with renowned art historian E. H. Gombrich, Carrier writes, “We offer different, but not necessarily incompatible, accounts” (6).

So, while there’s still no consensus on a lot of important issues, maybe there needn’t be. I’m reminded of the work of physicists in their study of the nature of light; their research has revealed that light has the properties of both waves *and* particles. Physicists, investigators into one of the “hard” sciences, find themselves faced with a reality that is both/and rather than either/or. At the risk of sounding too postmodern, too relativistic, or simply too wishy-washy, I hope that comics criticism can comfortably accept a similar position in its continued exploration of the nature and complexity of comics.

### *Conclusion*

Reduced to one of its most essential components, literature is communication—stories, beliefs, values. There *are* other forms of written communication that are not deemed worthy of the label *literature*, of course—the owner’s manual for a Maytag washer and dryer, a flyer pinned to a bulletin board announcing the sale of a 78 Ford Thunderbird. In recent decades the traditional understanding of what comprises literature has come under attack. Even the Maytag manual, although it doesn’t qualify as “literature,” *is* a text that one can scrutinize. Comics is one of those in-between cultural works that no one’s really sure how to handle. In the last ten or fifteen years, however, there has been a ground swell of realization and appreciation of the graphic novel. Twenty years ago most people thought of a graphic novel as merely a lengthy issue of a superhero comic book, but that is beginning to change.

The perception of the comics genre is undergoing a significant cultural shift. Graphic novels are garnering serious critical and scholarly attention as every year more works and more authors come forward that merit analysis and discussion. Just like literature, film, and the visual

arts, comics is an artistic genre that offers valuable insight into the nature of the human condition. Graphic novels are being reviewed at Salon.com, in *The New York Times Book Review*, and Scott McCloud's work has been anthologized in the twelfth edition of *The Norton Reader*, published in December 2007.

In works like "The American Scholar" (1837) and "The Poet" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson called for a spokesman to capture and express the American spirit; Walt Whitman responded to that call. In a similar manner Walter Benjamin, in the early part of the twentieth century, made an appeal for a new artistic medium that would best reflect that century's quickly evolving culture. Jared Gardner describes his concerns in this way:

Benjamin insisted throughout his career that the emergence of new media in the twentieth century demanded that authors develop a new language to record the present as it moves into the past. He called for a new way of writing to replace the purely textual, one that would utilize the graphic energy of advertising to more accurately capture the present that was, in modernity, already past at the very moment of its articulation. Motion pictures, the most popular and spectacular of the new media forms of his time, would not be the medium to handle this charge. Like Theodor Adorno, Benjamin was troubled by film's inability to open up a space for reflection—precisely the kind of space necessary for the re-encounter with the present/past. When, in "The Author as Producer," Benjamin calls on writers to pick up the camera, it is not film but the *still* camera he is thinking of: only the writer with a camera (or the artist with a typewriter) can hope to break down the crippling "barrier between writing and image" (775). Without ever

knowing its name, the writing Benjamin is calling for in the 1930s is clearly the comic. (789)

One of the unique capabilities of comics is its visual appeal, “the graphic energy of advertising,” while also offering the experience of rumination that is offered by literature; unlike film, comics doesn’t rush its audience along to the next scene commandeering control of the experience of the story. And if comics didn’t succeed as the genre-to-the-rescue that Benjamin called for in the 1930s, it looks as if it’s got a good chance at widespread popular support well before the 2030s.

The case that I’m making here is essentially two-fold: comics is a viable and vital up-and-coming genre, and Chris Ware is one of the most important comics creators who is expanding the expressive capability of the genre. Not only is he an innovator, but, maybe more importantly, he is also a historian of comics—a researcher, an archivist, a collector, a connoisseur—someone who has immersed himself in the provenance of the genre. Comics art and narrative have developed considerably over the past three or four decades, but it has taken someone with Ware’s fascination with the past to rediscover the early-twentieth-century masters and reintroduce their sensibility. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, his accomplishment is something like the Italian Renaissance that rediscovered Classical culture following the medieval period. The dark age of comics came in the slump after the wild success of superhero comic books in the late 30s and early 40s, and then deepened with the acerbic attacks of Wertham and his fellow iconoclasts. Even though comic book sales were rebounding by the 1980s, the genre had lost much of the beauty and depth and sophistication of its early creators such as George Herriman, Winsor McCay, and Will Eisner.

Now that I have introduced the basic subgenres of comics and briefly described its recent history and criticism, chapter two is going to offer a more in-depth examination of the nature of

comics by comparing it to other artistic genres to which it is most closely related: literature, film, and the visual arts. Although comics has elements in common with all of these, it is a distinct genre able to work in a unique manner, unlike any of these others.

Chapter three is an introduction to Chris Ware and *Jimmy Corrigan*. He began his career by writing a comic strip for *The Daily Texan* to earn extra money while he was in college attending the University of Texas at Austin. His work there attracted the attention of Art Spiegelman who encouraged Ware and served as a mentor. *Jimmy Corrigan* was originally serialized in *Acme Novelty Library*, which Ware self-published, and then it was edited and shaped into a unified story for publication in 2000. In my examination of his work, I will highlight Ware's innovative characteristics such as his subtle emotional tone, his spare style, and his pacing that slows down the action in order to emulate a more true-to-life feel.

In chapter four I offer a more in-depth examination of the development of comics from the 60s through the 80s, and how these developments have produced the current wave of popularity for graphic novels. This chapter compares *Jimmy Corrigan* to a popular trend in literature and elsewhere, an increased political awareness and sensitivity. Finally, chapter five examines Gothic characteristics in *Jimmy Corrigan*; Ware both conforms to and challenges Gothic conventions in unusual and intriguing ways.

To conclude, I would like to express the same sentiment as Paul Gilroy in his outstanding postcolonial work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*: "It is essential to emphasise that there is nothing definitive here. Black Atlantic culture is so massive and its history so little known that I have done scarcely more than put down some preliminary markers for more detailed future investigations. My concerns are heuristic and my conclusions are strictly provisional. There are also many obvious omissions" (xi). This dissertation is only two-

hundred—some pages rather than the twenty—two hundred that would be necessary to begin to adequately examine the topic of comics. Although I firmly believe that Ware is creating comics worthy of the most stringent critical evaluation, there is much more to say about his work as well as that of myriad other writers, and there are questions pertaining to comics to occupy scholars for decades to come.

## CHAPTER 2.

### COMICS' PLACE WITHIN THE ARTISTIC LANDSCAPE

#### *Introduction*

In a well-known essay defending the advent of Abstract Expressionism in the work of artists like Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and others, Clement Greenberg wrote in 1960 that starting in the previous century each of the arts had needed to establish its unique area of competence. The essence of Modernism, of which he considered this style of painting to be a part, lay in “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (Greenberg 85). As logic came to occupy a position of dominance in this late manifestation of the Enlightenment, the arts came under scrutiny, and upon each of them was laid the burden of demonstrating “that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity” (Greenberg 86).

Comics is currently in a similar situation: faced with the onus of justifying its own value and importance, it is an artistic medium that is awash in a sea of other media. And, a further challenge is the fact that comics bears much in common with several other art forms. Presumably other media have had to go through a similar process at some point, to some degree. Why do musicals, for instance, continue to do so well with films like *Moulin Rouge* and the remake of *Hairspray* when they are so similar to theater and opera and nonmusical films? Although the similarities are apparent, there *is* something unique in musicals that enables them to continue to be viable in the highly competitive artistic and entertainment markets. And graphic novels are proving the same to be true for the comics medium.

Every aspect of culture—music, literature, language—develops in relationship to every other. In order to define the comics medium more precisely, in order to plot its cultural coordinates within this complex landscape more accurately, one must examine in depth the relationship of comics to literature, film, and the visual arts. All three of these are narrative media, along with opera and theater, but each one has unique capabilities and strengths, as well as weaknesses. It is essential, then, to position comics in relationship to other, obviously related, media—in order to establish the importance of similarities as well as the greater importance of differences. For example, it is easy to see the similarities between cinema and comics, but a closer analysis reveals stark and important differences. The approach of French critic Philippe Marion is attractive: rather than trying to isolate comics' fundamental characteristics, "the specificity of the medium has less to do with a set of fixed features used exclusively in the comics, than with a larger set of elements it shares with other media" (Baetens 146). This approach has gained momentum in the last decades of the twentieth century. Keith Cohen recognized that there was "abundant research that still needs to be done in the general field of cross-art affinities" (711), and since 1979, when he issued this call, there has indeed been much work in this area, at least in regard to comics.

Graphic novels function in much the same way as novels: they offer "a firmness of treatment and subtlety to which we are not accustomed on the screen" (Bazin 727), but they also have the extraordinary visual capability of painting and film. Graphic novels combine the strengths of all of these, and yet transcend the limitations and capabilities of each. This interdisciplinary union is not a recent discovery, but has been utilized for some time and is a central feature of twentieth-century culture:



The twentieth century began in a flurry of artistic hybrids, everything from calligrams to tone poems. The mood in this period of *contre-décadence* was to change significantly after the First World War, but the gesture of drawing on one art for the enrichment of another—a gesture that Europe had become familiar with since Wagner’s generation—was repeated over and over and has come to be an essential characteristic of twentieth-century art. (Cohen 696)

This “essential characteristic” is found throughout modernism and postmodernism, both of which have been periods that saw the dissolving of generic boundaries—from the *papier collé* of synthetic cubism to the constructed, sculptural canvases of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

Like these examples, the comics medium occupies an interesting position that is neither entirely this nor that, but defies easy categorization. Jared Gardner writes about the “inextricability of various binaries in the comics form” in a poetical fashion: “Comics chronicle the twilight world, the liminal space between past and present, text and image, creator and reader. The comic frame is necessarily a space where these binaries overlap, collaborate and compete for attention and meaning” (801). The most important works since World War Two “are consistently the ones which eschew generic categories . . . or which seek contagion from other arts. . . . The twentieth-century tradition, if there is any pertinence to such a term, is marked fundamentally by a desire to go beyond the confines of the single art-form” (Cohen 715).

Jonathan Culler asks an interesting question in regard to this apparent penchant for hybrid art forms: “Why are our most crucial and tantalizing experiences of literature located at the interstices of genres, in this region of *non-genre literature*?” (53). The answer lies, at least in part, in the modern sensibility that has developed gradually over the last five or six centuries: we

are tantalized by the new and the fresh, by that which is unfamiliar. Anything that is foreign retains a sense of mystery and intrigue—it is captivating. And it is because of this characteristic in human nature that we think of art the way that we do: art is innovation. When a Henry James appears on the scene, we don't applaud quite as loud nor quite as long when another writer comes along who writes in a similar style. And after a decade or so that style falls out of favor altogether because it ceases to challenge or interest us. It is in the very nature of art, then, to challenge our ideas, beliefs, and expectations, and this is precisely what the graphic novel is able to do. For decades now the traditional novel has been turning and twisting, trying to find some new mode of expression—something new to say or a new way to say it. French writer, philosopher, and theorist Maurice Blanchot once observed that “when one encounters a novel written according to all the rules of the past historic tense and third person narration, one has not, of course, encountered ‘literature’” (qtd. in Culler 56).

In this chapter I will examine the nature of the “creative challenge” provided by comics through its relationship to the other genres of literature, film, and the visual arts. Comics challenges readers in ways that traditional novels and movies don't tend to do as often, because they fall into traditional narrative practices. It offers an exciting new experience of reading; comics engages a reader's attention unlike traditional prose or cinema.

A renowned comics scholar, M. Thomas Inge, writes that there “has been nothing else quite like comic art on the cultural scene since the invention of the novel for potential in creative challenge and imaginative opportunity” (*Comics* xx–xxi). Similar to other artistic genres, comics was influenced by the development of postmodernism. It was postmodernism's enthusiasm over blurring the distinction between high and low art forms that enabled comic books to transition from childish to adult entertainment, and then from popular to serious art. By closely examining

these other artistic forms, it is apparent that comics is a distinct medium, offering a completely unique experience from every other artistic genre.

### *Comics' Relationship to Literature*

In the first chapter I demonstrated that recent comics criticism has moved away from issues related to the form of the genre; throughout most of the rest of this chapter, however, in my first in-depth examination of the nature of comics, I *will* be addressing primarily formalist aspects of the genre. The purpose of this assessment is to lay the foundation for the more complex, cultural considerations that will be taken up in the following chapters. It is important to establish, though, what comics is and how it compares to other types of artistic expression.

Of the three genres that I am comparing to comics in this chapter, literature is probably the most dissimilar, while film has the most in common. Language and images, however, upon closer observation, have enjoyed a pretty close relationship over the last millennium. One might think back to the Middle Ages: illuminated manuscripts were so ornate that it is often difficult for the untrained eye to pick out the highly decorated text; also, the Bayeux Tapestry contains narrative text interspersed throughout the figures. Moving forward in time there are the literary works illustrated by Gustave Doré including the Christian Bible, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and many others. Even more recently are Rockwell Kent's 280 drawings for *Moby-Dick* published in 1930; Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Belle Captive*, a surrealist novel illustrated with seventy-seven reproductions of Rene Magritte's paintings; and Donald Barthelme's *Sam's Bar*, an illustrated novel. So by no means have language and the visual arts been strangers.

This dyad of text and image, though, according to Michel Thévoz, has long privileged the former over the latter: "a thousand-year-old logocentric tradition has trained us to conceive a relationship of the suzerainty of the verb to the image" (qtd. in Groensteen, *System 7*). Comics,

however, eliminates this adversarial relationship by intergrafting these distinct media into a new genre; comics is a unique, entirely distinct genre. Because comics utilizes images, this might be one reason that it has never been held in the same regard as literature; comics plays the part of literature's illegitimate, black-sheep-of-the-family cousin. Eddie Campbell, a well respected Scottish comics artist, describes what it was like to see *From Hell* in the publishing catalogue: "Finally the book was published. I got the catalog from Random House and it's full of regular books. It's great! Instead of being in reviews, I'm in this book with regular books. I thought, 'At last here we are in the main street, we're not on some crummy side street, we're on the main street'" (np). Thierry Groensteen, one of the world's foremost comics critics, is something of an iconoclast and he refuses to acknowledge that a novel is any way superior to a graphic novel; he writes:

The fact that written literature (itself preceded, and at one time accompanied, by oral literature) preceded by several millennia the quasi-simultaneous advent of cinema and modern comics confers on it no monopoly on the privilege of rights, merely a *de facto* anteriority. In other words, it is no longer possible to confuse narrative and literature, exposed as we have been to a range of media that have, more or less, recourse to the structures of the story. (*System* 7-8)

Dante Aligheri did for literature, in the fourteenth century, what graphic novels today are doing for comics. He was a renowned writer, not only for his stories, but also for the fact that he wrote in Italian rather than Latin. Dante established the vernacular as an acceptable medium for excellence; previously "only frivolous or popular works appeared in the vulgar language of the common people" (Bressler 23). Several centuries later Williams Wordsworth and Walt Whitman would take matters a step further by not only using the language, but the usages of the people as

well. Today, through the work of people like Daniel Clowes and Alison Bechdel, graphic novels are transforming comics, previously considered to be an inferior medium, into a genre capable of the highest artistic excellence.

Groensteen, whom I described as an iconoclast, writes, “Comic art is an autonomous and original medium. The only things it has in common with literature are: that it is printed and sold in bookshops, and that it contains linguistic elements” (“Comics” 39). I can’t help but feel that Groensteen is being—maybe intentionally for effect—too narrow and too hyperbolic here. After all, both genres can serve as narrative or reportage, both utilize plot, characters—a great many characteristics.

Comics and literature have a great deal in common, and yet there are also substantial differences. Initially I had planned on arguing for comics as the newest wave of literary forms, but I’m no longer sure that this is possible. Although I have discussed it in these terms above—and I think this is a justifiable practice for the sake of convenience and clarity—there are enough important points of difference so that comics has much more in common with film than with literature. Comics is not a sub-genre of literature, but is a co-genre; it relies more heavily upon graphic images to carry the narrative burden, and it does not even have to rely upon verbal language at all. Groensteen says that the actual *experiences* of the two genres are different in nature. He says that comics provides not only a story-related pleasure, but also an art-related pleasure, “an aesthetic emotion founded on the appreciation of the exactness and expressivity of a composition, pose or line,” but there is also a medium-related pleasure, that Groensteen says “cannot be reduced to the sum of the other two” (“Comics” 159).

After briefly discussing the theoretical and cultural contexts in which graphic novels arose, I will go on to consider how literature and comics compare. Modernism was an early–

twentieth-century cultural phenomenon in Europe and the United States. It was a period in which many previously held assumptions were scrutinized and rejected, especially in the arts; Modernism is among those “overwhelming dislocations, those cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative human spirit that seem to topple even the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions” (Bradbury and McFarlane 30). Painting had already been undergoing a revolution for several decades while literature was radically reconceived by writers like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. While comics has been around for well over a hundred years, it has only been in the last thirty that we have seen the rise of the graphic novel—and only in the last twenty years has it begun to garner widespread critical attention. Why was it not accepted into the artistic fold earlier than it was?

Although Modernism was a time of challenge and rebellion against tradition, it also possessed an elitist worldview—a “movement towards sophistication and mannerism, towards introversion, technical display” (Bradbury and McFarlane 26). Members of the avant-garde like Picasso and Joyce weren’t producing works for the middle class. In fact, at the well known art exhibit, the New York Armory Show of 1913, audiences were shocked and outraged: they did not understand what they were seeing. And Modernists were fine with that. Their works were philosophic in nature, not only exploring questions of life and meaning, but also probing the very nature of the artistic enterprise itself, and the nature of different artistic genres.

Much of this began to change with the rise of Postmodernism, however. Whereas the Modernists had out-and-out rejected the traditions of Western culture, such as the heritage of Classicism, Postmodernists reinserted elements of it with a sense of playfulness and irony that had largely been missing before; they brought a sense of mischievousness to their work, like adolescents who gleefully undermine their elders’ authority. One of the outcomes of this was the

inclusion of popular art forms into works of serious intent. Jasper Johns did a bronze sculpture of two beer cans and Andy Warhol constructed Brillo Pad boxes that he stacked in the gallery space turning it into something resembling a warehouse, in addition to his well-known paintings of Campbell's soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles. Many detractors of these new developments, however, saw Postmodernism as a "guerilla action, dismantling the logic of a repressive state and the political structures and social institutions that sustain it" (Trachtenberg xii).

Linda Hutcheon challenges the idea that the art of the 1960s didn't produce any lasting innovation in aesthetics: "I would argue that they did provide the background, though not the definition, of the postmodern, for they were crucial in developing a different concept of the possible function of art, one that would contest the . . . humanist moral view with its potentially elitist class bias" (8). The liberal humanism that came out of the nineteenth century held that the artistic enterprise was practically sacrosanct—something to be held apart from the life of daily living and revered. By contrast, after the 1960s not only was this popular material injected into the artistic bloodstream, but many popular forms were investigated with intense academic rigor (Hutcheon 20). This is the cultural atmosphere that enabled comic books to transition from childish to adult entertainment, and then from popular to serious art.

Postmodern artists not only utilized elements of pop culture, but they also practiced "a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself" (Hutcheon 9). Robert Rauschenberg included the detritus of daily living on a canvas that he laid flat on the floor, thereby pushing painting into the realm of the sculptural, and Jasper Johns stacked three canvases of the American flag on top of one another so that they project into three-dimensional space. Long before these interdisciplinary works, however, comics was utilizing both verbal and graphic means of expression; if it was not taken seriously as

an art form before the 1980s, this might be because comics was a genre well ahead of its time. Postmodern literature began to challenge Modernist categories and definitions several decades after the advent of comics. Hutcheon writes that “if elitist culture has indeed been fragmented into specialist disciplines, as many have argued, then hybrid novels . . . work both to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology, political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature, literary criticism, and so on” (20–1).

Graphic novels are currently on the cutting edge of literary development. They are a medium that is producing astounding works of insight and power. And yet, because they do represent a significant break away from traditional literary forms, they have largely been overlooked by academia. This is beginning to change, however, as they have been garnering more and more critical attention. In his *New Yorker* article Peter Schjeldahl describes this medium in a way that most of his readers must have found surprising; because graphic novels are a new artistic genre—even distinct from that of literature, as I will argue below—they present a unique challenge. Schjendahl writes:

Like life-changing poetry of yore, graphic novels are a young person’s art, demanding and rewarding mental flexibility and nervous stamina. Consuming them—toggling for hours between the incommensurable functions of reading and looking—is taxing. The difficulty of graphic novels limits their potential audience, in contrast to the blissfully easeful, still all-consuming movies, but that is not a debility; rather, it gives them the opalescent sheen of avant-gardism.

(162)



Comics is an adjustment for those of us who have spent most of our lives reading novels. The similarities between the novel and graphic novel are apparent: both are narrative media that utilize plot, characters, digression, themes, symbols, allusion, conflict, figurative language, and many other characteristics besides. In short, any device that can be used in a novel can also be found in its more recent counterpart. The graphic novel, however, is not simply a visual-arts foil to the novel, but it also has elements corresponding to poetry, reportage, the short story, and other literary genres. Comics, then, is not a subgenre of literature, although this is often a temptation for those of us who feel the need to put this thriving new medium into a prescribed category, but rather it is a co-genre (Groensteen, *System* 128).

The first, and most obvious, difference between literature and comics is the sole reliance upon language in the former. This factor is both a strength as well as a weakness. Because this is its sole tool for communication, one is much more likely to find great examples of language in literature. While comics certainly presents an interesting challenge to the writer, and many examples of comics exemplify great writing, language in this medium also shares the stage with images. The text in comics cannot be as expansive as in a novel or a short story even, but instead functions a little more like poetry where a writer must be much more precise and selective; and not only is there less space for text, but it must also relate to what is taking place visually.

But even though comics almost always communicates via text *and* images, it doesn't even have to use language at all. Comics can unfold an intricate plot, present dynamic, evolving characters, and effectively communicate themes about the nature of the human condition—all without the use of a verbal text. Examples of these types of works include *Passionate Journey* (1919) and *Die Sonne* (1927) by the Belgian Frans Masereel, *Destiny* (1930) by a German artist, Otto Nückel, *Vertigo* (1937) by the American Lynd Ward, and much more recently Eric

Drooker's works *Flood!* (1992) and *Blood Song: A Silent Ballad* (2002) (Eisner, *Graphic* 1, 136). Groensteen points out that "the sequential image is seen to be plainly narrative, without necessarily needing any verbal help" (*System* 9). This is what lies at the heart of the comics genre: the ability to tell a story primarily through successive images. Groensteen describes this as the "central element of comics," he writes that "the first criteria in the foundational order, is *iconic solidarity*. I define this as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated . . . and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in preasentia*" (*System* 18).

Groensteen establishes two vitally crucial points. First, comics is, at its very essence, a visual genre. The greater portion of the narrative burden is carried by the graphic images, rather than the written text, so "iconic solidarity" is a key element. Second, comics is a both/and medium through-and-through. It is both textual and visual; it features the "double characteristic" of both individual images—each of which is important—as well as a narrative created by the sequence of these images.

Unlike comics, prose literature makes broad and expansive use of language, but this is also a burden, a type of detraction, simply because these lengthy descriptions *are* necessary to evoke a mood or a physical type—whether architecture, landscape or a person. There is something poetical in comics' evocation, something more true-to-life in presenting an image and letting the reader digest and make sense of what he or she sees intuitively, rather than having to spend pages to spell something out prosaically. Everyone is aware of the power of nonverbal communication; so often we understand what people are saying more by their behavior than by what they choose to enunciate. Carol Bigwood writes that

we do not only read signs that represent concepts and numbers, but broadly understand the world in terms of readable signs. We ‘read’ an emotion, a thought ‘written’ on a person’s face. We read a situation, an artwork, a life, a culture. Reading a world rather than seeing it, requires that the ambiguities of its inviting, inexhaustible textures be transformed into a system of rather straightforward, commanding signs. (307)

This experience of an instinctive comprehension of people and events is much more easily accomplished in comics. I love Joseph Witek’s description that in comics “the images are at once more immediate and more subliminal than in prose” (43).

As an example of this subtle means of communication, I’d like to consider an observation made by Marion D. Perret; in her article, “‘And Suit the Action to the Word’: How a Comics Panel Can Speak Shakespeare,” she compares several different comics adaptations of *Hamlet* over the last fifty years. The most successful attempt was produced in the early 1990s, adapted by Steven Grant and Tom Mandrake, and the reason for this success is that it fully utilized the capabilities of the comics medium. Perret describes the presentation of the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy:

At the play’s most cerebral moment, the tragic hero is pictured not entirely as a man, the ‘paragon of animals’ (2.2.308), but partly as ‘a beast that wants discourse of reason’ (1.2.150). Hamlet’s legs and feet here suggest a goat’s legs and hooves, and his man’s face is given a snoutlike appearance by a patch of shadow under his chin. This visual effect usefully underlines a structural irony of the play; as he imitates Claudius’ pretense and scheming, Hamlet grows more like the man he compared to a satyr (1.2.140). (143)

Further, like cinema, comics can use angle of perspective to create atmosphere; about this same scene of the soliloquy Perret writes, “we are distanced from Hamlet by the visual perspective, an overview that denies intimacy and prompts analysis. . . . in Mandrake’s soliloquy panel we, like gods, look down on a mortal confronting mortality” (143).

Actually seeing something for oneself is completely unlike being told about it. Compared to comics at their best, literature seems like life lived at second hand. Authors like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, aware of this aspect of literature to some extent, set out to do away with the omniscient narrator and utilize “a highly self-conscious narrator as first-person teller or third-person ‘central reflector.’ The emphasis, as a result, was on *showing* how the events unfold dramatically rather than [sic] recounting them, from an aloof position, as already having taken place” (Cohen 698). Keith Cohen suggests that this development may have grown out of painting from some decades earlier: “By means of a method that may have owed something to the impressionist painters, the emphasis was on showing the object rather than telling about it, on seeing it and making it seen” (708).

The problem, however, is that literature, prose especially, cannot not tell—even when it attempts to show rather than tell, it is still telling. Comics is simply a more *experiential* genre. It doesn’t need to describe the tedium of waiting on someone who is late; comics can show five or ten or twenty panels of someone sitting in an airport on a bench. This is a medium that provides an experience significantly different from that of literature. Joost Pollmann writes:

The conventional view is that the imagination of the writer makes images superfluous. And the eloquence of the artist doesn’t need words. Isn’t the graphic novel doomed to drown in redundancy? No. Because the suggestion of sensory

experience (sounds, movements, temperatures) offered by a skilled comic author, adds a truly new dimension to the verbal and cerebral aspects of the story” (110).

Another difference between traditional literary genres and comics is that the latter is a more universally engaging medium. And actually, I believe this fact has long hurt the reputation of comics; they have been viewed as a debased, demotic form of entertainment. Even when outstanding stories were being produced there was a hesitancy—even a disgust—at the thought of embracing them, which has only in the last few years begun to recede.

So, while I want to argue that comics is a more universally engaging medium, this is by no means meant to convey that it is mere entertainment. All artists who are striving for excellence in their disparate genres are wary of going too far with the *dulce* of Horace’s renowned *dulce et utile*, but the pleasure of a work is of critical importance. Have people been reading Homer’s *The Iliad* for 2700 years because it provides us with insight into the human capacity for brutality, or the beleaguered nature of people trying to work together in society? No. *The Iliad* endures because it captivates. We still to this day admire Hector; we are attracted to Paris even though we despise his weakness and cowardice; we are similarly drawn to Achilles despite his childish petulance. In short, *The Iliad* was and is an entertaining work. This is the nature, I am arguing, of the appeal of many of today’s graphic novels.

If educators are interested in engaging students in ideas, and turning them on to great works of literature, comics is an exceptional tool. Many kids find the idea of even a modest novel to be daunting and intimidating. Graphic novels are a means of getting the next generation excited about reading. Recent evidence even suggests that “reading graphic novels may require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone” (Schwarz 263).

Personally I have always been curious about why so many of our high school curricula include *Hamlet*. For one thing, it deals with very deep and complex dimensions of the human psyche; what percentage of high school students are capable of grasping and then analyzing the issues that are taking place in the young prince's mind? Another, more obvious issue, is simply the state of the English language 500 years ago. I wonder how many people, even with graduate degrees in English, can read the "To be or not to be" soliloquy smoothly without having to constantly look at footnotes for meanings of words like *contumely*, *quietus*, *bodkin*, and *fardels*. Once hung up and distracted by the difficulty of the language, the powerful ideas and nuances of the speech are lost. Next to seeing a production of a play, comics comes much nearer to the true experience of drama than reading the text in a book. While Shakespeare is clearly one of the most brilliant writers in the English language, comics might be the best way to introduce him to high school students to get them excited about a great story like that of *Hamlet*.

In addition to being a more engaging medium, comics is also a newer and fresher medium. The novel is an older form that has been stretched and experimented upon for centuries, especially in the last five or six decades; graphic novels, by contrast, are a relatively new medium that is still expanding. Because comics utilizes so many new and unique means of expression, Pollmann writes, "These idioms give the comic boundless means of expression; boundless because the medium is still expanding its boundaries" (107). I would refer the reader back to the comments made by Jonathan Culler, referenced in the introduction to this chapter: works that fall at the "interstices of genres" are more titillating (Culler 53). Comics has a great deal more potential than the novel at this point simply because it has lain, almost dormant, outside the periphery of artistic acceptability.

In thinking about the nature of these two genres in relation to one another, I would like to examine at greater length some comic book adaptations of classic literary works. It is a very delicate enterprise any time a work of art is translated from one medium to another. And even though I wrote above that literature and comics do have much in common since they are essentially narrative forms, a successful adaptation from the former to the latter is only very rarely accomplished. Pollmann writes that an “adaptation for the comic format is not essentially different from an adaptation for the screen,” but I could not disagree more strongly (111). As will be discussed below in the section on film, comics is a medium that, like literature, empowers the reader with the ability to control the rate at which one experiences the work; electronic media, like television and film, don’t afford the luxury of going back to review a scene again or finding an earlier connection in the work.

In addition, a film must drastically truncate the original material, which comics doesn’t necessarily have to do. It is a pretty common experience that someone who has fallen in love with a novel is often disappointed with the cinematic version, and this is because a two-hour film cannot possibly capture the nuances and depth of a 300-page novel. Graphic novels, on the other hand, *can* run to several hundred pages. Although the two examples that I am going to examine here, *Hamlet* and *Moby-Dick*, are shorter comic book adaptations, someone could do a graphic-novel version that would be much more faithful to the original than a film could be.

This does present another problem, however: in the dozen or so adaptations examined in the two articles by M. Thomas Inge and Perret, those comics that attempt to be too faithful to the original work—thereby ignoring the unique capabilities of the comics medium—are invariably artistic failures. But, at the same time, a work like Eisner’s “Hamlet on a Rooftop” that

“interprets as much as illustrates” (Perret 127), which proves itself to be an “overvigorous attempt,” is also doomed to failure (128).

So what does make for a valuable adaptation, then? First, the comics version should capture the mood of the original work. In 1990 Classics Illustrated produced a forty-four-page comic-book version of Herman Melville’s classic novel *Moby-Dick*, adapted by Bill Sienkiewicz who was assisted by writer Dan Chichester. Of the six attempts made to render this novel as a comic book examined by Inge, dating from 1947 through 1990, this is the only one about which he had anything favorable to say. Inge describes Sienkiewicz and Chichester’s work with descriptions like these: “a brooding and masterful effort to recapture the philosophic terror that resides at the heart of Melville’s challenge to the universe and the benevolence of God”; “skillfully abridges Melville’s expansive style, while retaining as much of the spirit and mood of the original as possible”; and “the pictures serve to lead the reader’s thoughts off into the netherworlds of Ahab’s and Melville’s deep and disturbing imaginations” (“Ahab” 162–3).

*Moby-Dick* is a dark and philosophic work, and the creators of this adaptation have successfully captured these aspects of the original. A further accomplishment of this particular comic book is that it creatively “uses and expands on the artistic and technical possibilities of the medium” (Inge, “Ahab” 158). Inge, in fact, even questions whether this could properly be called a comic book since it doesn’t use any word balloons—a commonly accepted, and even definitive, element of the form—and it abandons the normal panel structure. He writes,

one can argue that [Sienkiewicz] has moved in another direction away from the comic book. Since the words and pictures are not always integrated and painting has replaced cartooning, what we may have is an illustrated condensation of the novel—a brilliant one and perhaps a work of art in its own right, but not exactly a



version of the pictorial narrative we have come to call the comic book or more recently the graphic novel. (Inge, “Ahab” 163)

So, not only does this version faithfully capture the spirit of the original work, but it is also innovative and expands upon the possibilities of the comics genre.

Another important aspect necessary for the successful adaptation of a literary work to the comics format is the effective incorporation of visual resources to complement the story of the original. In the version of *Hamlet* discussed above, by Grant and Mandrake, even the text of the prince’s soliloquy takes on expressive, visual characteristics that effectively communicate his emotional state. Perret writes that “[e]ven the most philosophical soliloquy can become visually active when the artist, recognizing that its action lies primarily in the slowly developing speech and the responses of the reader, draws for the mind as well as the eye” (123); she says that the “challenge of translating Hamlet’s meditation into images can be met if Hamlet’s developing insight is drawn not *by* the artist but *from* the reader” (136).

In the “To be or not to be” soliloquy Mandrake accomplishes this using winding balloon chains that each comprise an emotional unit (Perret 136), and as Hamlet is torn in his resolve between two courses of action, so the balloons alternate back and forth to reflect this tension (142). The actual words themselves, then, are “active, not only in Hamlet’s mind but visually on the page” (Perret 136). Perret writes that this is the brilliance of the comics genre: “Whereas books *allow* reading between the lines, comic books *require* reading between the panels, and when the comics artist manipulates our imaginative involvement effectively, we do more than fill in gaps between pictured actions: we become co-creators of the story’s meaning, which we therefore find relevant to us” (136).

In a successful adaptation it is important to recognize the capabilities of the different genres with which one is working. It is not reasonable to presume that one version will be entirely faithful to the original—it is not possible, nor is it even desirable. Inge writes that the “factors which make for a successful and satisfying film experience are not the same things which provide a good reading experience, and each work most appropriately should be evaluated in terms of the separate aesthetic possibilities inherent in each medium” (“Ahab” 158).

Groensteen is in favor of tearing down these old labels and erecting new categories, and I think that he may be on to something. He explains that comics, literature, film, and theater are all merely genres of the narrative mode (Groensteen, *System* 8). Part of the problem is that “narratology suffers from having developed in reference only to literature, when its field of natural investigation is in reality” the narrative mode, “and should no longer exclude the art of visual stories” (Groensteen, *System* 160).

Comics is certainly just as capable of every aspect of narrative that novels are. But comics aren’t limited to fiction, because they “englobe and traverse many different genres,” both fiction and nonfiction alike (Groensteen, “Comics” 38–9). In a library or a bookstore, then, graphic novels don’t belong in the literature section, nor even their own section, but they most properly belong throughout the collection—in history, biography, fiction, autobiography, documentary, so forth.

A further problem, if we stick with the old categories, is what to do with everything that seems to fall in-between. Comics presents no generic challenge whatsoever compared to something like Tom Phillips’ *A Humument*. He has taken a late-nineteenth-century Victorian novel, W. H. Mallock’s *A Human Document*, and made every single page, not only a conveyer of information through text, but also a visual field of communication as well. Phillips has illustrated

“each page of Mallock’s printed text so that only select clusters and rivers of the original words are visible” (Maynard 82). In essence he creates word balloons from the text that is already printed to create almost zen– or poetry–like fragments of text that offer a whole new perspective apart from that of the original work. James L. Maynard finds the relationship between the graphic and textual complex, so that “even separating the two for individual analysis violates the simultaneity of their reception” (86).

While this work is certainly an example of narrative, it isn’t exactly comics and it certainly isn’t a novel, especially since it reads almost more like poetry. Whatever label is eventually found suitable for *A Humument*, one thing *is* certain: the visual arts have decisively and effectively broken into the realm of narrative. Whether comics is seen as a literary form, or to the extent that it justifies its own generic category, our conceptions of narrative can never return to what they were before. The visual arts are clearly capable and competent to tell a complex and interesting story.

### *The Relationship of Comics to Film*

Comics has long suffered a position of ignominy within the artistic community and even in the perception of the mainstream culture at large. In order to rectify this fact, artists and critics have frequently compared comics to film in an attempt to gain credibility and recognition, and besides this attempt at garnering respect, the two art forms do have much in common. Both are narrative media, both are visually oriented, and they make use of similar tools and practices such as lighting, movement of the viewer’s perspective, pacing, dialogue, employment of scenes, gestures, compressed time, camera angles, and character development (Inge, *Comics* xix–xx). The two have so much in common that photographers and filmmakers will frequently study comics as a means of understanding photography and film. Well-known figures such as Orson

Wells, Alain Resnais, Federico Fellini, and George Lucas have acknowledged their indebtedness to the comics medium as a source for further developing their art (Inge, *Comics* xx), not to mention the widespread use of storyboards in the industry<sup>4</sup>. In his examination of comics' influence in film, Matt McAllister writes that comic books and comic strips were central to motion picture serials in the 1930s and 1940s: "one could argue that the style and format of these movies [action/adventure serials]—perhaps exploiting the serialized narrative structure and visual modalities of comics indirectly influenced the episodic and cliffhanger nature of the action film genre, some of them self-consciously so" (110).

Recently, however, comics has begun to separate itself from film—to establish itself as an art form alongside film and photography and painting, rather than subordinate to these other media. It isn't surprising, then, to find comics scholars consistently calling for a critical vocabulary that is uniquely suited to this medium (Inge, *Comics* xvii, Bongco 14, Harvey 3–4); nor is it surprising, because of the strong connection between comics and film, to still find critics pointing out that comics "predominantly utilize a 'cinematic' approach" (Tabachnick 6), and that "the argot" of film "is useful in describing" comics (Harvey 175). As comics has begun to establish itself and gain credibility, there have been fewer comparisons to film, and more frequently comparisons are made to literature, so that the experience of comics is described as a form of reading, as discussed above by critics like Hatfield. This shift in perspective, he says, is intended to gain comics greater respectability—to associate this genre with an even more highly regarded medium of narrative (Hatfield 33).

So, despite the many, obvious similarities between the two media, there are also important and significant differences. If competence in comics seems like it would make for an easy transition into film, think again. One of the recent giants of the comics medium is Frank

Miller; he is now known worldwide for such brilliant works as *Ronin* (1983), *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Sin City* (1991–), and *300* (1998). When Robert Rodriguez began work on the filmic “translation”—as he called it—of *Sin City*, he brought Miller on board to assist with directorial responsibilities, and he even insisted upon giving him screen credit as co-director for his work. When he was interviewed recently for the release of *300*, Miller was asked about the possibility that he would direct a film on his own, and he was quick to say that he’s nowhere near ready without first getting more on-set experience (Garrett 53).

To begin this examination of differences between comics and film, I first want to examine the relatively minor points of distinction; while some of these *are* pretty significant points of contrast, they don’t figure very prominently in the work that I am doing here. To begin, comics is a hand-made product while film is the result of a technological process (Harvey 175); the distinction is similar to the one between painting or drawing and photography. Complicating this distinction slightly, however, is the fact that graphic novels, like film, are mass produced, and when one is examined, this craftsmanship is not readily apparent. So, even though they are constructed through a tedious process, this is not apparent to the person holding one in her hands. Occupying a position between comics and film is the animated cartoon, which is carefully constructed—although by using computers, when is then also used to provide motion and sound.

Related to this difference is the fact that comics are usually the product of one or two people, in contrast to film, which is a collaboration among a large assortment of people—producers, the director, actors, sound technicians, lighting technicians, editors, and so forth (Chute and DeKoven 769–70). We frequently describe film as *an* art form, but really it is the product of camera work and acting and music and lighting and sound effects, all of which are their own artistic forms. In graphic novels, by contrast, it is often one person who “must fulfill

simultaneously the roles of scriptwriter, scene designer, director, and producer. The actors must be brought to life in the flat space of a printed page, engage our interest” (Inge, *Comics* 5).

Because film is a technological format, it is more easily edited throughout the entire process of production: scenes can be shortened or lengthened or rearranged or even re-shot, music can be added or dropped or changed, and with all of the takes that are filmed, the director can choose the best version that he feels captures his vision of the film. Daniel Clowes was asked about working on comics versus movies, since he has had several of his works make the transition from one form to the other—*Art School Confidential* being one of the most recent. He described working in film: “You can polish movies, especially in the screenplay form, down to the last detail and get everything exactly the way you want it”; with comics, on the other hand, “it’s very hard to go back and edit. If you want to add a panel in the middle of page 4, and you’re working on page 16, how do you do that? You can’t shift everything over. You’re limited by the nature of the medium. So you have to trust your intuition a lot more in comics” (qtd. in Flagg 39). Computers have made all types of editing nearly effortless: music, photography, written documents. There is no way, however, to do something comparable for comics, because, as Clowes points out, panels can’t simply be shifted over. Every single page of a comic book or graphic novel is carefully configured and shaped so that every panel relates to every other, as well as to the page as a whole; each page is a creative and original composition.

Another difference is that comics, compared to film, can bend the rules of reality much more easily (Harvey 186). Film and photography are media designed primarily to record that which *is*—the real world. In order for film to accomplish what comics does with ease through drawing, it must rely upon special effects. Harvey makes an interesting observation that special effects are related to the comics medium in their craftsmanship since they are “a species of

animation, of hand–wrought image making” (190). Even with today’s computer technology, while special effects may no longer be “hand–wrought,” they are aptly described as a form of animation, often created one frame at a time.

This is discussed at greater length below, but special effects has helped film better capture the feel of comics. Miller says that CGI is “great for conveying a cartoonist’s sense of reality” (qtd. in Garrett 54); and about Zack Snyder’s adaptation of *300*, he said that “it really is my comic book come to life” (qtd. in Garrett 53).

So far these have all been relatively minor differences, but I want to go on to examine what I consider to be significant differences between the genres of comics and film. To begin with the most obvious contrast, but one that merits consideration, is the fact that film utilizes sound, “film is audiovisual; comics are simply visual” (Harvey 176). This is one of the great technological innovations that made film an even more popular medium in the early decades of the twentieth century. It allows the audience to receive information in a more passive fashion, by listening. It allows film to effectively communicate powerfully and effectively by touching people’s emotional sides. Music and sound effects can heighten tension, startle, or set a mood of depression or caring or fear.

Without a doubt, sound is an incomparable form of communication that cannot be reproduced by the written word. While language *is* a powerful medium, it cannot do justice to the experience of actually hearing a human voice speaking or singing, or the experience of a symphonic orchestra. Because comics lacks the capability of sound, it is much more like literature or painting in this regard, but each of these media *can* achieve effects similar to that of sound. When reading a comic or a novel, or viewing a painting, the artist can create a mood of joy or suspense or fear, but she or he must utilize tools that are particular to that medium. In the

same way, although film cannot do what comics does the way that it does it, film can achieve a similar effect only in a different manner (Harvey 186). So, while my focus is on the unique experience provided by comics, by no means does it outstrip every other artistic form in every way. All of the arts seek to accomplish the same goals: to touch their audiences, to educate, to communicate the experience of what it means to be human. My point in this project is not to promote comics as the most important medium, but merely to point out its strengths and those things that it does do to the best effect.

Not only another difference, but also one of the great strengths of comics is its ability to vary its layout—it is a much more spatially oriented medium than film. In fact, this is one of the primary attributes of the medium. When asked to compare working in these two different artistic forms Miller said that “[c]omic-book pages are vertical, and movie screens are relentlessly horizontal” (qtd. in Garrett 54). And within this vertical space of the comics page, the possible combinations of panel shapes is infinite; in films, by contrast, only very rarely will a director do something interesting with the large, rectangular, brightly-lit space on the screen. If a scene depicts a telephone conversation and divides the screen in half, while this certainly isn’t a new device in the early twenty-first century, it is considered unusual and this type of use of the space is only infrequently used.

In a comic, not only is each panel a creative, individual work of art, but the arrangement of the panels on each page is also a collective work of art. A page might have three rows of four panels each; or the first row might be an entire panel depicting a wide, short, horizontal scene; or maybe the first panel on the left side of the page reaches from top to bottom, and then three panels run from top to bottom on the right side of the page. The possibilities are limitless. In addition, panels don’t have to be square, nor do they have to be isolated, but instead they might



overlap or be embedded within one another. It is evident, then, that the panel composition of each page is a significant aspect of the experience of reading comics. And even though these panels are basic narrative units, by no means are they absolute: text or people or objects can transgress the boundaries of panels.

In the same way that comics primarily relies upon space, film utilizes time. Harvey offers an insightful observation about the relationship of movement, time, and space in comics and film:

Another difference: the images on film move; images in the comics are static.

This seemingly commonplace observation embraces a more subtle truth: motion and time are related. The filmmaker is controlled by time: the motion he's filming needs a certain amount of time to show its completion. . . . The analogue for the cartoonist is space: he needs space—large enough panels or enough of them—to depict an action comprehensibly. But space is not exactly time in comics. In the two media, space and time serve but kindred functions. (176)

McCloud makes a similar comment, but from a little different angle. Eisner's preferred term for comics, *sequential art*, applies to film as well; McCloud makes a distinction by pointing out that film is "sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are. Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space—the screen—while each frame of comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does for film" (*Understanding* 7).

Compared to comics, critics frequently describe film as a relatively passive medium. Not only does the comics audience have to actively engage their minds as they read the words and images, but they also have to actively construct the story as they read—to fill in the gaps between panels. This is an important difference. David Carrier<sup>1</sup> makes an interesting point, and

includes a quote from Earle J. Coleman: “Comics occupy a fascinating place in between paintings and motion pictures. ‘Motion in the movies is made possible by the projector; in the comics, motion appears through our becoming, so to speak, human projectors.’ The successive images are connected only when the reader connects them” (56). More and more this aspect of comics has been emphasized and supported by critics (Hatfield 33). Unlike film, and even painting, comics “are not mere visual displays that encourage inert spectatorship but rather texts that require a reader’s active engagement and collaboration in making meaning” (Hatfield 33).

Comics is almost a connect-the-dot type of medium: everything is there on the page, but it requires the reader to make connections between the panels. The reader is called upon to supply the missing lines that bring the work to life. I like Scott McCloud’s description for comics—which also serves as the subtitle of his first work of criticism, “the invisible art”; he writes that the “comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much *from* them as well” (*Understanding* 92). Stephen E. Tabachnick also writes about how the reader has to provide so much that isn’t provided by the writer, so that “the mental interactivity of the reader with the graphic novel is much more pronounced and essential than that which occurs when he or she watches a film or high-definition television” (25).

I’ve been talking about the audiences of these media, but what about the creators? A common scene in a film might have a lengthy dialogue, or a diatribe by one character, but this isn’t as convenient in comics—there is a greater expectation of action or at least narrative development; it is more difficult for comics to manage ten or fifteen unchanging panels of one person and monologue. Unlike film, it must be much more selective in both the images and the

language that must move the story along so that it doesn't drag. Harvey writes that "the filmmaker needn't be quite as precise in choosing his images as the cartoonist must be. The cartoonist, though, must select exactly the right instants of a story for his drawings because what is chosen to be pictured necessarily acquires more dramatic emphasis than what is left out" (178).

Because the comics reader has more work to do in this medium, it also means that she has more control over the *experience* of the medium—an attribute more akin to literature. Because television and movies are based in time, there's no opportunity for the audience to pause and reflect, but the story is pushed along and the narrative continues its unceasing flow. To a greater degree than with comics, the audience members of a movie are at its mercy—with constantly shifting angles, and views, and scenes, and then with dialogue and music in addition, they are not left much of a chance to consider what is going on and how it relates to what has gone on before. Both Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin were bothered by film's inability to provide opportunity for reflection (Gardner 789). In a traditional novel or graphic novel, by contrast, a reader can reread portions or go back to review something from earlier in the work: "the comicbook reader can partially anticipate and control the pace and order of the changes" (Witek 34). Filmic media do not provide this luxury; they are more like a roller coaster that completely captivates its passengers with each turn and twist throughout the ride until the very end when one finally has an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the experience one has just gone through.

Comics, then, like any other type of literature, provide a better opportunity for the reader to grasp and absorb its content. Most people who have fallen in love with a novel are deeply disappointed by the movie version; there is simply no way to provide the same depth and subtlety and detail in a two-hour movie that one finds in a two- or three-hundred page novel.

André Bazin makes this observation, writing that “the novel offers the cinema characters that are much more complex and, again, as regards the relation of form and content, a firmness of treatment and subtlety to which we are not accustomed on the screen” (727).

Movies, by contrast, simply cannot examine people, events, or issues as deeply as novels or comics are able. Clowes wrote the screenplay for the film based on his graphic novel, *Ghost World*. The trouble, he says, in going from one medium to the other “was that there was almost too much material. [In film] you really just want to have the semblance of a story and some sort of direction” (Flagg 39). Most films that attempt a story that is too deep or complex risk losing and frustrating their audiences.

There is also a visual corollary: comics, due to the control exerted by the reader, allow greater visual depth. Movie directors and producers spend a lot of money on the set—a restaurant for instance. There are tables and chairs, place settings, diners, wait staff, lights, decorations—an entire room that provides the setting. All of these details are merely peripheral, however; someone watching this movie cannot possibly take in all of this detail. It may be a very rich environment, visually, and very convincing, but for the people watching, their focus is on the two or five people who are sitting at the table in the foreground. An artist of a graphic novel, on the other hand, might have a full-page spread of a single scene with dozens of figures, and the reader is able to pore over every minute detail—nothing need be lost due to the fact that the medium itself is setting the pace of the narrative.

This leads us to another important, powerful aspect of comics: simultaneity. A comics page is a cluster of images that a reader digests individually *and* as a whole. In addition, within each panel, there can be more than one action, which is impossible to achieve in film and ensure that the audience is able to follow both actions; even if it can tell the same story, film cannot tell

it in the same way. To demonstrate this characteristic Harvey uses a cartoon from George Herriman's classic comic strip, *Krazy Kat* (fig. 2). He points out that by the third panel there are two plots that have developed: that of Ignatz Mouse hauling up a brick, and the comment by second character about the brick passing the window. In panels four through seven there are now

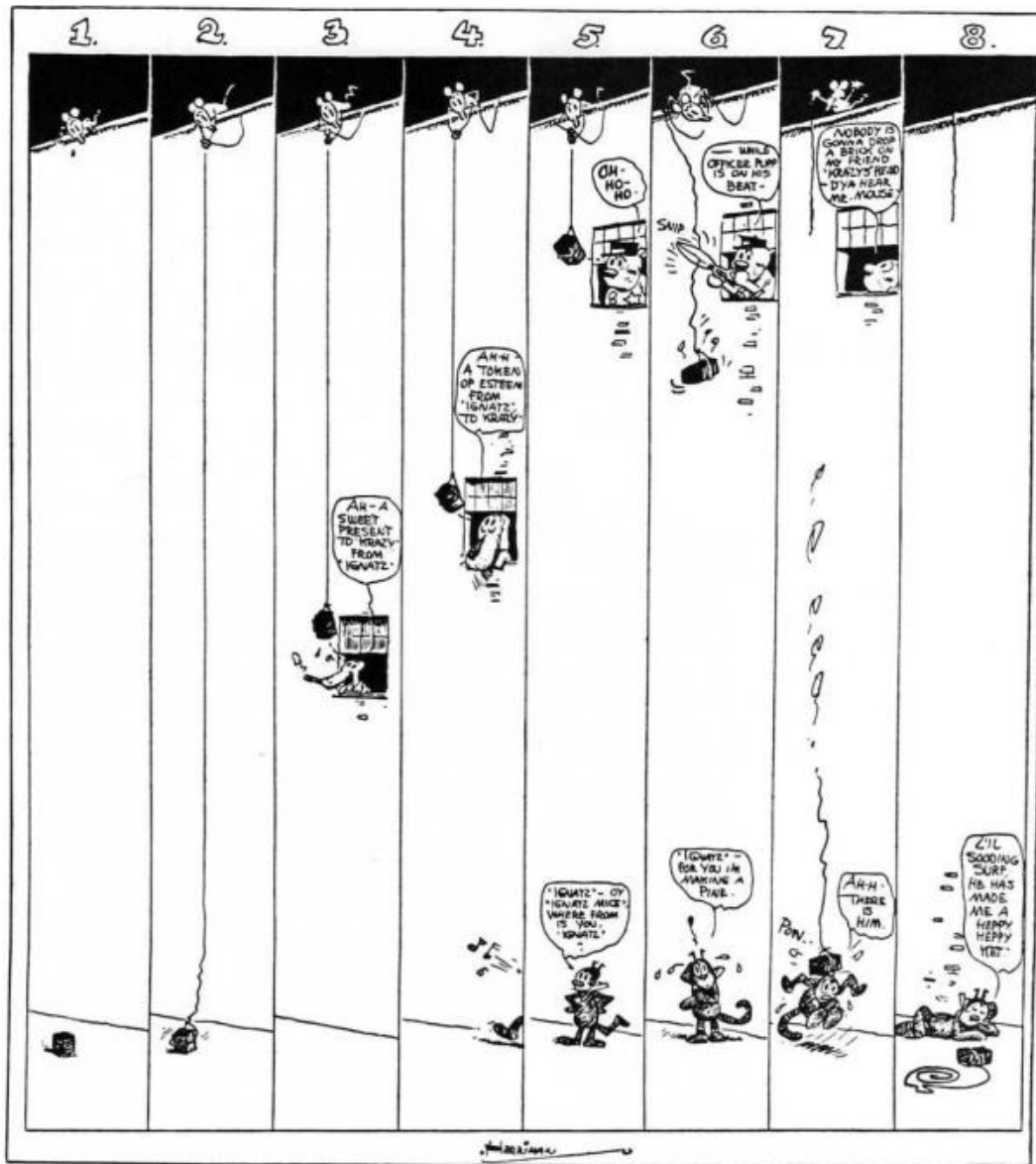


Figure 2. George Harriman's *Krazy Kat*, October 10, 1920.

three plots: Ignatz Mouse still pulling up the brick, Krazy Kat coming to a stop just beneath the brick, and Officer Pupp who figures out what is going on and decides to foil the plot (Harvey 175).

As discussed above, Herriman's creative vertical layout allows all three plot "strands to develop separately but at the same time" (Harvey 175), which is possible only because of the control of the reader over the flow of the narrative. Each panel can contain multiple elements—all of which are fully understood. In discussing another example, Harvey writes:

Film could present us with the same images—and simultaneously, too. But one (or both) of the story lines would fray as a result. In a motion picture version of this sequence that duplicated it exactly, the audience would devote more attention to one of the story elements, neglecting the other. It is virtually impossible for a viewer to devote equal attention to two sequences of action both of which are taking place at the same time. (188)

Precisely because comics is static, a fact that some might be tempted to view as a disadvantage, the reader can give equal attention to several characters or actions within a panel.

I know of one movie that has attempted something like this: *Timecode*. The entire film keeps four separate panels on the screen, each one with a part of the story that runs simultaneously with the others. Although this is an interesting foray of cinema into comics territory, it doesn't make for a very satisfactory experience, unless one enjoys feeling frustrated and anxious at being unable to follow what is going on in each part of the story.

In concluding this section examining the relationship between comics and film, I want to discuss several interesting developments in the last ten years. As I wrote above, comics scholars are focusing more on the specificity of comics, and distancing their discussion of the medium from that of film (Hatfield 33). Hatfield, very astutely, describes the situation this way:

Comics theory, then, has tardily arrived at a crucial stage, that of dismantling the once-useful cinema/comics analogy. The idea of comics as active reading has

gained ground in critical conversation, and displaced the once-attractive comparison to film. This shift is politically loaded, of course, underplaying the complexity of audience participation in cinema . . . so as to stress the *difference* of comics—a strategy consistent with what Bart Beaty has called “the search for comics exceptionalism.” Crucial to this search is the (re)invocation of the written text as a more appropriate point of comparison. (33)

While comics scholarship has begun to depart from cinematic connections, the two media themselves continue to have a significant influence upon one another, especially in the last several years, and to a great extent this is an unforeseen development. Robert C. Harvey, a respected artist and critic, described in 1996, when he published *The Art of the Comic Book*, how comics and film are such distinct media; because of the unique capabilities of each, one really couldn't much influence the other: “the art of one medium is not likely to be much enriched by the art of the other. For that sort of enrichment, we need storytellers who apprehend the singular potentials of their medium—who see them clearly and explore them creatively” (191). This is changing, however. Movies based on comic books have helped establish the action-oriented blockbuster as well as “the thematically and/or visually innovative art film” (McAllister 109). Graphic novels have recently stretched “the industrial and technological boundaries of their medium in attempts to mimic their source material” (McAllister 112). Examples include such inventive films as *American Splendor* and *Sin City*, which are both strongly evocative of the comics medium. In addition to an aesthetic influence, graphic novels also “encourage a reflection that is striking for mainstream film” (McAllister 112) in examples like *Road to Perdition*, *From Hell*, *A History of Violence*, and *Ghost World*, a “bleak take on teen identity and consumerism [that] contrasts significantly with the typical Hollywood teen film” (113).

Without a doubt, the success of comics on the big screen has had an effect on the comic book industry. McAllister writes that comic book companies increasingly “see themselves in the character–licensing business (at the very least) and perhaps even more specifically in the filmed entertainment industry” (111). It’s a lethal combination: with declining comic book sales and the astounding revenue from movies based on comic book characters like Superman and Spiderman, comic book publishers are de–emphasizing the comics medium; Marvel is actually “redefining itself as ‘an independent film studio’ that makes its own movies” (McAllister 111). McAllister believes that with so much emphasis on mining current characters for movies and so little concern about developing new ones, the mainstream comic book industry might be in doubt” (113).

This is a very intriguing development: not only are comic book sales declining dramatically, but comic book companies aren’t developing many new products for the future. Instead, the creativity in the comics medium is arising from independent creators like Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi, and Daniel Clowes, who are writing expressly for an adult audience. It is conceivable that in ten or fifteen years, as DC and Marvel focus more of their attention on movies, the comics genre could primarily be one for adults. This would overturn six decades of comics focusing primarily on younger audiences.

Comics provide a unique artistic experience unlike literature, or painting, or film—and yet it combines elements of all of these. The fusion of text and image is more prevalent today than at any other point in history. Before the prevalence of electronic media, stories and information were primarily in print form. Then video and audio recording seemed to swamp the media landscape. In the last fifteen years, however, with the rise of the internet, these two disparate forms of communication have finally merged into an intimate relationship with one



another; the internet has introduced the capability of drawing from the strengths of each. It is no coincidence, Jared Gardner believes, that the graphic novel and the personal computer have come of age at the same time (802). This recent discovery that text and image can work so powerfully in tandem has even leaked back into the medium of television, so that news programs almost always have a commentator presenting stories in addition to a text crawl at the bottom of the screen (Gardner 803).

Maybe comics has begun to receive new attention and consideration because of the widespread use of the internet. Tabachnick describes the graphic novel as providing the pleasure of an actual paper text with the visual stimulation of electronic media; it gives “us the subtlety and intimacy we get from good literary books while providing the speed of apprehension and the excitingly scrambled, hybrid reading experience we get from watching, say, computer screens that are full of visuals as well as text” (25). He describes graphic novels as the evolution of the book adapting to the electronic age (Tabachnick 27). And although comics far predated computers and television and film, there is no doubt that it is enjoying a revival of interest and popularity. In fact, Tabachnick believes that in terms of numbers of readers, the balance will continue to shift in favor of graphic novels over purely textual books (27).

### *Comics' Relationship to the Visual Arts*

If the topic of comics and high art comes up—which probably happens pretty often in the course of most casual conversation—anyone who knows anything about twentieth-century painting will immediately think of Roy Lichtenstein. After all, he painted large canvases that reproduced comics aesthetics, even the Ben Day dots of newspaper comic strips. The aesthetics of comics, however, doesn't trace its lineage back through painting at all. Instead, it is more

closely related to poster art, book illustrations, and caricatures that are found in prints dating as far back as the late Middle Ages and periodicals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

An uninformed comparison of comics to painting fails to recognize that these two visual genres are not siblings that allow a facile examination, but instead are distant cousins on two different branches of a family tree that extend back a millennium or more. To use a different analogy, comparing comics to painting is much like comparing apples to baseballs: there are obvious similarities such as size and shape, but these are entirely different objects otherwise. The exercise of comparing these two disparate genres *is* instructive, however, as it will help delineate the unique nature of comics. Essentially, there is only one primary difference between comics and painting, and all of the other points will extend from this one key issue: comics is a narrative medium, while painting is contemplative. Both are challenging art forms, but whereas comics offers the complexity of process, painting provides the depth and richness of a stable and static visual field.

To begin this comparison of comics to the visual arts, one must trace the ancestry of woodprints and comics, which actually extends back as far as the ancient world. Posters have been found in the marketplaces of Pompeii and Herculaneum, but with the fall of Rome, of course, they went into eclipse as an artistic medium (Metzl 26). The next example of commercial works came with the invention of the printing press, which produced images through wood engraving well before movable type was available for verbal communication (Hofmann 90). These earliest prints were produced for largely illiterate audiences, and probably were made for the purpose of religious devotion; images of saints were available at holy sites throughout Europe as souvenirs for pilgrims (Fern 1). The first-known example of printed illustration was

an image of a mermaid in a bath, “an early example of sex appeal”—this was a poster produced in 1491 by an Antwerp publisher advertising his book, *The Lovely Melusina* (Metzl 26).

Cartoons were also enlisted in the horrendous campaigns of religious controversy, such as the Forty Years’ War, that ravaged all of Europe in the seventeenth century. They were capable of communicating complex theological ideas, with surprising sophistication, such as this example produced by Lucas Cranach the Elder (fig. 3). This print clarifies the Protestant view of salvation in opposition to that of Catholicism (Harbison 117). These works didn’t merely

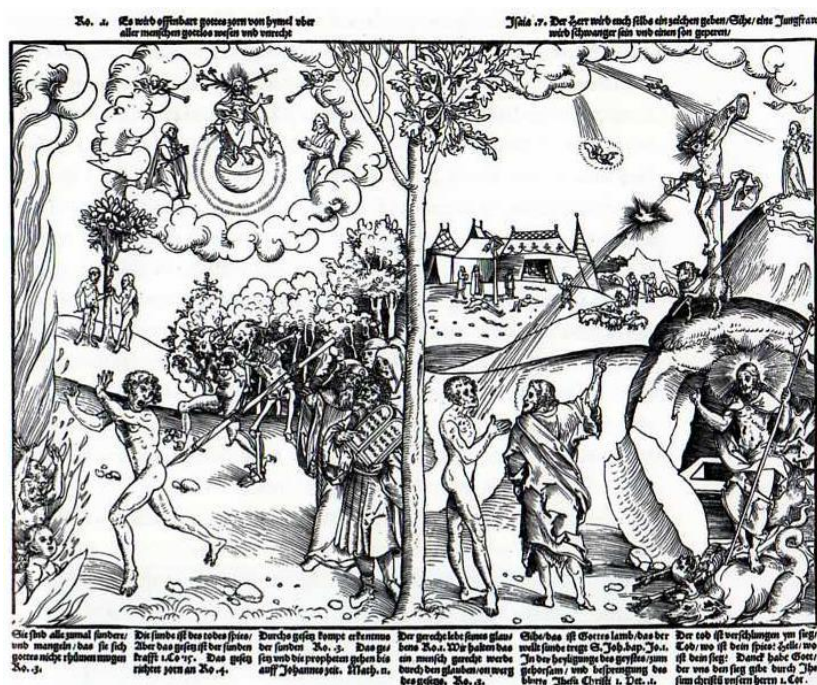


Figure 3. Lucas Cranach the Elder: *Allegory of Law and Grace*, c.1530. Woodcut.

illustrate or supplement a textual message; instead, they *were* the message. It wasn’t long before these types of images were utilized for political purposes as well. Political cartoons were effective because, like a statistic, they could “summarize a vast body of data in a succinct symbol” (Harrison, R. 69). Benjamin Franklin is credited with producing the first one in the Americas, for the purpose of uniting the colonies (fig. 4); the visual image carries the greater burden of the power of the message. Of course, these images produced fear in those who were

intent on maintaining the status quo. Cartoons were mass produced and easily understood by everyone; they had the “savage ability to depict an unflattering caricature”; and they also were able “to crystallize complex issues into a simple metaphor, a mobilizing call for action” (Harrison, R. 14).



Figure 4. Benjamin Franklin: *Join, or Die*, 9 May 1754. The first American political cartoon.

These relatively simplistic and inexpensive prints were also widely available in the Netherlands in the course of the Northern Renaissance. Rather than being merely propagandandistic, they were bought and sold as works of art for an emerging middle-class audience. Unlike the much of the rest of Europe, the northern provinces formed a republic following the Union of Utrecht that ended decades of civil war; this new political entity was Protestant rather than Catholic, and democratic rather than monarchic. In essence, there was a strong middle-class ethos that dominated nearly every part of the culture. This was evident in the demotic subject matter of artists like Vermeer as well as prints that were available in a free-market economy; rather than working for private commissions, artists experimented until they discovered what people were willing to buy. Again, these works were relatively crude prints compared to the lavish oil paintings of aristocratic countries like France and Spain.

As cities grew, anyone who wanted to advertise a business or product or restaurant had to compete with the “clutter of the urban landscape”; printed posters “would have to be large, and

assertive in design” (Fern 1). This was possible due to eventual improvements in technology that allowed better, quicker printing, as well as the production of higher quality paper. As with prints that had developed centuries earlier, these posters had to effectively get someone’s attention and communicate their messages quickly and clearly. These early urban centers, much like today, were crowded with visual stimulation and “visual *communication*, as opposed to visual perception, has to strive hard to gain our attention” (Schwarcz, J. and C. 1). One of the early figures who found success in this new artistic medium was Jules Chéret, who began working in the late 1870s. His distinctive style became the standard that others would follow, even as they brought their own unique sensibilities; Chéret used “bold shapes, flat colors, and lively outlines and . . . [the] incorporation of letterforms into the pictorial design of his posters” (Fern 4).

Through the rise of woodcuts and prints and finally posters, we find many features that are still apparent in comics today in the twenty-first century. Carrier raises the question of why it is that comics only developed at the very end of the nineteenth century; he believes that only “when newspapers needed to attract a newly literate mass audience was there reason to make these images. Once that need was felt, it was easily satisfied; the invention of comics required only adaptation of an already existing visual technology, the speech balloon, and development of the closely linked narrative sequence” (108). In February 1896 Richard Outcault introduced the *Yellow Kid* and used his “flowing yellow nightshirt as a speech balloon. And with that edition [sic], the modern comic strip was born, a communication which blends word and picture, dialogue and action, literature and art” (Harrison, R. 86). Although the American comic strip has much in common with these other, earlier forms, it was an entirely new form of communication and entertainment. After Outcault’s innovation it exploded in popularity and many other artists quickly brought their own original ideas to the form (Harrison, R. 88).

Ever since the widespread use of the poster for advertisements in the nineteenth century, Western culture has continually become more reliant upon visual means of communication. Many see the capability of downloading and watching movies on cell phones as deplorable, but “visual transmitters have become, for better or for worse, *the* encompassing, potent communication agents of our era” (Schwarcz, J. and C. 3). In my research I have come across this exact same idea—the increasing ubiquity of graphic elements in our culture—in discussions of twentieth-century posters, children’s literature, advertising, and elsewhere. The initial rise of the new medium of comics was simply another part of a trend that had already been underway for decades.

Connections between the poster and comics are pretty obvious. One of the innovations of Chéret was that he “minimized backgrounds, or dropped them completely, thereby forcing his figures and lettering to dominate his design” (Metzl 37). He understood that he needed to highlight the primary focus—and, he understood how to go about accomplishing that. Posters are almost always viewed quickly in passing, which means that they cannot be cluttered with too much extraneous detail. First, because it cannot be absorbed, and, secondly, it detracts from the object of main interest: “[b]ecause there is little or no background into which the eye can stray, there can be no diffusion of interest” (Metzl 43). Comics utilized this same strategy of reducing a comic strip to its essential elements—not because people are walking by at a brisk pace, but because the eye moves rapidly over each image. In addition, posters also incorporated text as a part of its visual field; instead of these two elements working toward the same goal independently, they were effectively yoked so that they were able to work in tandem. Artists worked “to create typefaces that would be expressive of contemporary life” (Friedman 11). In

the same way, comics communicate tone through the *manner* in which the text is written—in addition to *what* is written, and in addition to what is depicted visually.

We need to move on to a comparison of comics to painting. Above I wrote that comics offers the complexity of process, whereas painting provides a single, complex product for the viewer to absorb at her leisure. Yet another way of comparing them is to say that all of the visual arts, such as painting, are scenic and/or conceptual in nature, and comics, by contrast, is narrative. Let's use as an example of painting *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David (fig. 5). Upon one's initial observation, it is clear that this a work of great emotional content as well as one of extraordinary craftsmanship. Three young men stand on the left side, embracing one another, and swearing some sort of oath upon their swords, which are held by the older man who



Figure 5. Jacques-Louis David: *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784.

occupies the center of the canvas. Besides being a scene of solemn devotion, it is also apparently one that forebodes the potential for harm as we see from the women on the right side

who are in postures of lamentation. In this painting, in addition to the powerful evocation of *gravitas*, David also demonstrates an astounding ability with the brush. The shading and the anatomical detail are brilliant, the composition—dividing the scene into three parts that correspond with the arches in the background—is masterful.

Viewing this work for the first time, all of these details are slowly absorbed as one's eye travels over the canvas, appreciating different details and noticing the arrangement, which is the nature of the experience of the visual arts: they invite you to pause and reflect upon the image that has been presented. The visual arts depict a scene that expresses a concept or is inspirational. In this case, David effectively portrays courage and devotion and loyalty and sacrifice—this is his goal.

Comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels offer a very different type of experience: they don't encourage the reader to pause, but instead usher one on to the next panel to discover the sequence of the story. It is simply not possible to pull one panel out of a sequence and find great value and importance in it, any more than one could pull a sentence out of a paragraph and be able to decipher the chapter. *Oath of the Horatii*, on the other hand, is not part of a sequence but stands alone. Someone might be interested in comparing it to earlier and later works by David, but this isn't important in order to understand and appreciate this one painting. David Carrier writes that since painters of "Rembrandt's time did not aspire to depict individual moments of ongoing actions, it would be anachronistic to identify moments before and after that instant they show. . . . A photograph, because it is of the world, necessarily shows one of a sequence of moments. A painting, however naturalistic it may appear, does not have this relation to the visual world" (12).



Upon comparing comics to painting, then, many people are misled into believing that the former doesn't provide the profundity of the latter. And the truth of the matter is that only rarely does one pause to absorb the content of a single comics panel. The experience of comics, however, is the depth provided by an engaging and complex story. Each panel has to maintain a delicate balance between communicating necessary information while also being easy to scan so that one doesn't lose the pace of the narrative. If a painting is like a still, deep pool, then comics is a rapidly flowing stream—a lot of power, but at no one point is it very deep.

Narrative forms of visual communication will often utilize only minimal graphic art (Groensteen, *System* 163). Cartoons or caricature reduce the intricacy of each image in order to deliver *narrative* complexity rather than graphic complexity. The advantage of comics is that it offers quick communication, “it has all the advantages of speed and all the dangers of haste. It simplifies and exaggerates, so it has all the advantages of clarity, and all the disadvantages of distortion” (Harrison, R. 12). Comics reduces the complexity of the real world to shorthand symbols—icons—that are easily absorbed. Randall P. Harrison cites studies that have compared cartoon drawings to more realistic drawings and even photographs, and cartoons are decoded much more quickly (118).

Comics, then, are read in ways that paintings are not. A major reason for this is simply the fact that comics utilizes both graphic and verbal forms of communication. Andrew Harrison describes just how different these two media are: “In no clear and obvious sense does the pictorial seem to have a syntax at all like that of language, and . . . nothing in our coming to understand the pictorial seems to correspond remotely to what it is to learn the words of a dictionary” (213). What one discovers in comics is the intertwining of these very different

communicative forms into a new hybrid genre that is neither painting nor literature, and readers must grapple with both of these forms simultaneously.

Further complicating the experience of comics is the fact that the verbal and graphic forms do not hold a stable, consistent relationship to one another; Hatfield writes that comics is “characterized by plurality, instability, and tension” between these two (66). Joseph H. and Chava Schwarcz describe the same dynamic in children’s books that are relying more and more on the visual components to carry the burden of the story: “An illustration . . . reaches beyond the text and may even contradict it. Any illustration either interacts with the text or interferes with it. . . . illustrations of various types mix in the same book” (5).

There is nothing like these narrative complexities to be found in painting. Comics is not an example of the visual arts that encourages “inert spectatorship but rather texts that require a reader’s active engagement and collaboration in making meaning” (Hatfield 33). Although one might be tempted to place comics in the field of visual arts because it does rely so heavily upon images, Carrier finds that it has more in common with the language arts because of the way that it is read: “When moving from paintings to comics, a different sort of looking is called for—not the concentration of aesthetic seeing but the movement through a rambling narrative sequence. In this way, comics are more like novels than visual artworks” (95).

Despite the fact that I have devoted a fair amount of time distinguishing comics from its generic cousins, there are many examples that blur the distinction between comics and the visual arts. First is William Hogarth and his series of paintings that attacked social problems of the late eighteenth century such as *Rake’s Progress* and *Marriage a la Mode*. Each of these series contained six images that followed central characters through a series of events that constitute something of a narrative. Although these were both originally produced as paintings, they were

later mass-produced as prints so that they had a wide circulation, which is an important criterion of comics. Hogarth's works fail to qualify as comics, however, "for the successive images present discrete events that are too distant from one another, and so require too many intermediate stages to be filled in, to be viewed as one continuous story" (55). A novel, for instance, provides a smooth flow of events rather than presenting scenes that follow days or weeks after one another; we expect the plot to be a tight-knit series of actions. Hogarth's works are best described as "sequential tableaux" (Harvey 245).

Another intriguing example, one that blends graphic and verbal components, is that of William Blake and his works such as *America*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Songs of Innocence*. Although one might be tempted to merely dismiss his images as illustrations, and not true narrative, his work is fascinating because the visual components add to the meaning and experience of the verbal text; they are intrusive and demand the reader's attention. Carol Bigwood writes that "these works frustrate the usual cognitive reading of texts and encourage a fuller perceptual experience" (307). She believes that Blake is challenging our habitual practice of reading in order to grapple with these concepts in a substantive manner, rather than just giving cognitive assent to ideas as we always do; he "transforms our reading into an unexpectedly sensuous experience and encourages us to rediscover a creative, active pursuit which tries to get beneath readymade concepts to the existential experience to which these signs originally gave form" (309). So, while Blake's images don't create a plot, they do, like comics, encourage us to learn "through all the gates of the body, not merely the eyes, and [they] . . . encourage a multisensory, and in fact 'synaesthetic,' existential experience, rather than a merely visual one" (Bigwood 315).

A final example is that of children's illustrated books. This label, in fact, doesn't accurately describe many of the works being produced, some of which are best described as *picture books* because of the increasing importance of the images that carry the burden of the narrative. A pretty common example is the work of Tommy DePaolo, a very popular children's author and illustrator (fig. 6). These books tend to rely more upon the images to convey the story, instead of relying upon the text for the burden of the narrative; often they will employ a series of



"Let's see," Big Anthony said to himself after the artist had left the room, "I have to mix all these colors with the water and put them in jars."



So Big Anthony did.

Figure 6. Tommy dePaola: *Big Anthony: His Story*, 1998. Notice how the reader must rely upon the images rather than the text to pick up on Big Anthony's misunderstanding.

images on each page, much like the panels in comics (Schwarcz, J. and C. 5). Joseph H. and Chava Schwarcz discuss these works in terms that are identical to those used in describing

comics: “It is in the picture storybook that the two means of expression and communication work together most intimately, to the point where the cooperation and competition of printed word and picture is so essential that one alone is unable to carry out the full intention of the work” (5).

They describe different experiences of these two media in a fashion that would be valuable to anyone studying the nature of comics:

When word and picture come together to produce a common work . . . it is actually two languages that join forces. The verbal one progresses in linear fashion, with every word, every line, every page coming before or after every other one: this sequential order of the text guarantees comprehension. The picture, on the other hand, is an area, a surface usually representing space, with all its parts and details appearing in front of our eyes simultaneously. There we are at liberty to pick our way, perceive contentions and meanings at our discretion, with no prescribed direction. These two languages are, to some extent, learned spontaneously by experience. (Schwarcz, J. and C. 4)

These have just been a few interesting examples that blur the distinction between comics and the visual arts. Still other cases include the Cubist invention of *papier collé* in which these artists depicted silhouette forms of objects like bottles made from newspaper print, so that “the *printed word* made inroads into contemporary painting” (Massin 252). The poems of E. E. Cummings were innovative for their arrangement upon the page establishing a distinctive visual presence. And in the last few decades there have been several artists who, in various ways, have made language their medium. Joseph Kosuth presented a series of canvases, each of which contained a different silkscreened definition of the word *nothing*. Barbara Kruger draws upon her background in advertising to create canvases that draw attention to feminist issues in much the

same way as a billboard, poster, or magazine advertisement. Sol LeWitt is a conceptual artist who writes out descriptions of objects for others to construct, so that his verbal explanation is the only tangible manifestation of the work of art.

Artifacts that fall in the category of visual art are meant to be sources for meditation and reflection, while comics is a medium that offers a much more active interaction—like reading a novel. Comics look simplistic but this is a function of their ability to allow readers to quickly read its images so that they can follow the parts of a complex narrative. It is very tempting to place this genre within that of the visual arts, especially since comics relies so heavily upon images, but this tendency is completely erroneous. In a painting, the visual experience is the purpose of that work—it is the end to which the artist strives; in comics, by contrast, the visual experience is a means to an end.

The purpose of comics is narrative. Carrier writes that the “great discovery of high art was that it was possible to narrate highly complex scenes without appeal to words. The equally surprising discovery of the comics was that it is possible to deploy many different kinds of verbal information within storytelling visual images” (2). This integration of words and pictures produces a completely new art form (Carrier 4). This new genre isn’t literature, and it certainly isn’t one of the visual arts, although it might be seen as a cousin of each. Since comics is a narrative form, it is more closely related to literature and cinema, while it depends most heavily upon techniques developed in cartoons and poster art.

### *Conclusion*

Comics is an important artistic medium.

It is powerful, and effective, and valuable, and it is—most importantly—unique. Comics stands apart from every other art form. It cannot adequately be categorized as literature because

of its primary reliance upon images to communicate mood and events. Comics is, however, a medium capable of narrative or reportage; it can tell a story in as few as two panels while also having the potential to rival the breadth of a Russian novel. Comics is certainly not cinematic since it reads like a book and communicates sounds and sound-effects visually, nor can it adequately be categorized among the pictorial arts because of its primarily narrative function.

Comics is a narrative genre that primarily relies upon a sequence of images, although it almost always intertwines both graphic and verbal means of expression; it is a mass-produced medium for the purpose of broad distribution. It does more and it offers greater capability than any other genres can alone. Thierry Groensteen writes about the “plasticity” of comics (*System* 164), and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the importance of comics as an art form *is* its plasticity. While comics isn’t literature, film, or a visual art—nor is it even a sub-category of any of these—it does utilize elements of all of these genres to create a unique art form.

When I was in the process of writing about comparing comics to literature, I was thinking about how different film and the visual arts and comics are: they do the work *for* the audience of providing a clear, definite image, versus literature that allows a reader to create his own sense of an object, person, or scene. If a novel describes a book sitting on a table, it has to do precisely that—describe this object at length so that the reader understands it in the sense appropriate to the story, because the word *book* can mean a great many things depending on context. By contrast, an image provides details more directly, “but it gives considerably more information . . . is it a fat book or a thin one, a picture book or an adult book? All this is seen instantly in one apperceptive act; it does not require figuring out and putting together several words” (Spaulding 218). Comics tells *by* showing, in a way that novels cannot.

When I was writing about comics in comparison to film, I found myself thinking how much more like the novel comics is. It gives the reader the ability to manipulate the experience of the medium; one is free to reread a page or to jump back a chapter and make a connection that had been missed. Both of these genres put the power of control in the hands of the reader—this is the great power of a book, whether a novel or a graphic novel. They also have the capability of slowly exploring a scene or a thought in depth whereas a film can't presume to keep its audience's attention for much more than two or three hours. When a 300-page novel is translated to the screen, it always loses valuable information.

When I was comparing comics to the visual arts I was better able to appreciate the power and enjoyment of narrative that simply can't be produced in a sculpture or a painting. Although a work of art can inspire great emotion, it cannot depict what has come before that scene or what follows. This simply does not lie within the ability of this medium.

Comics alone can bring together text, picture, even typography, to “form a refined grammar” unlike any other artistic medium (Pollmann 107). It is something like an orchestra that draws upon many different types of instruments and sounds in order to produce an experience that transcends the mere sum of the parts; in the same way each of the different aspects of comics “participate in a concerted effort to accomplish something that could not be accomplished by each medium itself” (Schwarcz, J. 13). Despite its apparent simplicity, comics is a “complex means of communication and [is] always characterized by a plurality of messages. [It is] heterogeneous in form, involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes” (Hatfield 36). This ability to draw upon the various strengths and capabilities of so many artistic genres is what Groensteen had in mind when he praised the plasticity of comics.



Not only is comics an adaptable medium, but there is also reason to believe that images, when conjoined with text, enable greater cognitive capability in the reader. Carol Bigwood, in an article that examines the paintings William Blake and their impact upon the experience of reading his poetry, asks the following question: “Might it be that, although the regular print of a philosophical text helps us read more efficiently than hand-written texts, it has compromised our capacity for actively thinking through the text?” (313). Her response to this question is quite poetical itself: she believes that the images resonate with the abstraction of the poetry and provide a tangible experience of what Blake is trying to express. She writes, “Without association with the ambiguities and inexhaustible openness of other existential regions, the thinking mind forgets the deep music of language; in its eagerness to conceptually take up meanings and account for them, moreover, the thinking mind forgets the actual bodily origins of the cogito itself” (Bigwood 314).

The power of graphic images is recognized in every human culture. Religions have often emphasized the ability of pictures to communicate higher spiritual truths of reality. In different branches of Christianity there is the utilization of icons, and in Islam there is a belief in “*Alam al-mithal*: The world of pure images: the archetypal world of the imagination that leads the Muslim mystic and contemplative philosopher to God” (Armstrong 401). Even the work of Freud uncovered the heavy reliance upon pictures within the unconscious mind. Images, then, aren’t merely an amusement, but they are an integral part of what it means to be human.

Comics taps into this part of human nature. It provides an experience of story and information that appeals to the parts of the brain that respond to verbal as well as visual stimulation. Darwinian principles of natural selection apply to many areas of human culture, in addition to the animal kingdom; the simple truth of the matter is that if comics didn’t have

something unique and valuable to offer, they wouldn't have managed to survive for the last ten or eleven decades. Part of the problem in assessing what is happening with comics is that we are currently in the middle of this transition, and it is difficult to grasp any shift at the beginning or middle of the process (Carrier 108). Comics is enjoying newfound appreciation in Western culture, and as a result it is evolving as a medium. Hatfield writes that as "comics readers have become more experienced, comics have traced an arc of development similar to other cultural forms, such as the novel and cinema: away from presentational devices designed to ease audience adjustment and toward a more confident and thorough exploration of the form's peculiar tensions, potentialities, and limits" (66).

So, although comics currently basks in the cultural spotlight for what it has been able to offer in the past, and rightly so, one can only imagine what this plastic, hybrid genre will accomplish in the future.

## CHAPTER 3.

### CHRIS WARE AND *JIMMY CORRIGAN*: AN INTRODUCTION

#### *Introduction*

In the conclusion to the last chapter I compared comics to a symphonic orchestra, which combines the sounds and capabilities of many different types of instruments in order to produce a unified artistic experience; in the same way, comics draws upon language, the visual arts, and typography to create an artistic encounter that is wholly integrated, a gestalt—or, to use another German term, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>1</sup>. To stick with this analogy, Chris Ware is the most outstanding composer in a new generation of extremely talented people; he is the Mozart that rises above all of the other talented contenders to take the field in a fresh new direction of intricacy and complexity and beauty. Granted, there *are* a lot of innovators in the field right now, but no one else in the last seventy years has explored the capabilities of the genre to the same extent as has Ware. His style and his exploration of the potential of comics is reminiscent of George Herriman and Winsor McCay—past masters of the early twentieth century. Daniel Raeburn wrote the introductory essay for Yale University Press’s book on Ware, part of its Monographics series; he writes, “if Ware is the future of comics, he became this future by recognizing a paradox best summarized in the cartoonist Art Spiegelman’s aphorism, ‘The future of comics is in the past’” (9).

This, in part, is what makes Ware such an exceptional artist of the comics genre: his grasp of the work of past masters, as well as a profound appreciation for their brilliance. It has taken someone with Ware’s unique interest and commitment to the past to resurrect the genius, the unparalleled resource of past experts. In the field of comics, he is this generation’s Michelangelo, who was the first to be able to intuitively grasp the astounding works of the

Classical period—of ancient Greece and Rome—and then to have the capability to actually surpass their achievement a full millennium later.

To date, Chris Ware's *magnum opus* is *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, which was published in 2000. With the release of this graphic novel, people all over the world became aware of this comics creator, even though he had been toiling for nearly a decade, unknown to all but a small segment of comics devotees. In 2001 Ware was awarded the First Book Award by the *Guardian* newspaper of Great Britain. This was a significant achievement, not only for him, but also for comics as well:

this was the first time that a comic book was officially judged on an even playing field against literature and found superior. By refusing to differentiate between comics and prose, the *Guardian* avoided the condescension implicit in the Pulitzer committee's 'special' award in 1992 for Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and opened the door for cultural umpires to call comic books what they are: books. (Raeburn 17)

As a result of *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware has also received the American Book Award and his work was included in the Whitney Biennial Exhibition in 2002 as well as in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the UCLA Hammer Museum's "Masters of American Comics," and he has a current series, "Building Stories," that is appearing in the *New York Times Magazine* (Schwendener 225).

Ware has been called a "cutting-edge comics wunderkind" (Doherty 50), but as is so often the case with artists, he developed his skills not through the success that he enjoys today, but rather through isolation, personal struggle, and persecution. Art was an escape and a form of therapy—a means of dealing with the many challenges in his personal life.

*Chris Ware's Background and Beginnings with Comics*

Ware's father abandoned him and his mother when he was only a small child, so that he had no memories of the man. And as happens so often, Ware's childhood was fraught with the normal challenges and difficulties, in addition to the disadvantage that he already faced in a single-parent home. Ware recounts: "I ate lunch by myself. I had some friends I talked to on the weekends—but they wouldn't talk to me at school. The extreme eagerness I showed for friendship was off-putting, I guess. And I wasn't good at games—I was about as physical as an inert gas. Dodge ball was the worst—they'd just kill me with that ball" (CNN). His nickname among his peers was "Albino." Without the benefit of a healthful social outlet, Ware turned inward: "Drawing was the only way I had of distinguishing myself, of trying to impress people—impress people with my one pathetic ability. There's nothing less impressive than a scrawny kid with poofy hair, drawing superheroes" (Nissen). Detecting this interest, Ware's mother signed him up for art lessons at a local museum. He also recalls watching an instructor on his local PBS station: "I actually learned quite a bit about shadowing and space from that fellow's show. I loved it, and dutifully kept a notebook just like he told me to. And then, of course, I copied from comic books" (Pantheon).

Ware's earliest memories of comics take him back to the basement of his grandparents' house. His grandfather was one of the first newspaper editors to add *Peanuts* when it was initially offered, and he received free copies of all of the Schultz collections from the syndicate (Pantheon). In his grandparents' basement he also discovered stacks of comic books that belonged to his older cousins: "Once I started getting into those, though, I couldn't stop. Somehow I got quickly hooked into the superhero 'ethos,' and I latched onto that, though I wish now that I hadn't. I suppose I was just too much into wish-fulfillment at the time, because I was

a skinny geek” (Pantheon). Although Ware’s work disassociates itself from that of superhero comic books, the superhero motif, as an ironic symbol of an unattainable ideal, is prevalent throughout *Jimmy Corrigan*, which will be discussed below.

In college Ware began to read *RAW*, an underground adult comic that was published by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly: “I realized that art could provide more than just cool drawings and spaceships. *RAW* was the first comic book that I read that followed through on that idea completely, in both the images and the writing. . . . I remember being really emotionally affected by *RAW* magazine, once I finally actually started *looking* at it” (Pantheon). It was at this point that Ware decided to pursue comics as a career. He enrolled in English and art classes, and took a job with the school newspaper where he eventually began to do a regular strip.

*RAW* changed the way that Ware thought about comics; once he began to focus upon what these artists were doing, he had a textbook for studying the capability of this medium. Ware began to truly work on and in comics in a more rigorous fashion, whereas before he had merely dabbled and created in an effortless manner.

Unfortunately for Ware his social life did not improve as result of his new-found vocational interest: he was unable to fit in with his peers in his art classes. He continued to take life-study drawing courses, which others viewed as elementary. Ware says that everyone else believed in the notion that “‘talent’ interferes with ‘expression,’ and that reading about art was better than looking at the world, and that anything which made sense wasn’t really art. I encountered a number of ‘instructors’ who considered my cartooning a ‘gig,’ some kind of ‘side thing’ I was doing to make cash” (Ware qtd. in Fristoe and Waldronn). Ware recalls his epiphany: “one day it suddenly occurred to me that I was only going to be alive for sixty, maybe

seventy years, and I really didn't want to spend my days making unpleasant 'confrontational' art-essays" (Fristoe and Waldronn).

Finally, however, while still in college, Ware found support for the work he was doing—he found approval and someone who could act as a mentor, the father-figure that he had lacked in his formative years. He recounts the sequence of events:

Art Spiegelman called me in 1987—and this was long before I did the strip for *RAW*—he was very, very complimentary and said that he'd seen my stuff in a sidebar story to a review of *Maus* in an Austin paper, and he asked me to send him more of it. I did. Of course, I was blown away that he would have called me or that he would consider calling someone of my age and obvious lack of ability. And over the next couple of years he would telephone occasionally and encourage me, or tell me what he thought of the junk I'd been sending him. These conversations were incredibly important to me, probably more so than any other 'student/teacher' relationship I had in school, because I respected his work so much. Then he asked me to contribute to *RAW*. (Pantheon)

This encouragement by Spiegelman, and this opportunity to publish in *RAW* (fig. 7), introduced Ware into the community of comics creators where he would finally experience approval, recognition, and encouragement for his unique talents.

And Chris Ware did have something to contribute to the comics community, as well as to the genre itself. Spiegelman must have recognized—even well before Ware had any kind of career in comics—that he was something of a polymath, a savant; Ware wasn't merely a talented artist, but he was someone who intuitively understood the very nature of comics and was able to create unique conceptions and possibilities for comics communication. He brings a unique

sensibility that pushes the boundaries of the form in ways that others have not, regardless of how talented they might be. To be sure, there are many brilliant comics creators who have come to

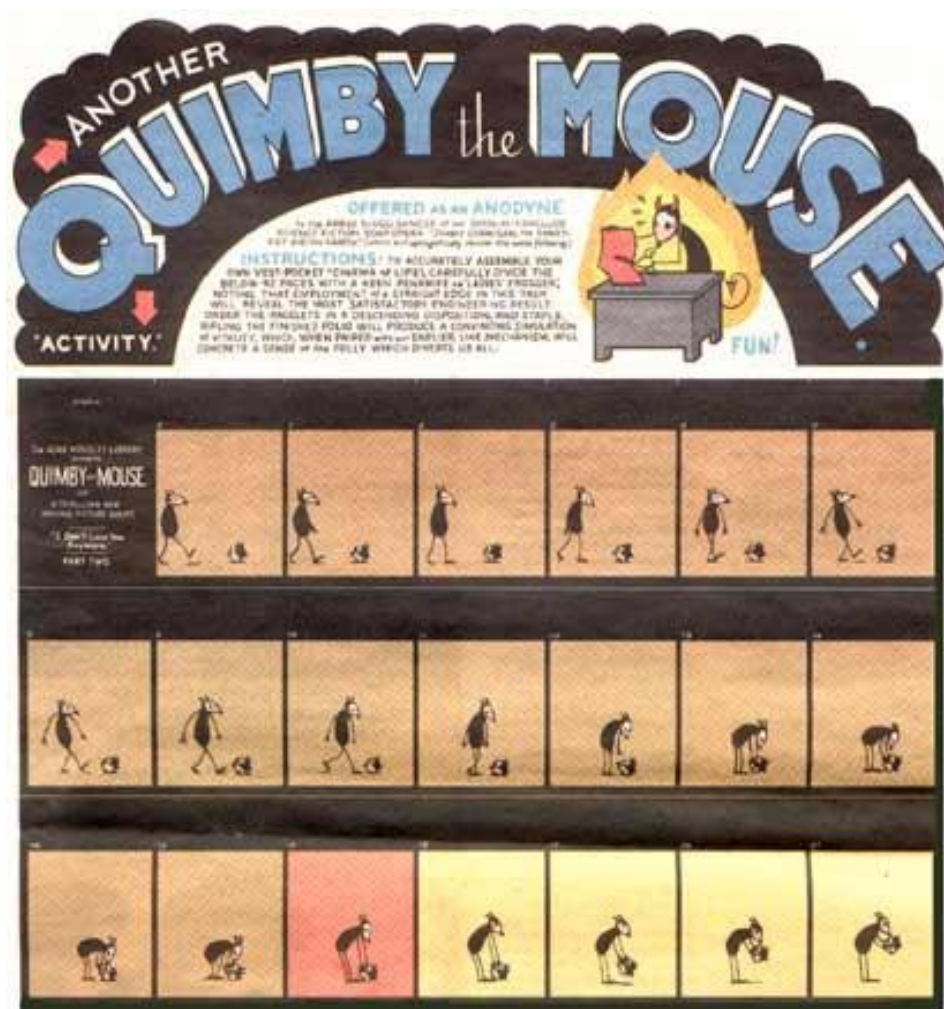


Figure 7. An example of Chris Ware's early work.

the fore in the last ten years—each bringing her own, personal contribution, but Ware is one of the very few who expands the *capability* of what the genre can do.

All of Ware's stories have a somber, morose tone, which is conveyed in various ways such as his use of symbolism, color, and even his visual design. This quality, however, is not what is unique in his contribution to the genre. Ware expands the expressive potential of comics through naturalism<sup>2</sup>—his ability to capture on the page the experience of real, mundane, everyday life: keys rattle, wrappers crinkle, and shadows adjust on a table as the sun moves



across the sky. But I'm not just talking about visual and sound effects: his characters fidget, scratch, and cough, and communicate one thing through their words while sending a different message via their body language. Ware has effectively captured the subtlety and complexity of real human behavior. Dante's *Divine Comedy* was innovative, but it also exemplified the Middle Ages in a lot of ways, especially in its shallow depiction of its characters who are cardboard-cutouts that merely stand in for moral virtues or vices. When Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* came along later in the fourteenth century, however, a revolution took place—the adumbration of Renaissance humanism is clearly discernible: *his* characters had a depth and complexity, the likes of which had never been seen before in Western literature. The Wife of Bath is predatory and shrewish, but we sympathize with her because of the abuse she suffered from the only husband that she ever truly loved.

Like Chaucer, Ware is among the first in his field to create true human characters, with true human behavior. One of the ways that he does this is by using eight or ten panels to depict an action that another artist might communicate in only two or three. Scott McCloud describes five different types of transitions between panels in comics. The one most commonly used in American comics he calls “action-to-action progressions,” which is where the reader sees the highlights of the action: in one panel a car is hurtling down a road, in the next it crashes into a tree. We understand what has taken place, but the panic of the driver as he realizes his impending doom, and the swerving and fishtailing are not shown—only the most important, most informative elements of the action. By using this technique a story moves along very rapidly. Much less commonly used is the “moment-to-moment” transition in which an action is depicted in much smaller increments of time (fig. 8), although this panel transition is frequently utilized in Ware's stories (McCloud, *Understanding* 70). By employing *this* technique, he heightens the

sense of tedium or tension that a character experiences. The reader, along with Jimmy, waits in the hospital lobby for news of his father's condition, with time just crawling by.

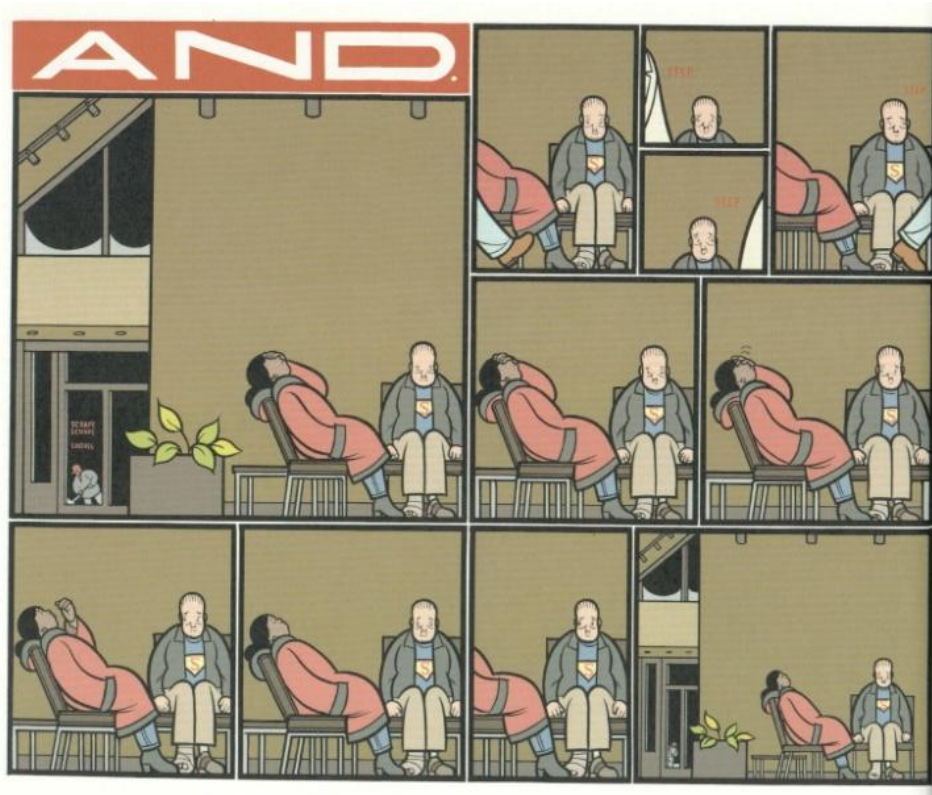


Figure 8. Ware's panel transitions advance the story in small increments of time.

I imagine that these experiences that Ware creates for the reader are just the types of moments that he suffered throughout much of his own life. He is someone who has spent much of his time sitting on the sidelines, observing his peers engaging in the normal activities of life. Even if he had tremendous natural talent, the quarterback of the football team would never develop a style like Ware's; his comics reflect someone who is patient, someone who values craftsmanship, and someone who immerses himself in the tedious, solitary work of making comics. The tone of Ware's work reflects his own morose personality.

### *Cartooning versus Drawing*

Before moving on to examine Chris Ware's work in greater depth, we need to take a moment to consider his distinction between drawing and cartooning. His early mature work was

an exploration of the pictorial elements of comics (fig. 9), which he did by “eliminating words from his strips and forcing his pictures alone to tell the story”; “Ware cartooned in a minimal

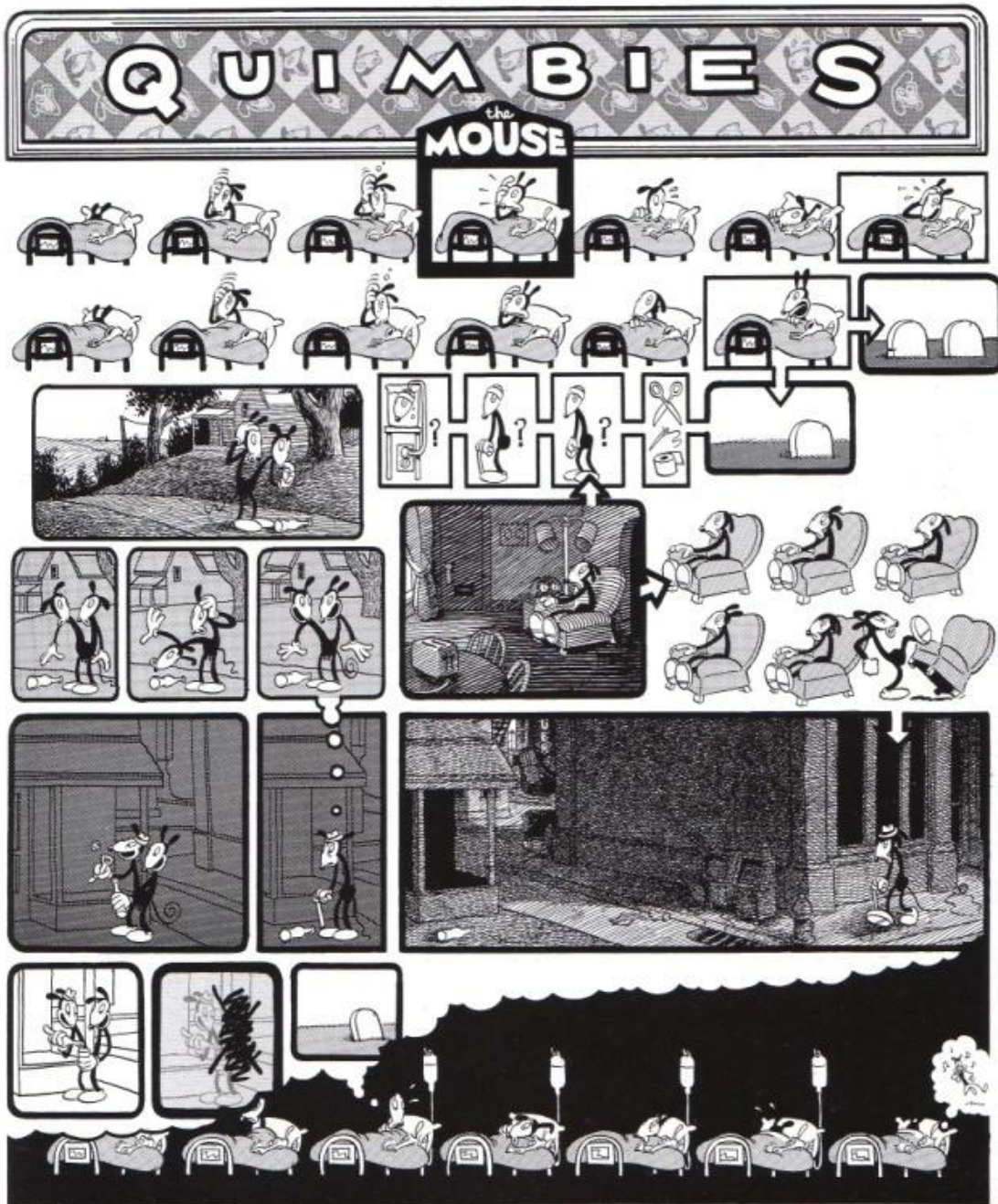


Figure 9. Ware devoted much of his early work to exploring the narrative capability of pictures, without relying on text.

style to make his comics more readable” (Raeburn 18). By working only with the graphic component of comics, he was able to isolate the capabilities of this aspect of this hybrid



medium—its potential and strengths. For Ware the balance between a drawing and a cartoon is not just a stylistic or artistic consideration, but primarily a matter of emotional evocation.

He describes drawing as having an increased degree of specificity, as being “more detailed, or ‘realistic,’ or ‘cinematic’” (qtd. in Fristoe and Waldronn). Although he makes greater use of the cartoon style, Ware says that he tries “to use ‘real’ drawing occasionally, or sort of a looser drawing, as a way of anchoring a sense of place or a feeling. By either floating it below or above the story it seems to take on this sort of tonal quality, like a long note held” (Pantheon). In contrast, cartooning is a more iconic representation of reality that allows an artist a broader, more universal appeal (fig. 10); for example, a smiley face is a symbolic Everyman whereas a

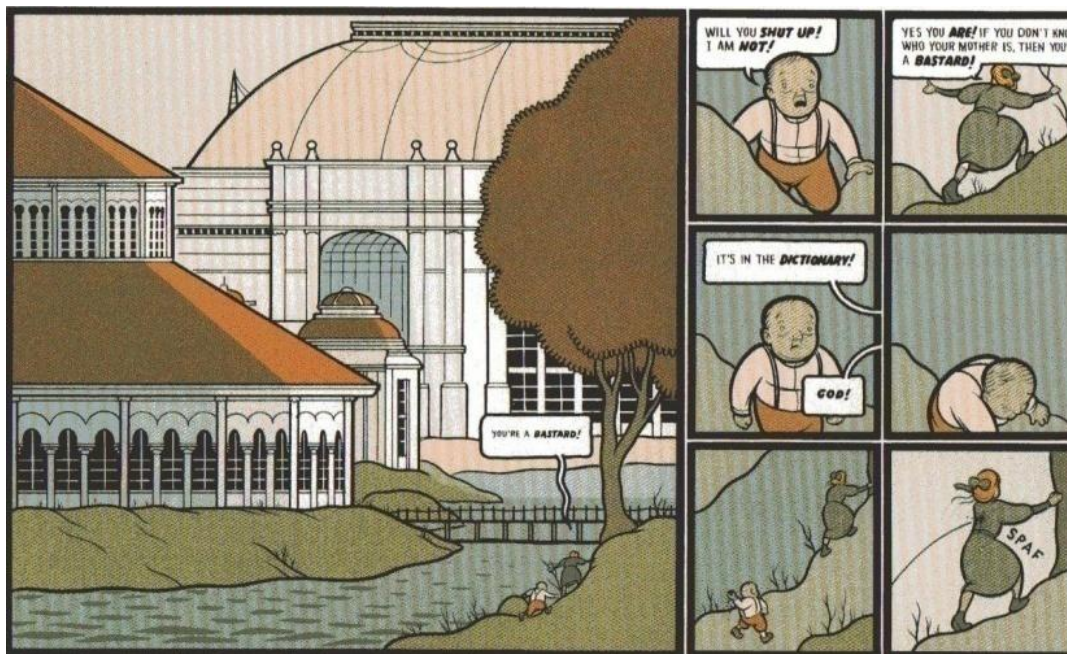


Figure 10. Drawing versus cartooning. While James and the tree are rendered in a simplistic cartoon style, the architecture is more meticulous and detailed.

photographic depiction is limited to only one individual. The less realistic style of a cartoon allows the reader to move very quickly over an image while grasping its underlying conceptual meaning. Ware compares the two styles: “I think drawing is about—or at least good drawing is

about—trying to see. It’s more about detail and looking, whereas cartooning is making a story happen with symbols” (Pantheon).

In *Jimmy Corrigan* the easiest example of cartooning is the eponymous protagonist who is depicted in a very simplistic, indistinct fashion (fig.11). This stylistic tendency applies not only to Jimmy Corrigan, but to nearly every aspect of Ware’s work, which Schwendener describes as having a “stiff geometric precision” (226). Ware states that it “seems like some of



Figure 11. Jimmy and his father come face-to-face for the first time. Both are depicted in a cartoon fashion, which more effectively highlights their similarities.

the best known cartoon characters end up being these peculiar, almost sexless, baby-like men—bald, pink men, like Charlie Brown, and Tintin and Skeeze, and Barnaby. It’s the least specific character. It’s the character you can immediately identify with” (Arnold, “Chris Ware”).

Scott McCloud defines cartooning as “a form of amplification through simplification” (*Understanding* 30). A natural question is, “what is the purpose of this simplification?” “By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’” McCloud goes on to say, “an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (*Understanding* 30). A related practice in films several decades ago was to have the bad guys in westerns wear black hats while the heroes wore white hats; cartooning is likewise a means of communicating quickly and clearly. Randal P.

Harrison describes the technique of cartooning in a little more depth: “the cartoonist simplifies . . . radically ‘levels’ what we usually see in our perceptual field . . . [and] the remaining elements are ‘sharpened.’ The figures stand out crisply from the background” (57). This communication of an *idea*, that McCloud and Ware point out, is a significant part of the achievement of comics: even with a style that seems simplistic or childish, cartoons can be used to tremendous effect in works for mature readers such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* about the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. Style, then, cannot be trusted as a reliable indicator of content; it is much like the oft-quoted axiom to not judge a book by its cover.

Ware’s ideas about cartooning are built around the rules of typography. He says that “the real ‘power’ of comics is that of a visual language where words and pictures are interchangeable; where the pictures function as words and vice versa; it’s essentially the blending of the acts of reading and seeing” (qtd. in Fristoe and Waldronn). Imagine a continuum with realistic drawing on the left, cartoons in the middle, and words on the right. The degree of abstraction increases as one moves from left to right, as does the universality; *dog* can indicate a variety of different types of animals, but a photograph of a dog is of a unique individual.

Cartoons have the unique capability of functioning as vehicles for universal concepts, but they’re also more visually present than are words. As you’re working your way through this page, for instance, you’re reading the words, but you really aren’t *seeing* them—you’re not paying attention to their appearance so much as you’re focused on the concepts that underlie the words. This is how comics differs from literature: “Comics . . . keep their foot in the door, they keep the eyes open, and present a world into which we can lose ourselves” (Ware qtd. in Pera). We read the images of comics for information, as with text, but we do this by looking *at* them—dwelling on them in a significantly different manner than we do with typography. First we scan a

panel quickly in order to read it, to follow the development of the story, and then we might pause at this point to actually look at the panel for its artistic characteristics, or we might wait until the end of the page to review all of the panels together.

Comics' ability to utilize both images as well as text allows it to present a story in a manner that is subtle and sophisticated; it can draw upon the differing capabilities of each or even expand upon what were the previously *assumed* capabilities of each. Furthermore, in some of the best examples of the genre these two different modes of communication work harmoniously—they are inextricably bound, they have a synergy that is far greater than the mere sum of the parts. Raeburn writes that words and images “have to be of a syncretic whole in order for the comic to have any aesthetic conviction or emotional power” (20), and this is an outstanding description for the accomplishment of Chris Ware. He uses comics' conflation of text and image to “reproduce on the page conflicting and simultaneous emotional states” (Kannenberg 186). In his review of *Jimmy Corrigan*, Daniel Nadel writes that Ware “has created pictures and words that blend so seamlessly that they suggest a completely different language” (13).

In the following sections I will be examining several of the more conspicuous characteristics of Ware's work, in order to demonstrate his unique ability to create emotional depth. I am very well aware that it is disingenuous of me to attempt to separate these aspects as if they can be examined in isolation; unfortunately, however, this is a necessary mode of any analysis, which can only really consider one idea at a time, but I will attempt to make necessary connections between these features as I go along.

Ware's tone, not surprisingly, is largely a product of the difficulties he faced growing up; his work was a therapeutic outlet for processing and working through these challenges. Although

the next several sections of this chapter are divided into different topics, all of these really contribute to a single effect—the atmosphere of his stories—which might be described as one of critical detachment or alienation or disillusionment.

*The Tone of Chris Ware's Work*

*Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* is a graphic novel about a young man in his mid-thirties who was abandoned by his father as a small child. As a result he has grown into adulthood as an acutely timid and insecure person—in his review in *Time* James Poniewozik describes Jimmy as a “shy, potato-shaped Untermensch” (116). He is a classic case of arrested development: he suffers from anxiety, unease, apprehension, and he is a man—if one can even use that term to describe him—who, as a result of abandonment, is emotionally immature and underdeveloped. Through a series of flashbacks to the late nineteenth century, we discover that this practice of desertion has been a pattern among the Corrigan men going back at least three generations; Ware extends his story into the past to Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893 where Jimmy's great-grandfather abandoned *his* son. The story opens with Jimmy receiving a plane ticket from his father and an invitation to spend the coming Thanksgiving holiday with him. Although this is probably the moment that he has always hoped for, now that it has finally arrived he is anxious about what will take place

*Jimmy Corrigan* is an extraordinary work of what Norman Bryson—an art historian—calls *rhopography*. Joost Pollmann also uses this term which he describes as “the domain of the still life, of the understatement . . . introverted, thoughtful,” and which is to be contrasted with *megalography*, “the artistic domain of heroism, of the hyperbole, of the macho” (115). This graphic novel explores the debilitation and challenges faced by an isolated individual working in the large city of Chicago. And as readers we are privy to the minutiae of Jimmy's life: his



inability to relate to his coworkers, the long hours that he spends alone in his apartment, and the many fantasies that his mind indulges in as he attempts to cope with an uninviting reality.

Raeburn writes about how art is supposed to imitate life, but that the opposite is eerily true in the case of Chris Ware. Since his father had left him even before he was able to remember, Ware created Jimmy Corrigan over twenty years later as a means of addressing and thinking through his past and even his present circumstances. After having written about half of his fictional version of estranged–father–contacts–son, Ware received a telephone call from his own father who suggested a meeting:

At first Ware thought it was a joke, but it was in fact his real father, and they did face each other, and their conversation was as pained as the imaginary one Ware had already written. . . . Ware went back to work on his book and ended it, years later, with the death of Jimmy’s father. Within one month Ware learned that his own father had just died. Ware appended to his novel a corrigendum in which he noted that the four or five hours it takes to read his book is the same amount of time that he had ever spent with his father. (Raeburn 15)

Ware is quick to say that none of the events in the book actually happened to him, but that he came through his own experiences with “an enduring empathy for the ridiculed, the awkward, the maladept” (Nissen). He describes Jimmy as “a pathetic version of myself,” at a time when “I felt cast adrift” (CNN), “he’s sort of an alloy of the worst, most self–pitying parts of myself, and a few other things” (Littleton).

I have commented a couple of times already about Ware’s ability to faithfully capture real–life human experience through the emotional tone of his work—he has been described as “an alarmingly capable chronicler of interpersonal pain” (Katz 133); one might be surprised,

however, upon picking up any of Ware's works to discover that the emotional content appears to be largely missing. At first glance there is almost nothing on the page that communicates the powerful feelings captured by Ware. In fact, some might be tempted to describe Ware's artistic style as carefully devoid of emotion or sentiment because only very rarely does one find overt expressions of surprise or anger or grief on characters' faces. One of Ware's means of creating a naturalistic story and characters is the subtle approach that he takes.

Reviewers describe Ware's illustrations as "very precise and detailed—yet elegant, in the mathematic sense: They have no unnecessary properties" (CNN). And Nadel sees the "level of detail" and "clean execution" as seeming "cold or overly precious" (13). These impressions are a deliberate attempt to create the emotional tone and realism of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Ware says, "I want every 'drawing' that I do to be stylistically as flat and dead as possible, as if it was killed on the page. . . . My urge to be as clear as possible makes my stuff look like it was drawn by the most heartless creep who ever lived" (Littleton). Notice how much Ware accomplishes through his spare style—through cartooning: it reflects not only the emotional vacuum of Jimmy's life, and not only the tedium of daily existence, but also the subtlety of human behavior. Ware states:

[S]imply showing every character's emotional reaction instantly seems to limit the potential for any subtlety of feeling. Adults *lie* with their faces. The comic strip language is not sophisticated enough yet to deal with that fact. Every guidebook to cartooning always advises you to learn how to draw facial expressions, as if there's some direct analogue to be found in how people move their faces and how they feel. There may be some connection in children, but not in adults. Depending on the social context, adults usually adopt expressions to suit their environment. Not that you can't represent all of this simultaneously, or show

real expression, but it muddles the subjectivity in what is essentially, at least right now, a presentational medium. (Pantheon)

Ware's style is simplistic "because his goal was not to depict emotion, but to create it" (Raeburn 18). He is able to create a naturalism in his work that is only rarely evident in the stories of other comics creators.

Ware's visual style, then, is the means to achieving his desired emotional tone, which might be called melancholic at best. His topic, throughout all of his work, is the difficulty of the challenges that we all face: work, lack of friends, relationships with friends and family and with members of the opposite sex. Although many have gone so far as to characterize his work as dismal or gloomy, Ware rejects the idea that his stories are depressing; in discussing *Jimmy Corrigan* he says, "I think that this is a happy story for the most part since I've tried not to lie about how essentially dry and miserable daily existence is, and how rare true moments of elation and enjoyment are. To tip the scales in the opposite direction is genuinely depressing to me, because it contributes to the cultural bias that expects life to be all smiles and thrills" (Littleton).

I found Ware's thoughts on this topic to be very intriguing and revelatory. One of the primary roles of art, far more important than that of entertainment, is to equip people for living life—to teach us a little bit more about ourselves and the world in which we live. The movies that are most likely to make the most money at the box office, however, are romantic comedies. The vast majority of people respond to stories with happy endings in order to experience a temporary, and therefore ultimately disappointing, euphoria akin to that of an opiate. Everyone will acknowledge the fact that life almost never works the way that it is depicted in romantic comedies, but people are *still* drawn to them and want to believe in them—to indulge in

intentional self-delusion. Ware comments further upon this phenomenon and his goal as an artist:

When I started trying to do comics that weren't self-conscious garbage, I wanted to make something that was *empathetic*. Something that is humorous can divert the reader, but something that is tragic is empathetic. I wanted to do both. Some people have said that they don't find Jimmy comic enough for the [comics] genre . . . . I just want to be as emotionally honest as possible. I don't mean the story to be pessimistic. But it upsets me to see stories that are nothing but happy people, with happy things happening. Life isn't like that. Overall, I've had a happy life, but unhappy things have happened in it. (CNN)

Ware's desire to do more than merely entertain creates the emotional depth that we find in *Jimmy Corrigan*. His story depicts the positive things that can happen in life, but it also reflects the fact that much of our everyday existence is filled with challenge and monotony.

### *Symbolism in Jimmy Corrigan*

One of the means by which Chris Ware creates his tone is through his use of symbols. He utilizes a classic image of comic books—the dashing, invincible, upright superhero—which he then turns upside-down for a postmodern generation. The opening of the graphic novel shows Jimmy Corrigan as a little boy donning the red mask of the superhero that he's hoping to see at the “Classic Car Show,” the Super-Man. It is immediately apparent to the reader that the “FAMOUS STAR OF TV'S BIG SHOW”—as the placard reads—is a washed-up has-been: his appearance is sparsely attended and only the young Jimmy is paying any attention or laughing at his weak jokes. In his excitement Jimmy fails to notice that Super-Man's appearance begins at the same time that he is supposed to meet his mother in the cafeteria; just as he approaches his

hero for an autograph, Jimmy's mother takes him forcefully by the arm, "**All** right, **little mister!** You've **really** done it this time! I've **had** it with you! This is **it!!**" (Ware 6<sup>3</sup>). But who should come to his rescue? Why, Super-Man, of course! The next panel is tightly framed with Super-Man's eyes glancing sharply upward and to the right and Jimmy's mother's breast prominently occupying the upper-right corner. "Hey, hey there, ma'am . . . that's no way to treat my **partner!**" "Pardon **me**, 'sir'?" "Why, this slugger's a **real smart kid!** In fact, he was just telling me what a **great** mom he had, and how she might know of a good place to eat around here, once I'm off work. **My** treat, of course" (Ware 6).

The last panel of this page shows an uneasy, wide-eyed Jimmy lying in bed facing the reader as we see the now plain-clothed "Super-Man" through the cracked door behind Jimmy's bed: "Right, just cream, no sugar. Do you have a coat hanger?" (Ware 6). On the next page Jimmy is fixing himself some cereal the next morning, and as he is drinking the milk from the bowl he is shocked to find Super-Man quietly exiting his mother's bedroom. Putting his coat on, he reaches into his pocket and gives Jimmy his red mask with the comment, "you **deserve** it!" (Ware 7). "A few minutes later," after our hero has punctuated his departure with a thumbs-up gesture to his little side-kick, Ms Corrigan comes out in a bathrobe to find her son sitting at the table wearing this ill-fitting mask: "**Mom!** He said to tell you he had a **real good time!**" (Ware 7).

The manner in which Ware is debunking our expectations of the superhero is pretty clear. This is certainly not a being of superior morals or strength, but rather a tired, middle-aged man looking out only for himself.

In Super-Man's next appearance twenty years have passed and Jimmy has come back to his desk from his lunch break to find a note from the girl in the cubicle across from his: "I sat

across from you for six months and you never once noticed me! Good bye” (Ware 18). As Jimmy glances over the short, half-wall in front of him, beyond the recently vacated space he notices, through the plate-glass window, a caped figure standing on the top of a six-storey building across the street. He waves and Jimmy foolishly waves back as if this man in costume actually had the capability of picking him out of one window of an entire high-rise. He bends his knees, throws back his arms and leaps from the top of the building falling to his death below (fig. 12). We, along with Jimmy, observe Super-Man lying face-down on the pavement for eight panels over the course of the next three pages: daylight fades, rain begins to fall, and people continue about their business before the ambulance finally arrives to cart away our superhero.

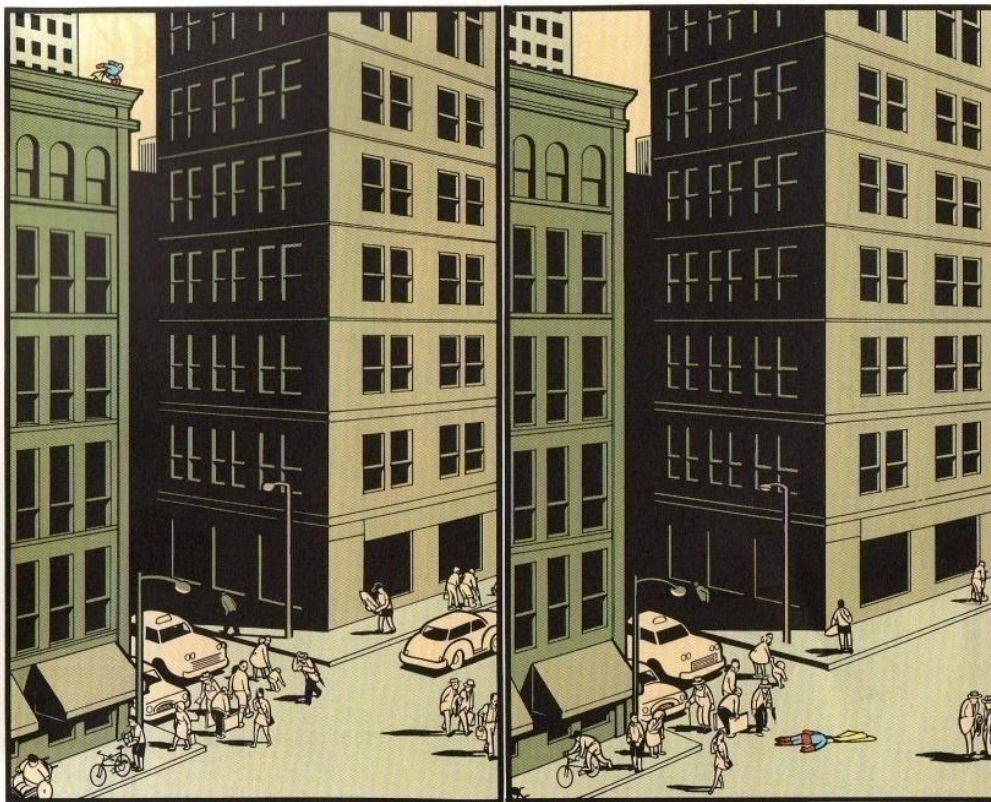


Figure 12. Super-Man leaps to his death. *Jimmy Corrigan*, p.19.

From examining Ware’s other work, such as the *Acme Novelty Library*, it is apparent that Super-Man was originally conceived as a “God character” (Raeburn 20). Often he is depicted as vindictive and as someone who delights in the suffering of others from on high, as when Jimmy

fantasizes that Super-Man picks up his house, which initially delights him to no end, until he lets it fall to earth and flies off with a characteristic wave (Ware 54–5). In *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, Super-Man is most often a failed God-character who walks among mere mortals and is unable to alleviate his own misery, much less that of others. In essence, the message communicated by Ware’s use of this symbol is an existential one: Jimmy is on his own. There won’t be anyone to offer hope or to swoop in to save the day in *deus-ex-machina* fashion. Super-Man “casts a shadow over the work, both as a symbol of Jimmy’s hopeless quest for an honorable, admirable, loving, and powerful father figure, and as a source of cruel humor” (Doherty 51).

The overall purpose, then, is to create a sense of hopelessness and despair: if even Super-Man is unable to help us, if he’s just a victim like everyone else, how can we be expected to save ourselves?

### *Ware’s Use of Color*

Another important means by which Ware creates the atmosphere for his stories is through his rich use of color. In her interview with Ware for CNN, Beth Nissen writes that while most “cartoonists use the colors of kindergarten crayons . . . Ware uses the shades in the Crayola Big Box—Aquamarine, Goldenrod, Burnt Umber.” Although he does use a broad range of colors, they all seem to be muted or washed out—only rarely does he use bright hues.

Above, I wrote that Ware’s drawing style was restrained and relatively simplistic—this is because he doesn’t use drawing to explicitly depict emotions on characters’ faces. Color, however, is a means upon which he relies very heavily. Because color communicates so effectively an emotional warmth, it creates an interesting and important contrast with the content of the story (fig. 13). Raeburn writes that Ware “uses his muted, secondary background colours to warm up his otherwise cold, mechanical, typographic style of picture writing. The natural

reds, browns and flesh tones give life to the skeletal, black and white structure” (20). Although the book is morose, Ware says that he “tried to make the pages as beautiful as I possibly could. The colour was essentially an argument counteracting what was going on in the story, because

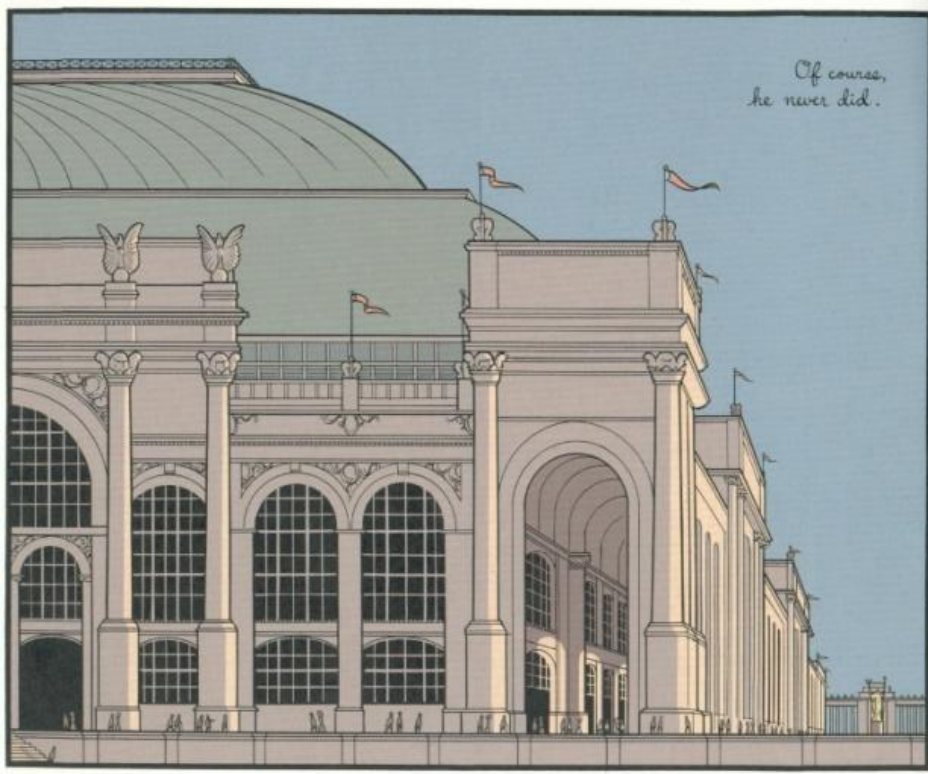


Figure 13. Ware’s colors are subtle and provide emotional warmth that is largely missing from the story itself.

there’s no way to say, ‘Oh, life is beautiful and wonderful’ without sounding corny. You have to show it” (qtd. in Raeburn 21). This technique is a great example of Kannenberg’s comment above about Ware’s ability to create “conflicting and simultaneous emotional states” (186).

But Ware uses color in other ways as well: it allows the reader to quickly distinguish between Jimmy’s present, the 1980s, and the 1890s. Each period has different color schemes that create distinct atmospheric qualities. Poniewozik writes that the “sepia tones” of the nineteenth century “depict senior Jimmy’s claustrophobic home life” (116). This is an important narrative device that provides clarity since the story frequently jumps around among three generations of Corrigans.



Finally, Ware uses color to create visual dissonance that underscores the emotional strain of the story. When Jimmy is about to tell his father how he feels about being abandoned, he is suddenly converted into a little boy, to reflect his feelings of insecurity, and Ware further shows “Jimmy’s tension by drawing the panel in red and green, which vibrate against each other” (Raeburn 71). Another example, much later in the story, is when Jimmy is at his father’s apartment with his step-sister and his grandfather—the same character whose childhood story we’ve been reading about in the 1890s. All three are sitting in the kitchen, which has lime-green walls; whenever a panel focuses solely on Jimmy, however, the background is a light brick-red. Again, the clash of these two colors in side-by-side panels visually portrays Jimmy’s anxiety and discomfort as he finds himself in the middle of a crisis in a family of which he has become a part only the day before.

As I wrote above, color, like Ware’s symbols, contributes to the mood of unease and anxiety; these separate elements, together, have a subtle, cumulative effect.

### *Chris Ware’s Visual Design*

Reading Chris Ware’s stories transcends his cartoon style or his chromatic aesthetic: he has a unique design sensibility—which has a tremendous impact upon our reading experience—that is evident throughout all of his work. Raeburn suggests that he has been able to accomplish this in two ways: by “recognizing that comics are analogous to a host of other disciplines—including writing, drawing, painting, typography, music, theatre and architecture—and by uniting these arts on the page by virtue of his skill as a graphic designer” (11). For any examination of Ware, this is an important point: in addition to his use of text, images, and even typography, design is actually “a crucial narrative element” (Kannenberg 176). Every aspect of a book comes under the artistic direction of one person and all of Ware’s work bears the mark of

his unique style. Upon opening a copy of *Acme Novelty Library* or *Jimmy Corrigan*, one has already been exposed to Ware's aesthetic, but upon reading his stories one enters into his world; Ware is an auteur who plays the parts of "casting agent, wardrobe artist, set designer and actor. In short, Ware has to work like a theatre director. Given that he also has to frame and crop our every view of this world, he also has to work like a cinematographer. He has to be a control freak" (Raeburn 21).

Ware's distinctive visual design manifests itself in a variety of ways, but one of the most obvious features of his work is the smallness of the panels that fill nearly every page. Ware says that these small images help "draw the reader in. Smaller makes for a more compact world. A little magical world" (CNN). Another function of these small panels, though, is related to Ware's idea that cartoons are images that must be read. His drawing style is on the iconic end of the spectrum, which means that they are processed very quickly; by using small panels Ware doesn't have to worry about filling each of them with extraneous details that will only distract the reader. He might fill a page with twenty small images, which means that a lot of information is conveyed, even though the story hasn't moved along very far at all due to the slow pace at which Ware narrates his story.

Another unique characteristic of Ware's design sensibility is his *graphical* use of text that serves as a unifying element within the story (fig. 14). Gene Kannenberg, one of the newest scholars on comics right now, refers to these as *lexias*<sup>4</sup> "to describe a distinct textual division in a graphic, not grammatical sense: a block of text which is designed to be read/viewed as a single unit" (178). These are found throughout Ware's stories where the narration "itself is at times limited to nothing more than conjunctions writ large: lexias such as 'And.' or 'But.' are placed within panels of their own . . . providing graphic, relational referral between illustrated events. . . . these



ugliness occurs in palatial physical beauty, and while that seems like an easy irony, the booklength repetition of abandonment and betrayal, from one generation to the other, builds the effect to a climax” (13). Images and emotions are so closely related, that it’s pretty much

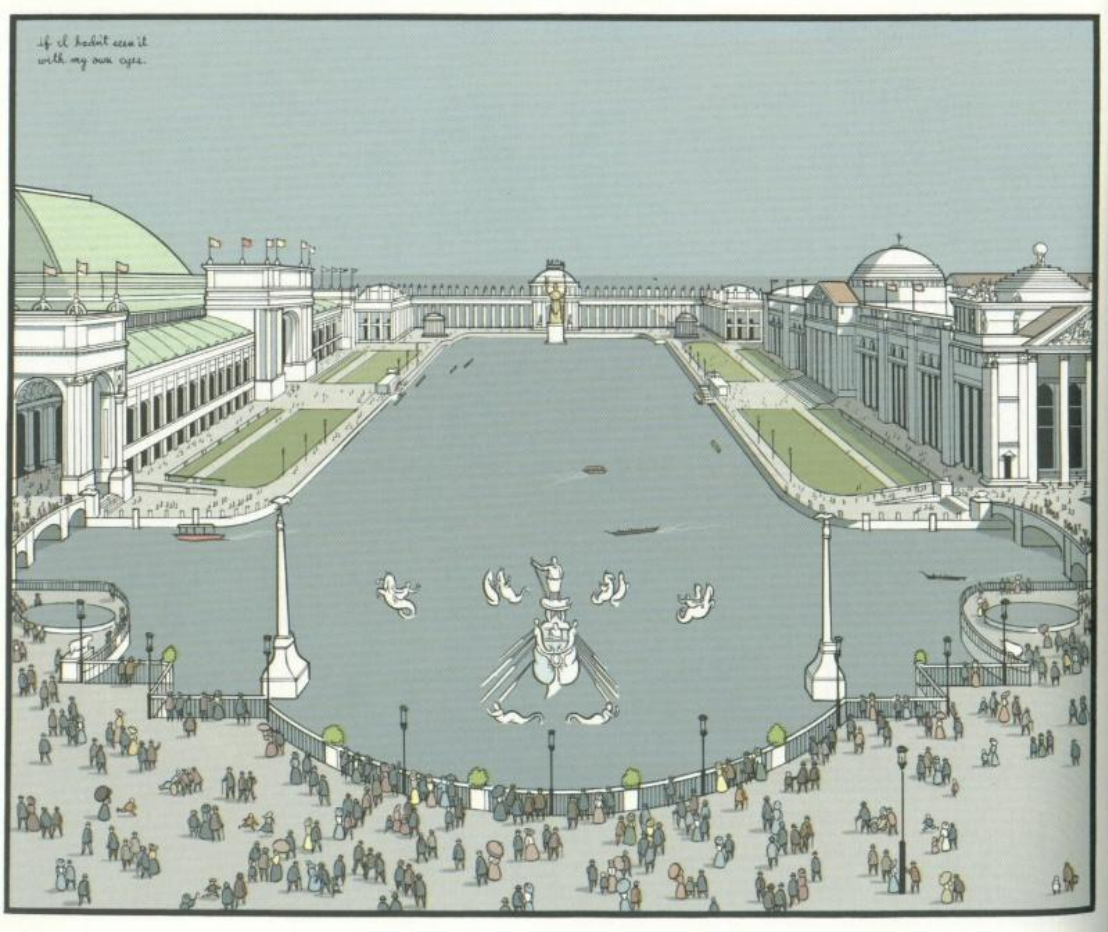


Figure 15. Ware creates full–page vistas of extraordinary beauty.

impossible to examine the former without invoking the latter (Kelsey 239); this response is a universal aspect of human nature upon which Ware capitalizes.

Once again, this is yet another example of Ware’s presentation of “conflicting and simultaneous emotional states”: the reader is inspired and uplifted by the scenery but also devastated by the plot (Kannenberg 186). And this highlights the naturalism in his work: life is rarely one emotional state, but it is almost always an odd mixture of conditions, like having trouble with the kids but things going really well at work.



Not only does this architectural beauty contrast with the dark emotional tone of *Jimmy Corrigan*, but it also serves to create an additional contrast between past and present.

Kannenberg notes that “the carefree joys of nostalgia are humorously debased with the deadening effects of modern life” (192). Although a significant part of Ware’s aesthetic sensibility is bound up with stylistic features borrowed from the late nineteenth century, he effectively captures the staleness of worn-out strip malls long past their prime, and the tangle of utility poles and power lines and fast-food signs (fig. 16). The effect is to make Jimmy’s life seem to be all the more flat. When we read about the circumstances of his grandfather’s life, we

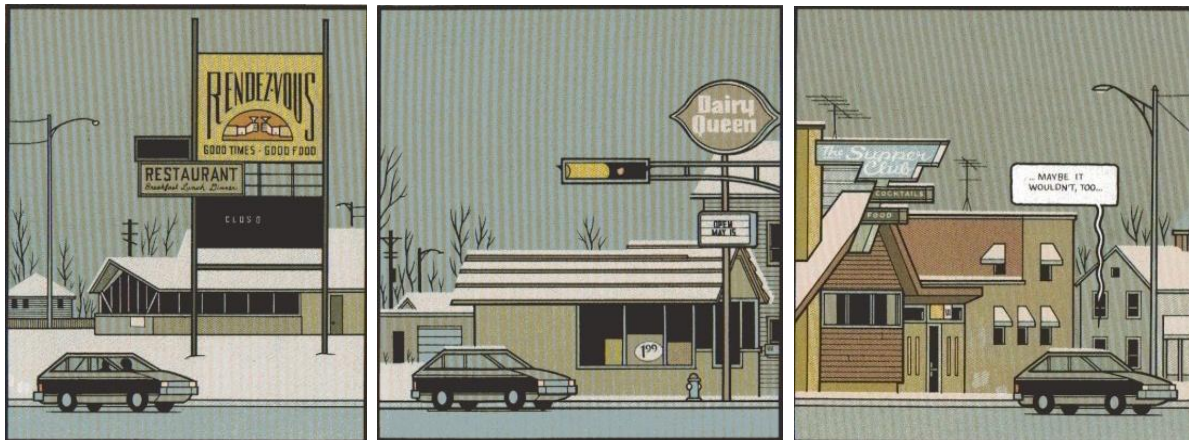


Figure 16. The beauty of the past contrasts with the ugliness of our present surroundings.

think, “what an unfortunate situation, but set in such beautiful surroundings”; when we return to the 1980s plot we are struck by the ugliness of Jimmy’s external life in addition to his internal, emotional misfortune. Ware is aghast at the surroundings in which we find ourselves today:

“[m]odern buildings—they mock people. They don’t elevate them or inspire them—they just contain them. Look at them—we’re surrounded by them. There’s no ornamentation or decoration. And we rip down all the beautiful old buildings, built by immigrant craftsmen who were paid pennies. I put them in my story so people would see that, and understand a bit of history” (CNN). Unlike modern design principles that are often driven solely by utilitarian

concerns, the turn-of-the-century style “seemed to have more respect for the viewer. What was presented was something hand-made, something crafted with care skill” (CNN).

*Chris Ware's Use of the Past*

Ware broadens the naturalistic capability of *Jimmy Corrigan* by telling this story in the context of four generations of Corrigan men. No one is a product of merely their own thoughts and efforts, but we all have been influenced by the people who raised us, and even by the people who raised them. Similar to classical works like *The Odyssey*, much of this story is told in flashback—almost 40 percent of it. This treatment of an earlier period is a prevalent thematic component, it is a structural device, and it is also an element of visual design. But, first, this utilization of the past is an integral aspect of all of Ware's work simply because it's a reflection of his personal interests. And he doesn't merely have an interest in the past, however, but Ware effectively immerses himself in American *fin de siècle* culture—*la Belle Époque*. Raeburn describes him as “a tireless historian and curator. He has made his home into a de facto museum, where he collects and archives the disappearing legacies of past masters, studying these antique comics and stealing shamelessly from them” (12–13). Even beyond comics, though, Ware surrounds himself with the *materiel* of a bygone era: “I collect old sheet music, old instruments—especially banjos, phonographic cylinders, old comic strips, toys. And old photo albums—I find them in thrift shops and junk shops” (CNN).

A part of Ware's interest in the past is an interest in craftsmanship. In his own artistic field, for example, he describes the comics strips in the funny pages today compared to those of seventy years ago:

[They demonstrate] a near-catastrophic decay of craft, quality and style. The reasons for this decline are many, but again much of the blame must fall on

cartoonists themselves. One of cartoonists' earliest blunders was trying to compete with the cinematic language on the cinema's terms. . . . more and more cartoonists began to ape a cinematic look and cinematic techniques. In doing so they neglected many of the unique strengths and possibilities peculiar to their own youthful medium, including typography, iconography and page composition.

(Raeburn 9)

Because of Ware's interest in these past exemplars of comics capability, he has been able to recover many of their innovations in his own work.

With his strong attachment to the aesthetic and craftsmanship of the turn of the late nineteenth century, it would be easy to label Chris Ware a Romantic, but that simply is not the case. He says that "[p]ining for any 'old days' is useless because they're over and done with, along with the diseases, prejudices, and wars that went along with them" (Littleton). He depicts past generations as being not any happier or kinder or better adjusted than people are today. But, like Jimmy Corrigan, Ware grew up thinking about his own personal past and his father's side of the family tree that he knew nothing about (Arnold, "Chris Ware"). The origins of *Jimmy Corrigan* arise from Ware's own life, so that his investigations and appropriations of the past "all serve his story" (Pollmann 116).

His interest in the past, then, besides being a personal matter, is also a means of characterization. Although we don't have the opportunity in this story to follow Jimmy about through many different types of situations and encounters to observe how he reacts, we learn a great deal about him through his family lineage. Beth Nissen compares reading *Jimmy Corrigan* to "finding 100 years of photographs in random bundles in a box." Ware uses the grandfather's past experiences in childhood—being abandoned by *his* father—to fill us in on Jimmy's

personality. We get to know him better by spending a great deal of time in flashback with his grandfather and his great-grandfather. The reader learns that Jimmy isn't just a weak and pathetic young man—for whom we might be tempted to feel no sympathy—but instead he comes from generations of men who have neglected their sons, and the end result is someone who is incapable of fending for himself, which is a generational inheritance. Jimmy is the last in “a long genealogical line of abandonment and disappointment, regret and paralyzing isolation” (Nissen). So, this nineteenth-century atmosphere that Ware creates is not simply nostalgia: his heavy reliance upon the past is a thematic emphasis similar to the idea from Exodus of punishing “the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (34:7, NIV).

Ware's use of the past also serves a structural purpose. *Jimmy Corrigan* has neither page numbers nor chapter divisions, which creates a more organic experience—more like true life. To create the rhythm of the story, Ware cycles back and forth between the 1890s and the 1980s, and occasionally a few points in between. He describes these as the movements of a symphony with different moods and purposes in each part. The feeling of reading *Jimmy Corrigan* is similar to that of reading a classical Greek tragedy like *Oedipus*, the divisions of which are indicated periodically by giving voice to the chorus to indicate the end of a scene.

Ware's design of his narrative is complex, quickly moving readers between decades or centuries and even between reality and fantasy as we often slip into Jimmy's imaginative world. To the uninitiated this might seem to make for a very confusing experience—and it certainly could be in a novel, but one of the strengths of the comics medium is this ability to quickly transport readers from one frame of reference to another. Stephen E. Tabachnick goes so far as to



describe this as a “primary cultural reason for the emerging triumph of the graphic novel” (27).

This capability to easily delve into the realm of the fantastical is the reason that

comics were and still are considered childish by many people. In a child’s imagination, the line between the physically possible and the physically impossible is blurred . . . . It is very easy for the artist to make the move from the realistic to the fantastic and vice versa in comics; it can be done from one panel to the next or even within one panel. We accept strange transformations in comics; that is perhaps the very essence of the cultural side of the comics experience.

(Tabachnick 27)

This is similar to the comment by Jared Gardner in the previous chapter that comics capture “the twilight world, the liminal space between past and present, text and image, creator and reader.

The comic frame is necessarily a space where these binaries overlap, collaborate and compete for attention and meaning” (801).

This, then, is another way that Ware’s talent is evident: he has a seemingly endless variety of visual techniques through which he cleverly connects the present with the past. A recurring visual motif throughout *Jimmy Corrigan* is a red bird that appears at unexpected moments in the story. We discover, in a very brief flashback, that Jimmy’s great-grandfather fought in the Civil War and shot off one of his fingers in order to escape the destruction, and wound up in a field hospital. In a two-page spread we see this bird “gathering nest materials by various hospitals. This bird is seen first collecting a flowered twig around a war-zone tent-hospital, then by a hospital building in the 1890s, next at Lincoln Hospital in the 1930s, then at St. Mary’s in the 1950s, and finally placing the twig in a nest on the windowsill of a present-day ‘doc-in-a-box’ where Jimmy waits with a bloody nose” (Kloberg 45). Through the fantastic

image of the bird, Chris Ware accomplishes a great deal in these two pages: he transports us through 120 years' time; he demonstrates the evolving culture through four distinct architectural styles; and he establishes a direct connection between Jimmy and his great-grandfather, William Corrigan.

Unlike the previous example, sometimes Ware indicates a jarring juxtaposition of past and present, not as historical events but as something that happens when our minds suddenly take us back to an event in the past (fig. 17). In this example Jimmy awakens on the couch in his father's apartment. As he lies there covering his eyes, we notice that he is slowly diminishing in



Figure 17. Ware's visual conflation of the past and present.

size, his pillow changes color, the floral pattern disappears, and the light coming through the window is no longer present: as he sits up Jimmy has been transformed into a little boy before transitioning back to reality. In the next-to-last panel notice how Ware has conflated elements of both past and present: although Jimmy is a little boy and we can see the nightstand and lamp from his bedroom, we can also see a light outline of the couch that the adult Jimmy is lying on in his father's apartment.

Another device that Ware seems to delight in using is the diagram (fig. 18). The example here shows the family background of Jimmy's step-sister, Amy (Ware 358). Although *we* have already been introduced to her, Jimmy is surprised to learn of her existence at the hospital where their father is in critical condition after a serious car accident. In this diagram we make a startling discovery that neither Amy nor Jimmy is ever aware of: they're actually related—they're distant

cousins. The diagram flows in reverse chronological order from top to bottom. Amy's biological mother is in the hospital with her mother, who we see was married to a soldier. His mother,

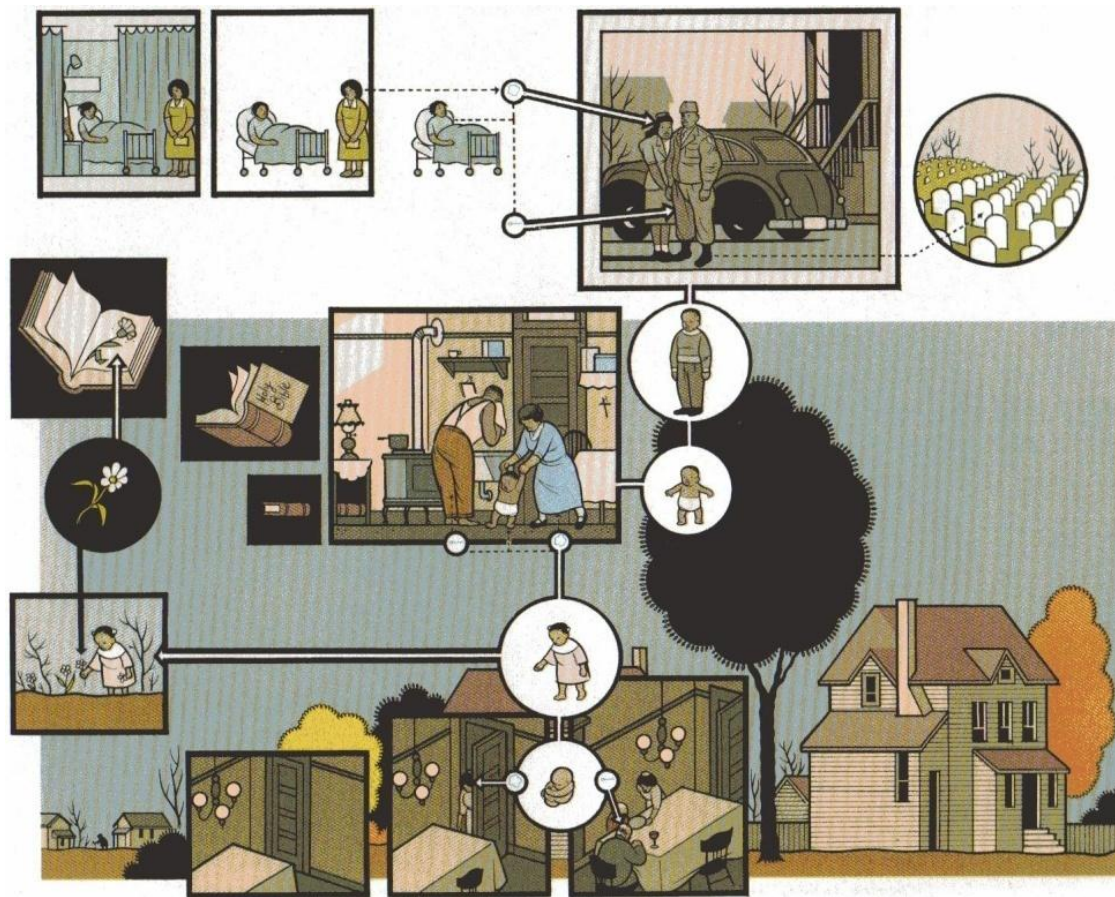


Figure 18. Amy's family tree is communicated quickly through visual means.

Amy's great-grandmother, was a product of the union between William Corrigan and his mother's maid<sup>5</sup>. In the lower-right corner we see the old Corrigan homestead that belonged to Jimmy's great-great-grandmother, while in the lower-left corner we see Amy's great-grandmother as a toddler picking a flower that is still kept in her family's Bible. This diagram contains a great deal of information that is economically packed into a small amount of space. The final example (fig. 19), and probably the most ingeniously constructed page that manipulates past and present, is a game of hide-and-seek that James plays around his grandmother's house,



along with another boy who's an Italian immigrant and the red-haired girl upon whom he has a crush. I'm going to rely upon Raeburn's explication:

This page is one drawing subdivided into twelve panels, each representing a different point in space or time—which are the same thing, basically, in comics.

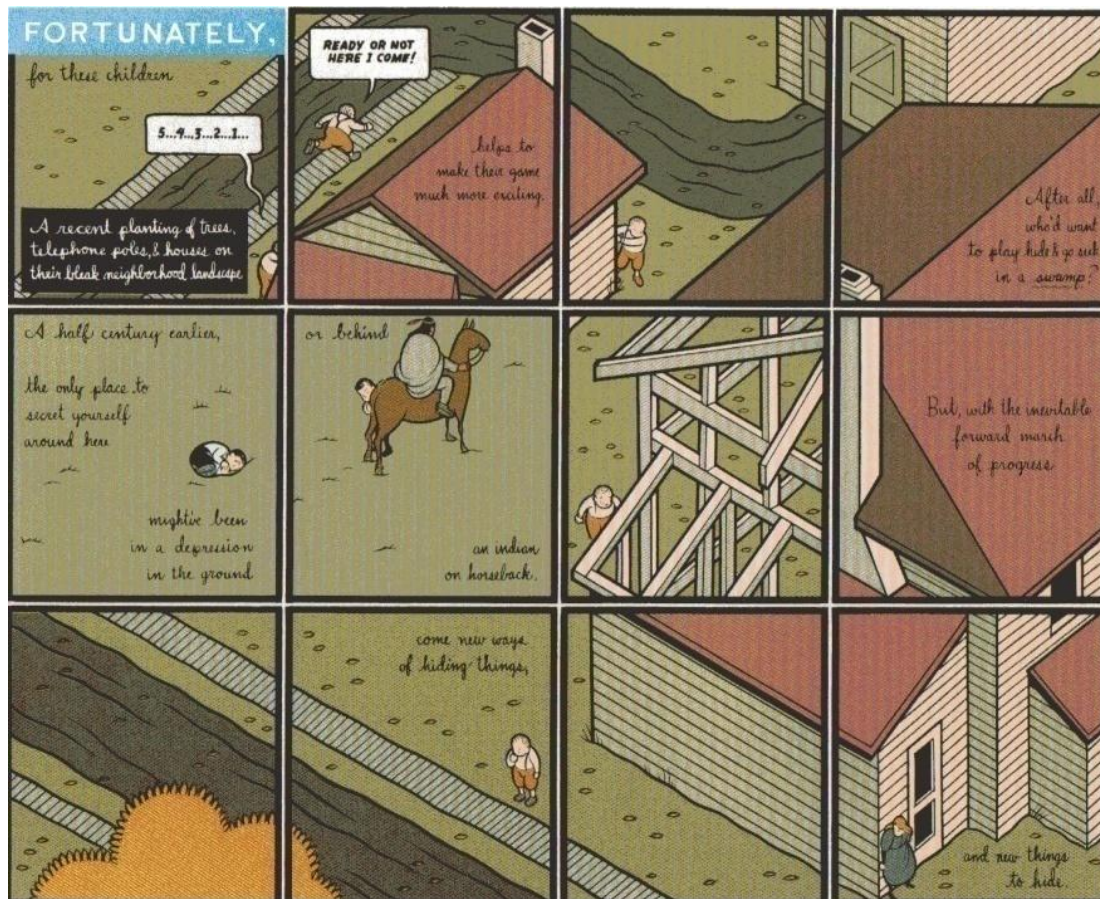


Figure 19. Three different chronological periods subdivide a single image.

As James seeks the red-haired girl his movements form a question mark that curls around the fifth and sixth panels, which 'exist' 50 years ago in time. This is more startling because the Italian boy has time-traveled back along with the narrator. Ware eases the reader out of this wormhole into more conventional comics storytelling by using a transitional panel, which shows the time when the Corrigan home was only a frame. (73)

What is so astounding is not that we are transported between decades, but that Ware manages to accomplish this with a *single* image—James’s grandmother’s lot—that is subdivided into twelve panels. The twelve images portray three different historical periods, in addition to the few minutes of the on-going game of hide-and-seek.

### *The Pacing of Ware’s Comics*

Although I have already given several different examples, probably one of the central elements of Ware’s work that creates the effect of real-life experience is the tempo of his stories. This is one of his great strengths. Everyone finds, on certain occasions, that time unfolds at a slow pace: waiting for a table at a restaurant, sitting through class, reading a novel, listening to someone ramble on endlessly about themselves. Only *very* rarely is life a quick succession of surprising turns and significant moments as it is typically depicted in comic books. Most people might be disappointed upon first picking up a graphic novel and feel that they are slow and boring compared to their juvenile counterparts; artists such as Daniel Clowes, Charles Burns, and Joe Sacco all create very intricate, time-consuming works. British artist James Pyman writes in *Art Monthly* that Ware’s stories “sometimes feel like slower-than-real time, heightening the Chinese water torture of the characters’ self-perpetuating mutual misery” (37). By using “moment-to-moment” transitions in his stories (McCloud, *Understanding* 70), we don’t simply read about the slow passage of time and awkward silences, but the reader actually *experiences* them along with the characters.

Above I mentioned the fact that Ware fills his pages with up to twenty small images at a time; this slower pacing is one of the defining features of Ware’s comics. He captures the feel of real life by depicting events happening in something like real time—rather than jumping from one action-packed highlight to another, he depicts panel after panel of someone fidgeting,

gesturing, or subtly changing an expression. Ware is able to “to illustrate the tensions, the boredom, the awkwardness of everyday life by using onomatopoeic words appropriately placed for coughs and sniffs and clearing of throats, by people fidgeting with objects, by the sound of a key turning in a lock, radios, clocks, and phones” (Klogberg 45). Jimmy’s life is one of anxiety in which he notices all of these mundane, inconsequential details, and the reader gets to go along for the ride (fig. 20).

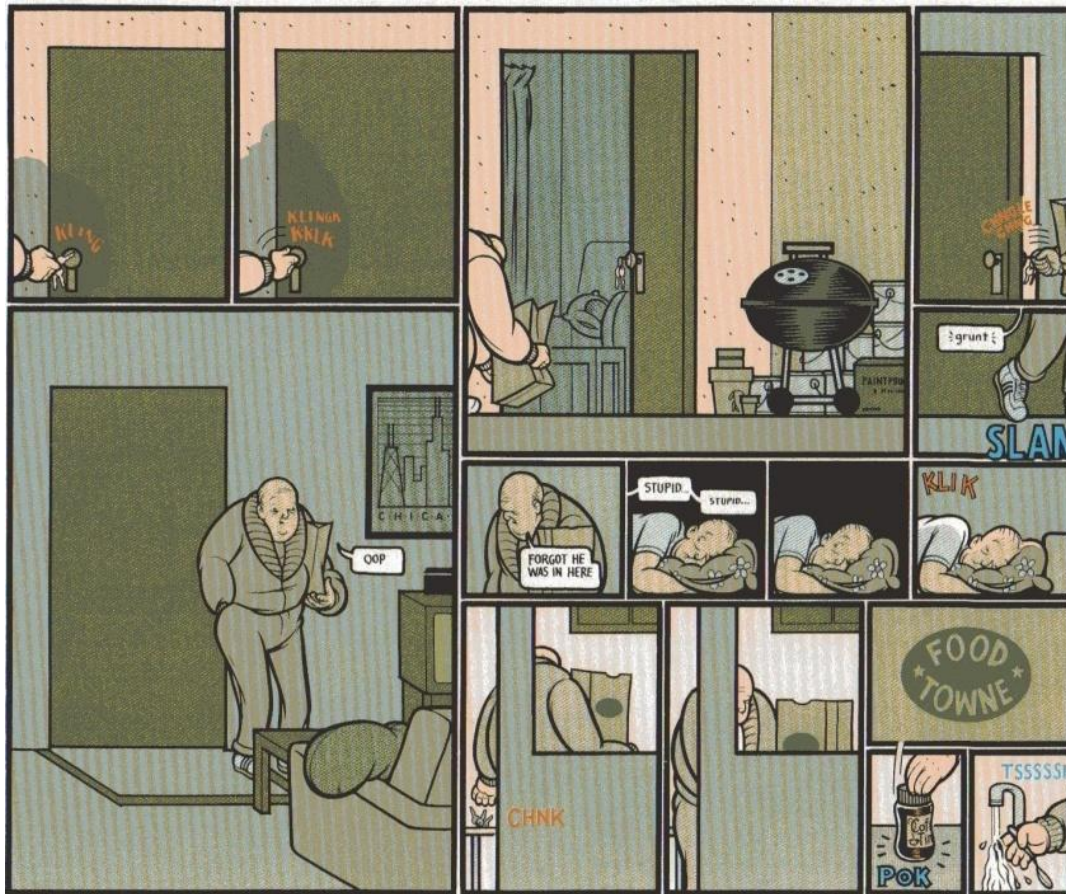


Figure 20. Ware includes the innocuous sounds of everyday life.

Reading comics by Ware means paying attention to all of these details and reading his images in a subtle and complex fashion, much like an encounter with real people or real situations. We are always making value judgments about the nonverbal cues of those around us. Rather than utilizing broad, dramatic movements, Ware captures the sophisticated

communication that we engage in every day: “Sometimes even changing the angle of a character’s eyebrow can really, seriously alter the effect and overall interpretation of a scene. And the insertion of a pause or a cough or a sniff, and all these things that we do in conversation, can bring it to life in a strange way” (Arnold, “Chris Ware”). Everything that I’m describing is very much a part of film and theater, where actors intentionally use their bodies and mannerisms to great effect, but these details have not been a significant part of the comics repertoire until the advent of Chris Ware’s innovative work (Arnold, “Chris Ware”).

Ware says that he deliberately strives to slow down the experience of reading comics: “There is a sort of staccato quality to a comic strip that doesn’t lend itself necessarily to telling something that’s a little more understated. So I had to slow that down and smooth it out a bit” (Arnold, “Chris Ware”). This increased complexity creates a tone, a sense of tedium in Jimmy Corrigan’s life that is unique to Ware’s comics. He isn’t telling stories of heroes dashing back and forth doing great deeds—the typical fare of comics, but rather he is attempting to successfully present a rhopographic portrayal of the everyday.

### *Conclusion*

These are just a very few examples of the innovative work of Chris Ware. The overall structure of *Jimmy Corrigan* deserves much closer examination, since he uses many more symbols than I have discussed, and Jimmy’s fantasy life really deserves a chapter of its own. Ware’s use of comics is a superlative example of the potential of the genre: he balances cartooning and realistic drawing, utilizes a precise and what initially appears to be an emotionally neutral style, while at the same time evoking powerful feelings through tools like his subtle use of color—all in the service of telling an intricate and complex story spanning nine decades. Kannenberg writes that



Chris Ware makes a significant contribution not just to comics but to visual literature as a whole. Ware takes the traditional elements of comics—panels, word balloons, sound effects, narration, and page design—and combines them in startling, sophisticated ways, emphasizing the materiality of text on the comics page as a visual element and using it to fashion complex, polyvalent narrative structures. (196)

Beth Nissen observes that the “compact imagery, the compacted plot and subplots, make *Jimmy Corrigan* more akin to a novel by Faulkner or Dickens than to ‘The Adventures of Spiderman.’ The book is not a quick read.” Through his small, intricate images, and his attention to the details of human behavior, Ware has created a comic book with startling emotional depth and naturalism.

Ware’s gift might have something to do with the fact that his conception of comics is unlike anyone else’s. In the previous chapter I attempted to define comics by comparing it to literature, film, and the visual arts; these are all pretty obvious media for comparison. Ware, however, consistently describes comics in relation to music. He says that comics takes instants of time and freezes them, much like musical notes:

The moments are inert, lying there on the page in the same way that sheet music lies on the printed page. In music you breathe life into the composition by playing it. In comics you make the strip come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat by beat as you would playing music. Another way is to pull back and consider the composition all at once, as you would the façade of a building. (Raeburn 25)

Ware connected half of this equation, the tie between comics and music, on his own, and then discovered the link to architecture from a comment by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that



“architecture is frozen music” (Raeburn 26). Rather than drawing upon comics to inspire his own work, Ware identifies the genre with other, more disparate artistic media; so, when Ware is drawing or editing a page, he is using completely different lenses through which he views the genre, which might account in part for his astoundingly unique creations. The structure of his narrative—even the composition of each individual page—is unlike anything else out there right now.

Dave Eggers, in the *New York Book Review*, had this to say about *Jimmy Corrigan*: “though it’s unlikely that anyone soon will tell a story as powerfully as did Spiegelman in *Maus*, in terms of sheer aesthetic virtuosity Ware’s book is arguably the greatest achievement of the form, ever” (F10). Rick Poyner writes that this is the “most remarkable exponent of graphic authorship . . . . Ware, in short, is the genuine article: a supremely gifted author who achieves a graphic interplay of word and image that graphic design endlessly theorizes, but rarely pulls off at this level of complexity, conviction, and expressive power” (41).

Raeburn describes *Jimmy Corrigan* as “a mind-boggling polyphony of space–time hallucinations and emotional associations centring on loneliness and the birth of the modern world” (9). As I emphasized above, one of the overall impressions of this work is a mood of dejection: Jimmy never achieves a satisfactory reconciliation with his father, who dies from his injuries in the car accident, and as far as we know he never develops a relationship with his step–sister, Amy. He comes through the difficult experience of meeting with his father, though, and when he returns to the vacant floor of his office over the Thanksgiving Day weekend, there is an indication that things are going to change. Although Jimmy assumes that he is the only one in his office over the holiday, he discovers that a newly employed red–haired girl has taken up the recently vacated cubicle across from his own—she’s come in to arrange her things; they timidly

introduce themselves and the reader is left with the impression that this is the beginning of a romantic relationship. So, there's a glimmer of hope for Jimmy at the end of this story. Pollmann writes that maybe this "melancholy" book has an "uplifting message: even in the most emotionally barren settings, there is still something not to deaden us but to make us stronger" (116). And this adds to poignancy of the story as a whole; because the plot is laced with so much difficulty, this gleam of the possibility of something positive carries a far greater impact.

## CHAPTER 4.

### *JIMMY CORRIGAN AND THE ADVENT OF THE POLITICIZED GRAPHIC NOVEL*

#### *Introduction*

The work of Chris Ware, and *Jimmy Corrigan* in particular, represents some of the most outstanding efforts in comics today. He certainly isn't alone, of course, in producing comics worthy of critical examination and even the label "high art"—there's a new field of great talent that has only recently emerged in the last ten to fifteen years. Charles Hatfield observes that "comics are clearly in the process of being repositioned within our culture" (xi), but how have graphic novels come to be where they are today, on the verge of widespread mainstream acceptance? Comics has taken some unusual, but important, turns in the last four decades that have produced works like those of Ware and so many others, like David Clowes, Craig Thompson, Lynda Barry, and Alison Bechdel.

It depends upon which source you consult, but most agree that comics in its modern form has been around since the late nineteenth century. It has always been a popular genre because people are naturally drawn to images and also because comics has always been entertaining—it has made people smile at the antics of foolish characters, or made them laugh as that day's political figure was lampooned for all to see. Especially with the introduction of comic books in the 1930s, most people looked down upon this genre as entertainment for children or those with little education or low IQs—and often for good reason. Only very rarely did someone come along who demonstrated the capability of the genre—like Winsor McCay or Will Eisner, and only very rarely was comics used to say something of lasting value. Comics almost always catered to younger and less sophisticated audiences.

This trend changed, however, with the advent of “Underground comix” that began to address adult audiences: “when America’s rebelling youth of the 1960s set about breaching their culture’s established taboos, the comics genre offered a particularly fruitful ground for iconoclasm” (Witek 50–1). This generation of comics creators—Robert Crumb most notably—was rebelling against their culture and the Comics Code Authority by making comics that were explicit in every way imaginable: overt sexuality, drug use, political protest, even outbursts against women and racial minorities—every conceivable taboo was explored.

Following this somewhat adolescent phase, comics began to offer something more than merely juvenile and explicit entertainment: in the early 1970s arose very personal confessional narratives. The earliest examples, such as Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, were pretty graphic, but they were also a therapeutic means of coping with personal problems through satire, farce, and scorn. This period was followed by a more mature, astute treatment of personal as well as political concerns. Although this later material was intended for adults, it was also intended for wider, mainstream audiences, which meant that it was less graphic and prurient in nature. Art Spiegelman’s *tour de force* two-volume graphic novel, *Maus*, came out during this time, which led everyone in the comics community to believe that comics had finally achieved a position of cultural prominence, but that turned out to not be the case. Instead of continuing to increase in sales, graphic novels quickly fell out of the public spotlight and comics aficionados in the early 1990s felt that comics were doomed to perpetual obscurity. This slump has turned around yet again, however, with this most recent generation of comics creators. New artists—such as Joe Sacco, Alison Bechdel, and Adrian Tomine—are continually emerging and they are generating more sales, claiming a greater market share, and garnering more critical attention.

My purpose in this chapter is primarily two-fold. First, is to show how comics shifted its appeal from its exclusive, alternative fan base to mainstream audiences, which was a very gradual process that took place over the course of eighteen to twenty years. Each new wave of development seems to build upon and include the innovations of the previous wave. My second goal is to demonstrate the unique qualities of *Jimmy Corrigan* in comparison to other current graphic novels. Just as I said in chapter two that I needed to define comics by comparing it to literature, film, and the visual arts “in order to plot its cultural coordinates within this complex landscape more accurately,” so also I want to continue examining Ware’s accomplishment in *Jimmy Corrigan* by comparing it to other recent graphic novels. In doing so, I plan to expand and delve into many of the corners and crevices of this work that I left unexplored in chapter three.

#### *Comic Books as Counter Culture: Underground Comix*

Hatfield writes that the early history of comic books, from the 1930s until the 40s, was primarily focused upon the exploration of the capability of this new, longer format, which was significantly different from its predecessor, the newspaper strip (9). During this time, and into the 1950s, comic books focused on fantastical elements, whether the story was based on a superhero, or a horror, crime, or war story; they tended to push the boundaries in their explorations of the far-out and the grotesque. And then came Fredric Wertham and his *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, and, along with Communism, comic books became the object of fear and loathing across the country. Rather than face the possibility of federal censorship, the industry imposed its own standards, the Comics Code Authority, to regulate the explicit nature of content. So, although comic books became more “kid friendly,” the subject matter remained largely the same—superheroes, villains, romantic relationships, detectives and criminals, cowboys and bandits.

What had been overlooked, however, from the inception of the comic book, was any examination of real people living true-life experiences. Instead, it was heroes, melodrama, and sensationalized stories—fantasy. Comics was lacking depth, sophistication, subtlety—reality. During the 1960s the genre was ready for a change; Paul Gravett writes that “[s]o much of people’s lives, dreams and feelings, all the extraordinary theater of the everyday, had been excluded from the genre and was ripe for expression, from gritty realism to magical surrealism” (39). The solution to this vacuum was underground comix—the “catalyst for a publishing revolution that had been waiting to happen” (Sabin 37). They were “underground” because they were published independently and conscientiously violated the Comics Code Authority—the *x* in *comix* was intended to denote their lascivious, x-rated content (Sabin 36).

Over the course of two decades, two movements occupy the development of graphic novels: the first is a rapid, dramatic departure *from* the mainstream, and the second is a gradual return back *to* mainstream audiences. Comics evolved past the obstacle created by Wertham and the resultant Code, and, actually, it was *because* of Wertham that comics was transformed. The young adults who had grown up on comic books didn’t care for the new Howdy–Doody tone, so comics creators took the genre in a direction that it might never have gone otherwise: adult themes. At the same time that they expanded its range, however, they also narrowed their audience by excluding kids, which is why they become an “underground” movement. Very gradually, through the 1970s and into the 80s, this new facet of comics continued to be developed and eventually adult themes were brought back in line with mainstream audiences. No longer, however, was *mainstream* equated with kids fare, but comics had broadened its horizon.

Although there were earlier examples and creators, it is the work of Robert Crumb in early 1968, *Zap Comix*, that is recognized as the mature emergence of this new development in

comics (Hatfield 8). Comix was “an expression of the counter–culture of the 1960s and 1970s, which, in America, must be seen as in large part a reaction to the extremely repressive atmosphere of the 1950s”; it was also a revolt against the Code—“an outpouring of all the ‘unsound’ ideas bottled–up since 1954” (Sabin 171). These artists “systematically flung down and danced upon every American standard of good taste, artistic competence, political coherence, and sexual restraint” (Witek 51). Although utilizing “an attractive ‘Disneyesque’ drawing style,” the content of these works was an exercise in just how far one could go beyond socially accepted boundaries (Sabin 37). Joseph Witek describes it this way: the audience for underground comix “was already alienated from mainstream American culture,” and “often the weirder and more repulsive a comix artist could be, the better” (76). Witek goes on to say that “the excesses of the underground comix were culturally valuable precisely because they were gratuitous” (76).

Although underground comix presented explicit material and were popular with the hip 60s generation, they were a relatively short–lived phenomenon, thriving from 1968 only until the early or mid–1970s; they “succumbed to their own clichés—sex, drugs and hedonism, sapped of political will—and withered, retreating to the margins of culture” (Hatfield 19). Although briefly reveling in the liberation of the anarchic spirit of the 60s, “comix artists came to see that even full freedom can become an artistic dead end” (Witek 77).

This development, although it might be perceived as childish in a lot of ways today, was vitally important for at least a couple of reasons. Underground comix broadened the capability of the genre (Witek 153). They “above all were the catalyst for a radically new understanding of the art form” (Hatfield 7). These new creators were intimately aware of comics’ past, and they consciously toyed with readers’ expectations and explored the traditions and tropes of the genre

(fig. 21). Hatfield sees a parallel with the Beat poets, to whom these artists looked for inspiration: “the pioneers of comix were self-styled hipsters and iconoclasts who both rejected



Figure 21. Underground comix parodied romance comics as well as feminists.

and built on prior traditions” (18). Rather than merely floating in a culturally marginal limbo, comix “transformed the medium into a vehicle for a febrile romanticism in tune with the radical sensibilities of the Vietnam-era counterculture” (Hatfield 11).

Another point of importance is the fact that comix broadened the reading audience of the genre (Witek 153). Adults were reading comic books in unprecedented numbers, and this saturation of a mature audience caused ripples that are being felt today. Even if it was a relatively tiny proportion of the country that was being reached, R. Crumb and others made it clear that adults could and should read comics. This small crack in the door of cultural acceptability made it possible for future generations to come along and slowly open the door a little more and a little more.



So, when one considers the nature of literary graphic novels being produced today, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, one key element is that they are almost always about topics other than fantasy—that is, superheroes—and a second key factor is that it is just naturally assumed that there *is* an adult target audience out there. Neither one of these things was a part of the conception of comics four–and–a–half decades ago.

The success of these early comix changed the market. By the mid–1970s an underground comics culture developed in the US, which was publishing whole lines of comic books—such as *Last Gasp*, *Rip Off*, and *Kitchen Sink* (Sabin 41); this was an indication of the strength of adult comics. Hatfield calls this next generation *alternative comics*, once the undergrounds created a sustainable market viability. So, although initially in rebellion against industry giants like Marvel and DC, comix grew into an industry itself. Some writers began to direct their satire at comix themselves (Hatfield 20), while others created new comics formats. An example of this new type of publication featured collections of work by artists rather than publishing issues of individual comic books; this gave rise to magazines like *Weirdo*, *Arcade*, and Spiegelman and Mouly’s *Raw* (Hatfield 20), which created opportunity for new talent and the exploration of new ideas.

*“Ego Absolvo”: The Confessional Graphic Novel*

The alternative comics that grew out of the underground movement came about as an offshoot of an almost adolescent spirit of rebellion—offensive material merely for the sake of giving offense—but after only a few years, comics creators began striving for something more. Works like *American Splendor* and *Maus* began to take on more serious themes in the form of confessions. Hatfield writes that the “the singular genius of the underground comic books was the way they transformed an object that was jejune and mechanical in origin into a radically new kind of expressive object, a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations” (7).

Comic books didn't have to be merely about fantasy and escapism, but they could serve as "an acutely personal means of artistic exploration and self-expression" (Hatfield ix). After having explored the limits of obscenity, the style of this next generation brought back a sense of decorum (Witek 77).

These writers were interested in the artistic and literary potential of comics as a genre; once the door to the room of possibility had been cracked, writers and artists came along to investigate the boundaries of this new and exciting space. The alternative comics of the 1970s "enlarged the comic book's thematic repertoire by urging the exploration of genres heretofore neglected in comics, such as autobiography, reportage, and historical fiction. Autobiography, especially, has been central to alternative comics" (Hatfield x). Douglas Wolk, in his recent book, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, humorously describes this generic development as the "sentimental memoir—the first-person story that explains why the author is in the right and why the author's pain and sadness are more sad and painful than yours" (203).

During this period comics begins to explore the landscape of reality in a way that it never had before; there is a shift from adult themes—almost always of a vulgar, puerile nature—to an examination of intimate, personal stories. This means that the genre effectively enlarges its range of possibility in yet another dimension, just as it had through underground comix. It also means that comics continues to move closer to the realm of mainstream acceptability. These stories are not fantastical nor are they coarse; they present events and problems that anyone can relate to. In the mid-1980s all of the ingredients would finally be in place to enable widespread acceptance of comics: mature examination of topics with which mainstream audiences could identify.

This first example that I'm going to examine treats a very serious and a very personal issue, but it does so with a similar sense of vulgarity and coarseness that permeated underground comix. In 1972 Justin Green published *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and essentially invented a new comics genre; Paul Gravett writes that Green "became the first neurotic visionary to unburden his uncensored psychological troubles" in comics form (22). Art Spiegelman offers a more positive assessment of Green's accomplishment: "What the Brontë sisters did for Gothic romance, what Tolkien did for sword-and-sorcery, Justin Green did for confessional, autobiographical comix" (qtd. in Gravett 23). So, although this eventually becomes a prominent genre in alternative comics, he was "ahead of the memoirist curve" (Wolk 203); *Binky Brown* has been described as "the ur-example of confessional literature in comics" (Hatfield 131).

In *Binky Brown* Justin Green describes his childhood struggles with guilt that he suffered for having sexual thoughts; these challenges were compounded by an emotional illness that was later diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder. Hatfield writes that Green "depicts the mutual reinforcement of religious dogma and psychological obsession, a cruel synergy that all but consumes its titular hero" (131). Due to his OCD, "Binky falls prey to bizarre obsessions and paranoid hallucinations" (Witek 128). Although these were very real challenges in his life, Green presents them in a tone described as "surrealistic high farce" (Witek 130). The tone of *Binky Brown* is hard to describe because while he delves into deeply personal issues, he does so in an absurd, self-mocking manner. This is a transitional work that reflects many of the same characteristics as underground comix—*Binky Brown* is still childish in many elements of its presentation, although it deals with adult struggles.

*Binky Brown* is important in our discussion of the current state of comics for several reasons. Justin Green was the first comics artist to come out and use the genre as a cathartic

opportunity for public disclosure, which made possible the work of Harvey Pekar, Art Spiegelman, and even Chris Ware. Although all four of these writers present very different tones and ideas in their work, all of them are essentially working in the same manner: sharing personal aspects of themselves via comics.

Green's work continues to have an impact even up to the present day. Although it might seem quite a leap to go from the frenetic, chaotic landscape of *Binky Brown* to the somber and morose presentation of *Jimmy Corrigan*, there are some surprising similarities. Both works utilize a fictional persona, and they both shift frequently and quickly between the realms of fantasy and reality. Green uses a series of "disorienting conceits that capture young Binky's *psychic* landscape," but they become more and more assertive as they appear as a part of his daily life, and the fantastical elements become more intrusive (Hatfield 137). In the same way Ware's narrative in *Jimmy Corrigan* frequently blurs reality and fantasy: Jimmy imagines himself as a bird and as a robot; he dreams of living impoverished on a farm and of having the wealth to enjoy vacationing on a yacht; he has frequent sexual fantasies about women throughout the book; and he also fantasizes about harming his parents. So, although *Binky Brown* is crude and satirical and farcical, in many ways it is actually one of the works that is most similar to *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Just as underground comix opened the door for a personal examination like *Binky Brown*, so *Binky Brown* opened the door for a more serious and more protracted exploration of one's self in *American Splendor*. In this section I am going to continue to consider several autobiographical comics; my larger goal in this chapter is to examine *Jimmy Corrigan* and position it in relation to these other works. One might protest—and correctly so for the most part—that Ware didn't write *Jimmy Corrigan* as a confessional graphic novel; but even though this work is not autobiography

per se, there clearly *are* autobiographical elements, and Ware's use of comics as a therapeutic working-out of personal issues draws upon these earlier examples. Furthermore, in addition to the events and larger elements in *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware seems also to share many of the same personality traits as his eponymous character. Unlike Green and Pekar and Spiegelman, Ware is simply too introverted to write in a straightforward autobiographical fashion.

Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* is examined here for several reasons: it significantly contributed to the acceptance of comics by an adult audience; it was another important step in the evolution of confessional comics; and, most importantly, it was a significant development in helping comics achieve the greater cultural recognition that is even now in the process of accruing. Joseph Witek writes that even though *Binky Brown* and *American Splendor* have obvious similarities, the former work is much more closely connected with "the unfettered undergrounds"—especially in tone—rather than with Pekar's "sometimes dour, often ironic renderings of immediate experience" (128–9). *American Splendor* isn't really "about" anything, except for the difficulties in Pekar's life and his reflection upon their nature and significance. He frequently describes trying to sell records from his jazz collection at work; in one issue Pekar helps a friend move a rug and some chairs into his apartment and then misses meeting a girl at the movie theater; in another one he is called for jury duty and he uses the occasion to reflect on Nixon and the American justice system. Considering the mundane nature of his topics, it is pretty remarkable that this work has seen the success that it has, which is a testament to Pekar's ability as a raconteur.

Although underground comic books broke with comics' past by addressing mature topics, they often did so in an outlandish, drug-induced manner that oftentimes continued the genre's tradition of fantasy—absurd explorations of imagination. And Justin Green continued in this

same vein as well. Pekar's stories, however, "reverse the traditional escapism of American comic-books" (Witek 122). They have been described as "a refreshing kind of memoir, focusing on the ordinary and valorizing it over the extraordinary" (Wolk 204). Pekar himself has said, "I want to write literature that pushes people into their lives rather than helping them escape from them. Most comic books are vehicles for escapism, which I think is unfortunate. I think that the so-called average person often exhibits a great deal of heroism in getting through an ordinary day, and yet the reading public takes this heroism for granted" (qtd. in Witek 122). This shift in Pekar's work is an important part of comics' move toward the mainstream.

Not that it's a direct influence necessarily, but *American Splendor* also exhibits elements that are an important part of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Just as Pekar's narrative is rhopographic in nature—concerned with the realm of the mundane and everyday, the nonheroic—in the same way Ware draws us into the minutiae of Jimmy's pathetic, lackluster existence. Not only are these stories realistic in their portrayals of life, but they also deal largely with the *uneventful* details of life: we see Jimmy in the break room at work, we see him in the grocery store, and we spend 10½ pages with him eating in a diner with his father. Neither of these works deals with cataclysmic events, nor do they glorify their protagonists. *American Splendor* and *Jimmy Corrigan* both epitomize the idea of rhopography.

During the 1970s and early 1980s very little was happening with comics to alter its cultural status significantly. *American Splendor* enjoyed a loyal following, but it was a miniscule minority in relation to the US population as a whole. The high point for comics in these years, along with the publication of *RAW*, was the publication in 1978 of *A Contract With God* by Will Eisner—an eager, courageous, as well as a desperate attempt to make a bid for cultural legitimacy. Eisner saw this project as an opportunity to bring the genre of comics before the

attention of the public as serious art. It was this collection, “a quartet of sad, moving and disarmingly unglamorous vignettes of Jewish life set in New York in the ‘dirty thirties,’” that popularized the term *graphic novel* (Gravett 38). Ultimately, Eisner’s effort did not meet with a great deal of success—comics continued to be viewed primarily as the purview of children—because no one was prepared for *A Contract With God* or the idea of comics possibly deserving cultural legitimacy. Like an oak tree planted on a beach, Eisner’s idea did not have the resources to survive; granted, he had produced and planted something that was exceptional and vibrant, but no one had prepared the soil to ensure long-term growth.

This all changed, however, with the appearance of three very different titles published in 1986 and 1987: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*. Eisner’s work had inspired and spawned other, later attempts that flourished. Frank Miller’s reconfigured Dark Knight was Batman in a way that he had never been portrayed before: he grapples with his past and how it has shaped him; he struggles with the decision of resuming the mantle of a vigilante; and he fights to overcome the limitations of a body that has begun to give out. The decision to resume the mantle is related in a manner well suited to comics—more visually than verbally (fig. 22). Bruce is drinking alone in his manor watching a newscast. His recollections of the night of his parents’ murders are interspersed with news stories of the ongoing violence and chaos that plagues Gotham. Finally he dashes from the room as square blocks record what he hears in his head: “The time has **come**. You know it in your **soul**. For **I** am your soul . . . You cannot **escape** me . . .” (Miller 25). The typical twelve-to-fourteen-year-old audience was not the target of this menacing, complex character.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* similarly took comics to a new level of sophistication. It was a revisionist presentation of the superhero ethos: can a vigilante do

anything to effect change, especially in a global environment? Like Miller's Batman, many of the "heroes" suffered from emotional and relationship problems well beyond the ken of adolescents.



Figure 22. Bruce Wayne's prevarication in the present is interspersed with memories from the past.

Of these three titles, *Maus* was the most exceptional development in a time of exceptional changes. Art Spiegelman tells the story of his parents' experiences as Jews in Nazi Germany, as well as the resultant dysfunction that this has caused in his own life. Not only was *Maus* bold in



its grappling with the greatest human crisis of the twentieth century, but it was also unprecedented for a comic book to “combine seemingly disparate genres and narrative approaches into a single seamless story. . . . it makes Vladek’s Holocaust story and Art’s psychological quest into a single narrative which blends public and private history” (Witek 115). *Maus* is a blend of historical narrative, biography, autobiography, and confessional; it draws from Vladek’s personal experiences to validate what has transpired historically, but for Art it is a “psychological need to hear and render the truth” (Witek 114).

This graphic novel is unlike *American Splendor* in that it broke through the barrier to reach wide, even international, audiences; it was a cultural phenom. But *Maus* is also very similar to *American Splendor* in that it explores the most intimate parts of Spiegelman’s life, although there is also a focus on how the personal is impacted by the titanic, destructive forces of history. Roger Sabin points this out, almost as an afterthought, which I think is misleading; he writes that *Maus* “was also an autobiography in the sense that the story partly concerns the author’s relationship with his father in the present-day, and the way in which the legacy of the holocaust affects that relationship” (90). In the last twenty years this work has received an unprecedented amount of attention for a comic, and is almost always recognized as a “major work in holocaust literature” (Sabin 91).

This view misses what I believe to be the primary point of this work. I am very deliberately discussing Spiegelman’s masterpiece under the rubric of confessional, autobiographical comics, because I believe *that* to be its primary significance—a point that is extremely important and most often overlooked. The initial motivation behind *Maus* was not to explore the atrocities committed by Nazis in World War II—although it *is* a brilliant work considered in that capacity alone—but for Spiegelman it was first and foremost a *personal* quest

in an attempt to understand his parents and his family's dysfunction. He is less interested in the Holocaust than in Vladek and Anja. The story opens not in 1930s Germany, and not in Nazi-occupied Poland where his parents were from, but in a suburb of New Jersey in 1958.

Spiegelman, as a ten-year-old, falls while roller-skating with friends who leave him behind; he goes crying to Vladek for sympathy, but his father responds, "Friends? Your Friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . THEN you could see what it is, friends!" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 6). And it is this incident between Art and his father that sets the tone for the rest of the book; *Maus* is the congress of the Spiegelmans' past and present: Art's investigations into his parents' experiences in Nazi Germany combined with the current difficulties of their lives in the US.

*Maus* connects to confessional comics in one section especially. While conducting his series of interviews with Vladek, Spiegelman learns that he has upset his father: someone has passed along to him a comic that Spiegelman wrote about his mother's suicide called "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," a part of which is reproduced. Stylistically it is a dramatic departure from the rest of the book (fig. 23), and, in the same vein as confessional comics, it is brutally and painfully honest—raw in its emotional transparency. *Maus* is such an intricate, complex blend of



Figure 23. Stylistic comparison of *Maus* to the earlier "Prisoner on the Hell Planet."

disparate genres that most readers do not seem to be fully aware of the deeply painful and personal issues being explored by Spiegelman; for most readers his own suffering is

overshadowed by the trauma suffered by Vladek and Anja, which simply serves to underscore the troubling issues that have dominated Spiegelman's entire life.

My emphasis on the value of the personal narrative outweighing the significance of the historical one is further borne out in volume two; here, Spiegelman opens up to an even greater extent about his own challenges—not only with his father and not only with his own failings, but also with the success of the first volume of *Maus* (Fig. 24). The scene following this one shows Spiegelman at a session with his therapist; he depicts himself in a diminutive fashion as his



Figure 24. Spiegelman struggles with anxiety despite the success of the first volume of *Maus*.

confidence and self-esteem wither. When asked how he's feeling, he responds, "Completely messed up. I mean, things couldn't be going better with my 'career,' or at home, but mostly I feel like crying" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 43). Spiegelman is being hounded by people looking to capitalize on his success, "But even when I'm left alone I'm totally **blocked**. Instead of working

on my book I just lie on my couch for hours and stare at a small grease spot on the upholstery” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 43).

And *Maus* did have tremendous commercial success. Especially due to the fact that it was published by Penguin, a publisher of traditional books, Spiegelman’s work was even more highly esteemed than either *Dark Knight* or *Watchmen* (Sabin 91). For the first time comics was receiving widespread mainstream attention, and even more importantly, respect. Unlike the iconoclastic comics of the 1960s and 1970s, these newest works—these graphic novels—made a new and unprecedented bid for acceptance as literature<sup>1</sup> (Witek 52). Another difference between *Maus* and the other two titles is the fact that it in no way addressed the superhero genre; like earlier alternative comics, it liberated itself from “normative practices and narrative clichés of ‘mainstream’ comic books” (Hatfield 18).

There are significant advantages to the graphic novel over the comic book: it “opens up all sorts of possibilities. It can allow for greater character development, more complex plots, more detailed scene-setting and the generation of mood. Qualitatively, therefore, the form can have properties that a regular comic lacks” (Sabin 236). But why did these graphic novels receive so much media and critical attention? While the underground comix helped redefine the potential of comics for artistic expression, they also kept comics from becoming a more widely accepted art form because of their pugnacious nature, which “ensured that they would remain at the fringes of the culture at large” (Witek 153). The graphic novel revolution of the 1980s was important because it was a shift away from the marginalized fan base, which had sustained alternative comics for nearly twenty years, and toward a mainstream audience (Sabin 176).

There were several factors that lay behind the sudden success of graphic novels. The first, and maybe most important of these, is the fact that Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Art

Spiegelman had written great stories. As demonstrated by their continued success over the last twenty years, all of them are outstanding storytellers: Miller portrayed a Batman that had grown old and lived in the real world; Moore toyed with the superhero formula in sophisticated and entertaining ways; and Spiegelman brilliantly related struggles that other Baby-Boomers could identify with—even if the reader didn't have parents who had lived through the Holocaust. All three of these men were able to appeal to adult sensibilities and also were able to write for widespread audiences, which was not the case with Pekar's stories.

Another important factor in the rapid rise of the graphic novel is the market forces that were involved. For the first time comics was being openly and eagerly accepted into bookstores across the country (Hatfield 29); this was a “major step forward, not least because it made them accessible to a public who may either have felt intimidated by the fan shops, or who may never have otherwise come across them” (Sabin 94–5). Large, chain bookstores got on board promoting these new, grown-up comic books, because there was a lot of money to be made. The term *graphic novel*, then, was—at least to some extent—a marketing tool that “had several advantages from a publicity perspective. . . . it was used as a device to mark them out as something new, to distance them from the childish connotations of the word ‘comic’” (Sabin 93). Many articles were written during this time putting mainstream America on notice, as if it had just occurred at that moment, that comics had grown up—a news story that was promoted and sustained by publishers “in order to keep the profits flowing” (Sabin 93).

These elements are not sufficient, however, to explain the critical attention and admiration that were showered upon graphic novels. There was also a cultural movement well underway that was larger than comics and that helped make this genre more palatable, even with scholars and academics: Postmodernism. Amy J. Elias describes this phenomenon as three

interlocked discussions that are epistemological, sociological, and aesthetic in nature. She writes that some of the characteristics of aesthetic Postmodernism include “a blurring of traditionally separate literary genres; a reversal or destruction of traditional high art/low art hierarchies; experimentation with popular or ‘low’ art genres, such as science fiction, romance, and detective fiction” (Elias xxvii). So, the success of graphic novels in the mid–1980s can be attributed, at least in part, to the luck of timing. Sabin writes that “it became increasingly acceptable to think of ‘culture’ as including not just the ‘high arts’—opera, prose literature, fine arts—but also areas such as television, video, rock music and ‘pop’ culture generally. The barriers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, it seemed, were, if not breaking down, then leaking badly, and there was pressure on the ‘arbiters of taste’ to expand their horizons” (92).

What was the result of these three factors all coming together from 1986 to 1987? For the first time in over thirty years comics was embraced and celebrated with less concern on the part of readers about morally damaging material or of being perceived as intellectually inferior. Everyone in the media, it seemed, was excited about comics. Sabin, again, provides a feeling for the cultural climate of the time:

graphic novels were now frequently reviewed in the literary pages of the quality press, and were even studied at some universities and polytechnics. This co-option was the final stage in the transition of part of the comics industry from a ‘comics culture’ to a ‘book culture.’ In short, it served to remake comics in prose literature’s image. . . . graphic novels were invariably reviewed in the books section rather than the general arts pages. (247)

If anyone had thought that this shift in cultural favor and beneficence was too good to last, she would have been correct. *Dark Knight*, *Maus*, and *Watchmen* had “established a

beachhead for ‘graphic novels’ in the book trade and indeed expectations of success that for years went spectacularly unfulfilled” (Hatfield 30). Sabin points out that most people simply weren’t prepared to start reading comics as a part of their everyday lives, and that, despite all of the media coverage, “the perception of the medium remained rooted in traditional notions of it as children’s entertainment” (178). In the mainstream there wasn’t yet a culture of comics—this new genre was something of a novelty for most people. Although in academia, falling in step with the drum of Postmodern, there might have been intellectual assent and recognition of comics as a viable artistic genre, this idea had not yet trickled down into the broader public consciousness. Even with the success of *Maus* adults weren’t yet comfortable being seen reading a graphic novel. Comics’ breakthrough into the mainstream would have to await another opportunity.

Sabin published *Adult Comics* in 1993, when graphic novels had already passed through their initial boom with these three titles, and, from his perspective, they were already headed toward bust: “by 1991 some bookshops were withdrawing graphic novels from the shelves” (247). He hadn’t given up hope, of course: “there are substantial barriers to overcome in the future . . . although graphic novels currently have their problems, they are manifestly not ‘graphic novelties’, as some cynics have suggested. . . . they have established themselves, albeit in a marginal sense, and are now a feature of the publishing landscape in a way they were not before. Nobody today doubts that they are here to stay” (Sabin 248). And, although he was not a dispassionate observer, he was right in his prediction, although he had no way to foresee or even imagine what lay beyond the horizon: the revolutionary work of reportage by Joe Sacco in *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–1995*, the many successful and diverse examples of graphic novels like Daniel Clowes’ *Ghost World*, Kim Dietch’s *The Boulevard of*

*Broken Dreams*, Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner's *Our Cancer Year*, or Eric Drooker's *Blood Song: A Silent Ballad*.

Just as Sabin foretold, graphic novels *have* survived through the slump of the late 80s and early 90s. Comics has enjoyed yet another renaissance in the public spotlight, only this time it is more gradual, more sustainable; the rapid ascent of underground comix and of the graphic novel in the mid-80s, by contrast, were phenomena of the flash-in-the-pan variety. Following the "Big 3," as Sabin refers to them for convenience, it was about ten years before literary graphic novels of merit again resurfaced. Although new titles were being published, none of them was anywhere near the caliber of the three titles that had created the media sensation: "In the rush to cash in, quality was not always the highest priority" (Sabin 246). Gravett writes that this turn-around was "bound to take time, because these sorts of graphic novels can require years, even decades to come to fruition"—Bechdel's *Fun Home*, for instance, took seven years to complete; Gravett continues, "Slowly, all of life is finding a place in these new comics, where it has always belonged" (39).

Surprisingly, the early realist influence of writers like Justin Green and Harvey Pekar has remained potent, even after twenty years—many of the most significant graphic novels in recent years continue to exhibit an intimate, confessional aspect. From 1996–2003 French writer/artist David Beauchard published six volumes entitled *L'ascension du haut mal*, which were collected into one book in 2005 under the title *Epileptic* in its English translation. This work tells the story of Jean-Christophe, Beauchard's older brother who develops epilepsy, and the impact that it has upon the family. Epileptic seizures are the curse of this family, somewhat analogously to the way that the Holocaust was for the Spiegelmans.



*Epileptic* is biography and autobiography and memoir, but it is also confessional. The primary purpose behind this work, similar to that of *Maus*, is one man trying to come to terms with the challenges that he and his family have faced; as well as exploring the nature of this illness and its repercussions, Beauchard is very candid about his personal failures and those of his family. From very early on, as a young kid, Pierre-François—Beauchard’s name before he changed it as a young adult—realized that he had a certain power and authority over his brother, even though he is older by a couple of years (Beauchard 34); this creates a tension that wrecks havoc in their relationship throughout the entire rest of the book. As a young man Pierre-François alternately feels aggressive—frequently getting into fights and beating up his brother—, frustrated, thwarted, repressed. Ultimately all of these emotions stem from feelings of helplessness: Pierre-François is powerless to cure or even assist his brother; he is upset about his family’s inability to find a curative treatment despite years of continual searching and investigating; he is irritated by Jean-Christophe’s unwillingness to do anything for himself—he has surrendered to his condition. Beauchard tells us about his wishes that his brother would die, and he even goes so far as to consider ways that he might kill him (266–7).

As an adult, living his own life in Paris, Beauchard is still unable to escape from the curse that has consumed most of his life; he is angry and tortured over his past. He fantasizes about being an epileptic and having others take care of him (Beauchard 287–8), and occasionally he even contemplates suicide (Beauchard 289, 328). When he returns home after failing to pass his exit exams at university, Beauchard is unable to tolerate even the proximity of his brother: “Sometimes he comes to see me in my room while I’m working. He sits down on the bed. He never looks at what I’m doing, he doesn’t say a word. . . . I try to get back to work but his silent presence drives me crazy” (318). This is a difficult scene to witness, because it is clear that Jean–

Christophe wants nothing more than to be near his brother, even if they don't have a significant relationship. The episode concludes with this exchange:

"If you don't want anything, go away!"

"But . . . David . . . Don't get mad, I'm not doing anything . . ."

"EXACTLY! Get the fuck out of here!" (Beauchard 318–9)

If the reader is shocked by Beauchard's propensity for anger, Beauchard is also disappointed in his own behavior: "What I've done tears me up, but I don't know what else to do" (319)

There are several significant similarities between *Epileptic* and *Jimmy Corrigan*. Both works examine realist concerns and exhibit an interest in history—family history in particular. Several times in the early parts of *Epileptic* Beauchard gives accounts of his grandparents' lives and the challenges that they endured; in a conversation with his mother he explains the link that he sees between past and present: "Our ancestors were locked in a constant struggle to escape their misery. You endured a similar struggle in your quest to cure Jean–Christophe. I see it as the same thing" (96). When she says that he only sees their story as a tragedy, he responds, "True, it's tragic. But what interests me is the struggle against disease and death" (96). As discussed in chapter three, Ware also uses the stories of past generations in order to develop the story of the present. Both works frequently jump between distant past and present, and various points in between.

Another common element is the motif of helplessness. Beauchard and his family are incapable of helping Jean–Christophe, who is unable and/or unwilling to help himself; Jimmy Corrigan is a similarly passive character who is constantly overwhelmed and intimidated by everyone and everything around him, even to the extent that he has very little dialogue throughout the entire book. Both of these characters respond by developing strong attachments to

their mothers. Jean–Christophe surrenders and hides behind his condition so that he doesn’t have to cope with reality, but because of his child–like nature he never considers the option of suicide; at the very end of the book, however, we find Jimmy on the same street corner where Super–Man landed after making his fatal leap (361, 373), and he even envisions making the jump himself (375). Throughout the entire book Jimmy is the very epitome of helplessness and passivity, always apologizing and adopting gestures postures of insecurity.

A final similarity between the works of David B. and Chris Ware is the many fantastical elements that both of them employ, despite these being very serious and realistic stories. Much of *Epileptic* is told from a child’s perspective, when Beauchard was growing up, and the narrative often visually utilizes child–like fanciful imaginings. For example, epilepsy is represented through different visual metaphors: most often it is a monster that lurks in the corners and recesses of the family’s life, and even begins to possess different people as it consumes their thoughts and actions; epilepsy is also represented as a ghost that haunts Jean–Christophe and Pierre–François; and as a mountain that Jean–Christophe and the family are having to scale. In *Jimmy Corrigan* the reader is witness to the miscellanies of Jimmy’s imagination: sexual fantasies, a robot that is Jimmy’s alter–ego, giant grasshoppers that invade his grandmother’s house, little horses that appear in his dreams. Jimmy also daydreams about living out in the country, growing up as a farmer, as well as having a luxuriant lifestyle spent lounging on a yacht. In addition, Ware delights his readers with random oddities like collector cards of architectural highlights of the town of Waukosh, WI, and constructions for the reader to cut out and assemble—a zoetrope of the robot hobbling along with a crutch, and a model of Jimmy’s great–great–grandmother’s house, trees and outbuildings.

Much more excruciating in its realist exploration of the self is *One Hundred Demons* by Lynda Barry; she calls this a work of “autobifictionalography”: “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (8). Barry discovered a Buddhist painting exercise called “one hundred demons” that is supposed to help you exorcise those parts of your life that continue to be burdensome. *One Hundred Demons* is a collection of seventeen vignettes, each of which deals with a different one of Barry’s demons: “My First Job,” “Dogs,” “Dancing,” “The [2000 Presidential] Election.” Although in most of the sections Barry is self-deprecating, she manages to do so with an almost cheerful tone—as if from the perspective of an adult finally able to cope with the recurring tragedies of childhood. As with Green, Pekar, Spiegelman, Beauchard, and Ware, Barry creates her work as “a sort of art therapy, or an attempt to understand the past, if not always a cathartic release from it” (Gravett 23). She shares with the reader the difficulties of her childhood, which include a paucity of close friends due to her own eccentricities, and a mother who was verbally and emotionally abusive.

These works, in increasing degrees, address topics with which mainstream audiences can readily identify. They also challenge the parameters of the *graphic novel*. Barry does this not only by mixing genres, which we’ve seen before, but also by adopting forms more often found in comic strips. Most graphic novels, even if they’re innovative in other ways, tend to look like a traditional comic book, but that’s not the case with *One Hundred Demons*. The different stories are told using large panels, two to a page, so that the reading experience is much more like that of a comic strip. The book is shaped similarly to *Jimmy Corrigan*, about ten inches wide and six inches high, which is conducive to this comic-strip format and feel. This unusual format, as well as Barry’s child-like painting style, helps relieve the tension of the stories; she maintains a playful tone which keeps the painful subject matter from becoming overwhelming.

Paul Gravett describes the experience of reading *One Hundred Demons* and the carefully balanced tone that Barry manages to achieve:

Her personal *Family Circus* is not simplistic, white, middle-class idyll; hers is raw, raucous and far closer to many people's real experience. Her deceptively naïve drawing and large, skewed letters have a childlike directness that gives you the feeling of being privy to a teenage girl's secret diary. Her short reflections acquire a cumulative effect, a mood that is ironic and critical about herself, while never sinking into self-loathing. (20)

Above, I mentioned Wolk's semi-mocking description of the confessional graphic novel: "the first-person story that explains why the author is in the right and why the author's pain and sadness are more sad and painful than yours" (203); as Gravett mentions, though, Barry manages to keep her stories from adopting this bathetic tone. Nick Hornby writes that although she might have had a difficult childhood, Barry "prefers to concentrate on the details that connect rather than those that may exclude—it's an innate talent, and one that separates the artists from the self-pitying bores" (11).

Much like *Binky Brown*, *One Hundred Demons* addresses Barry's innermost personal thoughts and struggles; and much like *Jimmy Corrigan* it is impossible to distinguish the fictional parts from the nonfictional. Despite their similarities, such as their emphasis on misery and the plight of the underdog, *One Hundred Demons* and *Jimmy Corrigan* are significantly different works. Most obviously, they offer very dissimilar reading experiences. Barry's work is essentially a collection of short stories, each one of which offers a significant conclusion, leaving the reader with something to reflect upon. Hornby writes that "what she is particularly good at is resonance. These stories all contain little grenades of meaning that tend to explode just after

you've read the last line" (11). *Jimmy Corrigan*, by contrast, is more like reading a novel with multiple story lines that don't offer closure or ultimate significance until the very end of the work.

These two works also have very distinctive tones. *One Hundred Demons* is a story about pain and difficulty, but the events are presented from a safe distance by the narrator; Barry adopts a tone as if she's laughing at her own quirks, peculiarities, and trials, as if she's finally able to contextualize these things as an adult that traumatized her as a child. Although many of the scenes are poignant, Barry hasn't set out to pull us down emotionally into a morass of suffering and self-pity. *Jimmy Corrigan*, by contrast, rather than creating an emotional divide the pain, awkwardness, and tension are on the surface, they are more immediate; Ware takes us along the path of Jimmy's suffering so that we experience it first-hand. Because of the trauma that he has endured, though, and because of the reader's sympathy with Jimmy, Ware keeps the emotional tone from submerging into bathos—it is poignant rather than pitiful.

### *Taking a Stand: The Socio-political Graphic Novel*

Above I commented upon the strong influence of Justin Green and Harvey Pekar in recent graphic novels; even though I have inserted a section break, this autobiographical element continues to be prevalent. There *is* a new ingredient, however, as these personal narratives are now blended with ingredients that carry potent messages of social significance. These stories aren't necessarily strident demands that seek to effect change, however. Instead, many of these authors relate, as we saw before, very personal narratives that also happen to carry a socio-political flavor. The method of propagation—if one can even call it that—of many of these stories is to draw attention to issues by familiarizing readers through an intimate perspective.

The transition that takes place, then, is a shift from a purely personal focus to one of broader social concerns, which allows even broader appeal—more confident, dramatic strides into the cultural mainstream. These political graphic novels that I’m going to examine have something of an agglutinative quality: they reflect the developments of alternative comics in the 60s; many continue the confessional trends of the 70s and 80s; and they also portray a cultural sensitivity that has only been widely pervasive in comics for the last ten years or so.

This development in graphic novels is an important one, which needs to be addressed, but it actually isn’t a strong component in Ware’s work. He does address the plight of so many children in recent decades that have grown up in single-parent homes, but he doesn’t make the *social issue* his primary focus—he isn’t writing to effect change or even to raise awareness. In the previous section there were subtle distinctions to be made in comparing *Jimmy Corrigan* to each confessional graphic novel that I discussed; here, however, it is the differences that far outweigh the similarities. Unlike most of his peers, Chris Ware almost entirely abnegates and retreats from the socio-political impulse. *Jimmy Corrigan* has a specific historical context that covers parts of two centuries, but it is a very isolated, contained tale—Ware does not concern himself much with current events. His story begins and ends with the poor parenting skills, and resultant dysfunction, that has been perpetuated through recent generations of Corrigan men. His writing is somewhat like that master of American letters, William Faulkner, who is admired for the depth and complexity of his stories that span generations, but whose focus is narrow, revolving around the lives of the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha county, rather than encompassing the vast landscape of national socio-political concerns.

Ware probably tells this type of story in this manner for several reasons. Ware is not a member of a marginalized minority, so ethnic or racial exclusion is not an experience that he has

had to grow up with. Second, Ware was a victim of abandonment by his father, and *Jimmy Corrigan* is a therapeutic working out of his own personal struggles; therefore his story focuses on *personal* trials and *personal* struggles without exploring a larger context. Also, *Jimmy Corrigan* was originally being written in serial form back in the early 1990s, before politicization was such a common feature in graphic novels. And, finally, Ware is not a scholar and likely has little interest in literary studies that delight in exploring identity politics.

To go back, for just a moment, to the original context at the beginning of this chapter, the political nature of underground comix—for all their intentions to challenge authority and the status quo—was not a terribly subtle or complex phenomenon. The Comics Code Authority “stipulated ‘no sex,’ so the comix reveled in every kind of sex imaginable; the Code stipulated ‘no violence,’ so the underground took bloodshed to extremes; above all, the Code stipulated ‘no social relevance,’ yet here were comics that were positively revolutionary” (Sabin 171). There weren’t right and wrong sides to be taken—these creators were rebellious and anti–anything–establishment. They weren’t even necessarily politically liberal, as one might expect, because they often produced works that were misogynist and racially inflammatory.

The accomplishment of underground comix was to open the door for more mature expression, as discussed in the last section, and to allow for more sophisticated partisan, socio–political works today. In light of the current climate in regard to terrorism, it might be indecorous of me to use a violent metaphor, but since works of a political nature *are* intent upon cultural change and revolution, maybe it’s reasonable after all. In their attempt to create a stir, the political approach of underground comix is somewhat akin to using a hand grenade: broad, sloppy, cumbersome, imprecise. More recent works of the last ten or fifteen years, by contrast, are more like a rifle: more focused and much more effective. And even though I’m lumping the



works of this section into one category, they are pretty diverse and fall within a broad continuum of political graphic novels in regard to issues, positions, styles, genres.

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel is an outstanding transition from “confessional” graphic novels to those of the “political” variety— this might be the boldest work that I am examining in this entire work. In this deeply personal story Bechdel describes her strained relationship with her father, the emotional problems that she struggled with growing up as a result, and her discovery during college that she is gay. *Fun Home* was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, it was named the number one nonfiction book by *Entertainment Weekly*, “Book of the Year” by *Time*, one of the top ten books of 2006 by the *London Times* and *New York Times Magazine*, as well as being listed among the *New York Times* list of “100 Notable Books for 2006” (Emmert).

Bechdel—much like Linda Barry—opens up her life in a starkly transparent fashion. Ware, on the other hand, is creating a fictional story that has as its basis his own experiences. In *Jimmy Corrigan* we never have the feeling of discomfort that we’re seeing things that might not be appropriate for public exhibition. Bechdel also departs from Ware in her desire to explore not only extremely personal issues, but also very controversial issues. Homosexuality is an extremely divisive topic in the United States that Bechdel addresses head-on. Ware, by contrast, doesn’t address anything that could really be identified as a hot-button topic.

*Fun Home* begins in a similar fashion to that of *Maus*: a scene between Bechdel and her father. She writes that “like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of ‘airplane.’ As he launched me, my full weight would fall on the pivot point between his feet and my stomach. It was a discomfort well worth the rare physical contact” (Bechdel 3). As with

*Maus* and *Jimmy Corrigan*, although political issues might figure prominently, this is primarily a story about the personal relationship between child and parent.

Bruce Bechdel is obsessed with the “monomaniacal restoration” of his Victorian-era house (Bechdel 4). In fact, he pays more attention to his work and his own interests than to his children; when it came to decoration Bruce was “an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor” (6). Bechdel writes that “Sometimes when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent his exhibit. A sort of still life with children” (13). And her father seems to have established the atmosphere for the rest of the family as well: he was alienated from his wife, and maybe because of this fact she became absorbed in her own work and distanced herself from her children, and they from one another (fig. 25). Bechdel goes on to modify this analogy: “If our family was a sort of artists’ colony, could it not be even more accurately described as a mildly autistic colony?” (139).

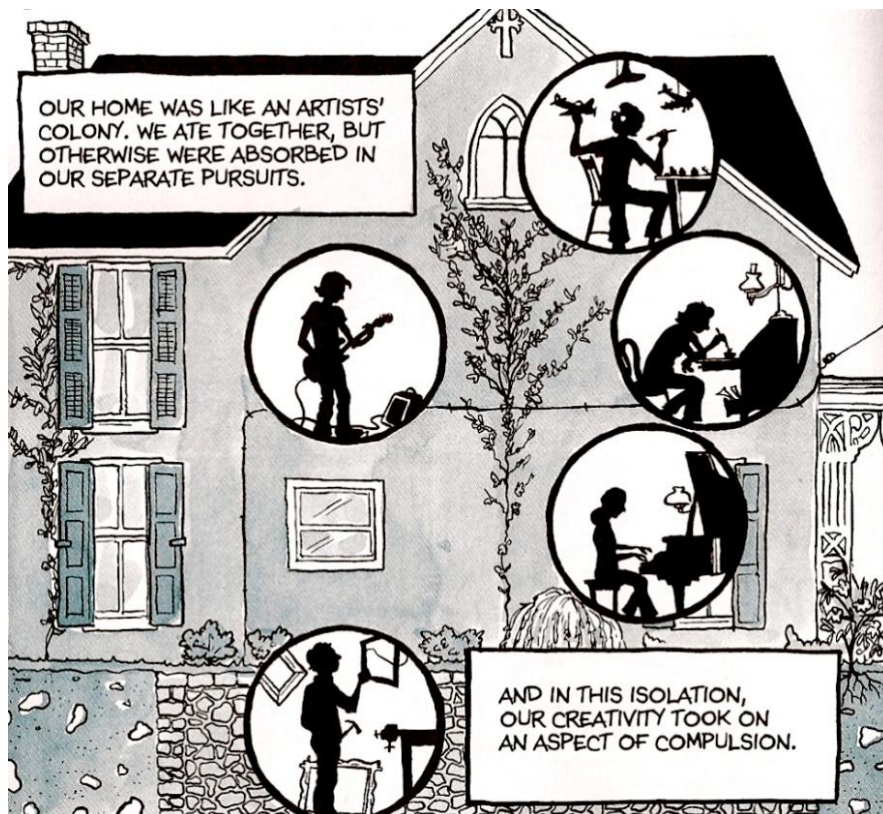


Figure 25. Bechdel renders her family's emotional aloofness in a visual manner.

Throughout *Fun Home* she also brilliantly utilizes literary allusions to describe events and people in her life; the purpose of this is not merely artistic, but it has emotional significance as well: “I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison” (67).

Bechdel addresses complex topics best suited for an adult audience<sup>2</sup>—which is a legacy of Underground Comix; through her intimate disclosures she reflects the influence of confessional comics in the 1970s; and she also makes a political statement simply by addressing this delicate topic at all. *Fun Home* encapsulates developments in comics over the last forty years, as well as serving as an example of what so many other graphic novels are doing right now: building upon and including past developments.

*Fun Home* is largely a product of Bechdel’s thinking and working through the events of her childhood and young-adult years. Although she says that she “couldn’t have done the book without having done lots of therapy,” Bechdel says she was also “very clear that I didn’t want the book to be *about* my therapy” (qtd in Emmert). Wolk describes this work as not so much about “Bechdel’s slow discovery of her father’s hidden life; it’s about her investigation of her own memories of that discovery” (364).

Bechdel’s unfolding of her narrative is stunning in its complexity—Dirk Deppey describes it as an “onion-like peeling and repeeling of its story to examine a singular tale from as many angles as possible”—and yet these convolutions are not a distraction to the reader due to Bechdel’s exquisite abilities as a writer. Nor does this read like a graphic novel that’s set out to make a political statement; but although this isn’t an overtly political work, just discussing the issue of homosexuality in a public forum becomes a significant action. So, does *Fun Home* fall

under the genre of confessional or socially conscious writing? The answer, of course, is neither one nor the other but “both.”

Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* also borrows from the confessional model as Spiegelman shares his innermost thoughts about the events of 9/11, but it is a strident declaration of his animosity toward the policies and actions of the Bush administration as well. Although *graphic novel* is a pretty broad category including works of fiction as well as nonfiction, that term doesn’t seem to fit with what Spiegelman has done in this work. First of all the book is unusually large, 14.5 inches tall by 10 inches wide, and it is printed on thick, cardboard pages. The reason for these large dimensions is that *Shadow* originally appeared in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, and was printed using the entire page, so that, when the book is turned sideways, each installment is 20 inches tall by 14.5 inches wide. Similarly to Barry’s work, the unusual format creates an un-comic-book-like feel.

Wolk describes this book as “a god-awful mess,” writing that “Spiegelman’s drawing is overworked and over computerized, and there’s no sense of drive or closure to it—it just kind of ends after a while” (346). And he’s absolutely right, it *is* a mess and there isn’t any sort of definitive conclusion; but it’s also a genuine reflection of the author’s emotional state, which was in a shambles in the years following September 11, 2001. Unlike *Fun Home*, *In the Shadow of No Towers* doesn’t merely address a socially relevant issue; instead, it clearly presents strong feelings and personal opinions. Spiegelman is incensed that after the horrors of September 11<sup>th</sup> people seem to have returned for the most part to their normal lives (fig. 26). He depicts



Figure 26. Art Spiegelman: *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

himself as a mouse sitting at his drawing table and describes himself as feeling “equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own government” (Spiegelman, *Shadow* 2). Spiegelman is not without a sense of humor in all of this, however; he *is* able to recognize his penchant for hysteria and to laugh at himself. Again depicting himself as a mouse, he is complaining about the air quality in his daughter’s school and the area surrounding Ground Zero, and all the while each panel is filling with more and more smoke from his cigarette—Spiegelman is fuming both figuratively and literally (fig. 27).

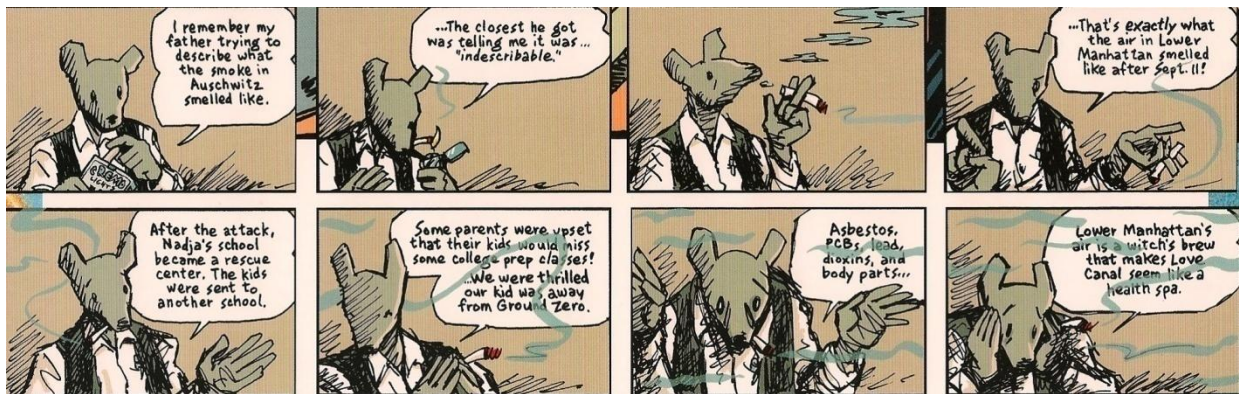


Figure 27. Despite his outrage, Spiegelman *is* able to poke fun at himself.

If I were to describe *Fun Home* as 90 percent personal and 10 percent political, then I’d have to say that *Shadow* is more like 30 percent personal and 70 percent political. Spiegelman’s commentary was so controversial and strident, in fact, that he couldn’t find a single American magazine or newspaper that was willing to serve as a platform for his views. *Shadow* came about as a result of Spiegelman’s being approached by *Die Zeit*, a highly respected German newspaper. This work is completely unlike anything found in *Jimmy Corrigan*, of course. Rather than highlighting a specific problem and clamoring about change or trying to simply raise awareness, Ware’s tone is more along the lines of resignation—a message that says life is tough and full of suffering that we often can’t do anything about.



Originally written back in the early 1980s, *V for Vendetta* is another impassioned warning about the current state of affairs. What Alan Moore was originally protesting, of course, was Thatcher-era politics: a time when the tabloids were “circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality” (Moore and Lloyd 6).

The story takes place in the near future after Great Britain has survived a near-miss nuclear strike; in response to the threat of another attack, the government has adopted “Big Brother” measures, not unlike those in *1984*. Moore then creates a hero who comes forward to restore the voice and power of the people. And this hero is not just any no-name vigilante, but Guy Fawkes, the perfect symbol of protest, anarchy, and violent rebellion—or at least it is someone wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. This historical figure is never named in the story because apparently he has become a forgotten figure in the UK of the future, but of course he has tremendous political currency with Moore’s readership in the present.

The brilliance of his work is that he raises the question that has often been pondered in the recent decades, “what is the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter?” The events of the night of December 16, 1773 were terroristic in nature—the commandeering of a foreign ship and the destruction of private property, both of which were a political statement against another nation, but because a group of men was rebelling against British authority and the efforts were eventually successful, we call them heroes and we refer to the event with the quaint title “The Boston Tea Party.” Similarly, the work of *V* uses the methodology of terrorism, but he does so in the service of overthrowing state-sponsored oppression; Moore cleverly transforms the persona of Fawkes from that of scoundrel and rogue to hero.

Another ingenious strategy of Moore's is that he never reveals the identity of V, the man behind the mask. He saves a girl from a life on the streets, Evey, and trains her to be his protégé; by the end of the story she is eager, as is the reader, to see the face of this man. After V has been fatally shot, Evey ultimately resists the temptation to remove his mask. She realizes, "If I take off that mask, something will go away forever, be diminished because whoever you are isn't as big as the idea of you" (Moore and Lloyd 250). V's identity isn't as significant as the concepts that he represents; as Evey assumes the role and identity of V, Moore places a Platonic emphasis on the immutability of ideas that are indestructible. More important than the life of one person is the survival of courage and belief in freedom.

Having looked at examples of confessional political works and a dystopian work of fiction, the last one I'm going to consider at the furthest end of this continuum is an example of reportage: *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–95*. Joe Sacco has produced an amazing graphic novel that demonstrates the incredible range of this re-emerging genre. He takes us into this southeastern Bosnian town and introduces us to its inhabitants, its geography, its stories. Without having to rely upon the description of a narrator, Sacco is able to *show* us the often-conflicted responses of the victims themselves to these internecine conflicts: the Goraždans are often elated *and* exhausted, relieved *and* frustrated. The reader develops a close relationship with Edin, a math teacher at the local technical school; Edin acts as translator, tour guide, historian, and informant for Sacco and the other many journalists who have descended upon this small town. We also get to know Riki, a much more somber figure who is often stationed out on the front lines of the action, but who is also often shown belting out the lyrics to American songs by the Eagles, Bruce Springsteen, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and many others.

Throughout this book we are shown the difficulties and challenges faced by Sacco trying to get transportation between Goražde and Sarajevo and trying to make sense of this complicated cultural and historical narrative; but unlike Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of Now Towers*, or even Sacco's *Palestine*, *Safe Area Goražde* is not a book about Joe Sacco. He does a very good job of keeping the focus on this town and its inhabitants and *its* story; this is not a confessional work like those of Bechdel and Spiegelman. Sacco is also careful not to assign moral status to the different parties; the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims were all guilty of atrocities dating back to the Second World War, and likewise they have all been victims at various times by different parties.

*Safe Area Goražde* has a veracity unlike anything found in *Jimmy Corrigan*. By comparison, Ware's story of one man's trial and personal struggles reads like a quaint fairy tale far removed from the grit of everyday reality. *But*, this is simply the difference between fiction and reportage; the former is an isolated narrative that allows the reader to momentarily escape from the harsh conditions that are intentionally explored in the latter.

Not only is *Safe Area Goražde* a work of reportage, but it is also a work of political history that recounts the story of the Slavic peoples since World War Two. It is a dense and complex narrative that involves factions based upon religious loyalties, ethnic divisions, royalists, communists, and six decades of historical events. Sacco's visual narrative helps one make sense of this 227-page story. In fact, it's a surprisingly engrossing story. Although I knew that this was an important example of political comics, I was dreading having to read and write about *Goražde* because I don't know much about the convoluted history of Eastern Europe and I never followed very closely the news reports about the conflict in Bosnia fifteen years ago. Sacco, however, puts a human face to these events that took place half-way around the world,



and relates them with a surprising degree of clarity. This is also an *important* work because the world should be aware of acts that took place as recently as the late twentieth century that rival the atrocities under Nazi rule.

As graphic novels evolve they will continue to blur traditional boundaries in ever more increasingly complex ways. Sacco has successfully created a compelling work of reportage, dealing with topics that most people wouldn't even consider delving into on their own—political strife, religious division, ethnic differences; but he brings this material in people's hands in a palatable form. In her work on postmodernism, *Sublime Desire*, Amy J. Elias discusses a similar idea. She writes about the sociological component of postmodernism, which, she believes, exhibits “an increased aestheticization of everyday life”:

What this means is that reality becomes “reality”—increasingly influenced and controlled by media, advertising, and escapist entertainment technologies until it is impossible to distinguish what is a story from what is real, what is entertainment from what is political, what is a projection of human desires from what is material. . . . Rather than life influencing art, art *becomes* life but is stripped of its intellectual content and social critique. (xxvi)

This description certainly seems to fit *Safe Area Goražde*. Although one reads about historical figures like Slobodan Milosevic and sees maps of real cities and nations in southeastern Europe, at the same time one is ingesting these elements via comics, what some might call an “escapist entertainment technology.” Where I disagree, however, is that this necessarily means that a work must therefore be “stripped of its intellectual content and social critique.” In her writing and thinking about literary postmodernism, Elias simply has not taken into consideration—much less addressed—the depth and complexity of graphic novels of the last ten to fifteen years. By using

the comics genre, creators like Alan Moore and Joe Sacco *are* appealing to the entertainment sensibilities of contemporary audiences, but how is this any different from the greatest works of literature throughout the world and throughout the millennia that have delighted *as* they have instructed? Maybe postmodernism is a fit label for describing works that utilize popular media *and* having something important to say.

### *Conclusion*

Although Ware doesn't reflect this socio-political aspect of recent graphic novels, this *is* going to continue to be an increasingly prevalent trend. Graphic novels are broadening their scope to examine a wider range of society, such as Adrian Tomine's examination of the challenges of being a twenty-something Asian-American male in *Shortcomings*, and *Aya* by Marguerite Abouet and Clement Oubrerie—a story set in the Ivory Coast in the 1970s. Rather than focusing entirely on the corruption and problems of her country's past, which is done so commonly in Western media, Abouet wanted to emphasize the normalcy of her culture by telling a little more light-hearted tale. But these are just two examples that demonstrate the diversity that is becoming more and more common in graphic novels. Western, African, Asian, and Arabic stories are all coming forward, utilizing both fiction as well as nonfiction, and with the innate, universal appeal of comics, it's hard to imagine how this genre cannot keep growing and making its way ever more steadily into the mainstream.

In this chapter I have shown how comics has finally begun to make significant progress in its bid for acceptance into the mainstream of American culture, after four decades of attempting to do so. In the last twenty years this has happened under the rubric of the graphic novel. *Graphic novel*, however, as has been demonstrated, is not simply one thing; instead, it is a featureless label for a wide variety of different types of literary works that include fiction as well

as nonfiction, children's material as well as that for adults, personal narratives as well as those that are highly socially relevant.

Not only do graphic novels include a wide spectrum of different types of works, but they also exhibit tremendous diversity within individual works themselves. This feature might have begun in earnest with *Maus*, which would be just one more innovation to Spiegelman's credit. Witek writes that before this work it was unprecedented for a comic book to "combine seemingly disparate genres and narrative approaches into a single seamless story. . . . it makes Vladek's Holocaust story and Art's psychological quest into a single narrative which blends public and private history" (115).

A more recent example is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. This is a *Bildungsroman* that is set in Iran in the 1970s and 80s while that country underwent a political revolution which was quickly followed by a religious one. Satrapi doesn't interrupt her narrative to make commentary about political and religious issues, but rather this is an organic part of the story (fig. 28). As she

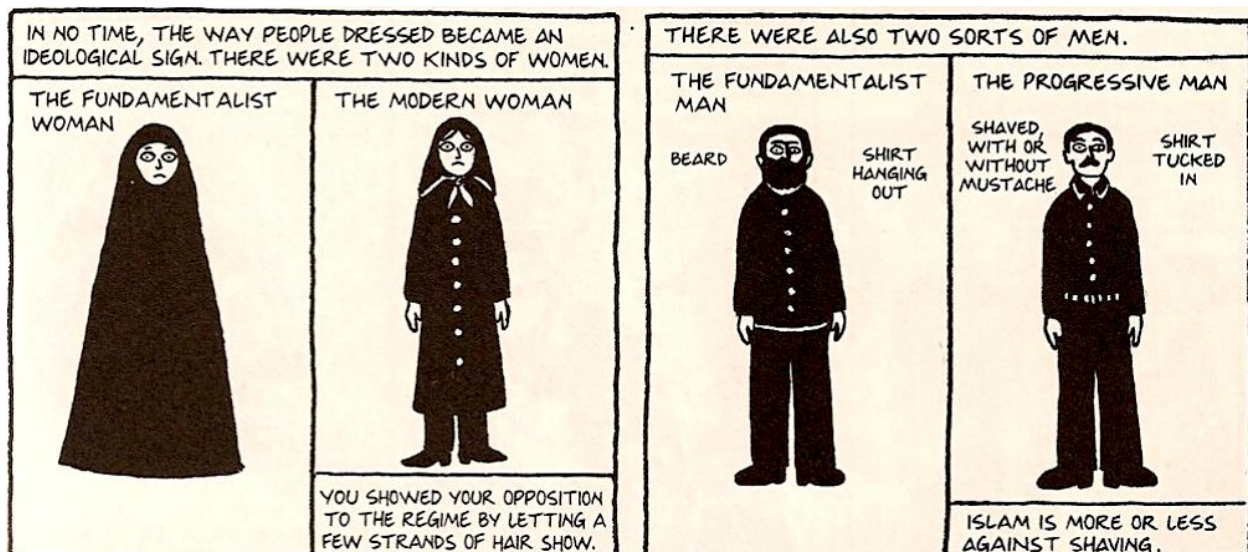


Figure 28. Satrapi's socio-political observations.

was growing up, her parents were politically conscious and active, so from an early age she was thinking about very difficult and complex matters. In the moderately conservative schools of her

youth, Satrapi was raised to believe in God, but as she grows older she finds herself talking to God—whom she imagines with long, flowing hair and looking a lot like Marx—less and less often. Satrapi’s story even has parts that are somewhat hagiographical as she extols the virtues and accomplishments of political martyrs who were close friends of her parents. Because her story is directed toward Western audiences, she provides historical background on Iran covering thousands of years as well as a closer focus on the twentieth century; and as she tells the story of her teen years Satrapi also offers cultural commentary as she became more aware of American music and clothing styles like blue jeans and Nike tennis shoes.

*Persepolis*, then, is autobiographical, and more specifically a *Bildungsroman*—it is a historical narrative of events in Iran from the 70s through the 90s, and it makes political, religious, and cultural commentary. Although this text might be legitimately utilized in a college course on Middle Eastern politics or culture, it is also just a really good story about a little girl, the world that she grew up in, and the challenges that she faced. The complexity of this work, of course, relates to Jonathan Culler’s ideas about non-genre literature that I briefly mentioned in chapter two. Not only is comics a hybrid narrative genre because of its unique combination of verbal and visual elements, but, further, graphic novels are also regularly transcending previously delineated categories of literature. Culler writes, “Some of the most important expectations and requirements for intelligibility are enshrined in the various genres. A genre, one might say, is a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sentences are to be read” (51). At least a part of the value of graphic novels is the pleasure one finds in the challenge in reading these multi-genre works that address adult audiences, combine personal—sometimes confessional—aspects, and speak to current political issues. Rather than encountering the “same old thing,” we are surprised and intrigued by

an unexpected combination of elements. Whether we're discussing music, or fashion, or film, every aspect of human culture is continually going through a process of transformation. Culler has written that "our most crucial and tantalizing experiences of literature [are] located at the interstices of genres, in this region of *non-genre literature*" (52–3). And the continuing evolution of comics doesn't seem likely to slow down any time soon: "Both socially and aesthetically, comics are likely to remain an unresolved, unstable, and challenging form. . . . if comic art is some sort of bastard, to recruit a popular metaphor, then maybe bastardy is just the thing . . . . In our age of new and hybrid media, interartistic collaboration is king" (Hatfield xiii).

*Jimmy Corrigan* is certainly no exception to this trend: it is *Bildungsroman*, rhopography, historical narrative—and one *could* argue that it has elements of psychomachia as we see Jimmy's innermost thoughts which are often of a disturbing nature, and *Jimmy Corrigan* even includes elements of romance in the final pages of the story. But where Chris Ware does depart from current prevailing trends, however, is in the apolitical nature of his stories, which are isolated, self-contained narratives. *Jimmy Corrigan* thereby has a tone of distance, separation, alienation, which will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter. Jimmy doesn't strike out into the world to make a difference—to make it a better place; instead, he's emotionally immobilized, caught up in his own existential quandaries and reveries—Jimmy lives a life of fear. Much like the other works that I've examined in this chapter—*Binky Brown*, *American Splendor*, *Maus*, *One Hundred Demons*, *Epileptic*, *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*—*Jimmy Corrigan* depicts life at a very personal level and reminds us not to judge people by external appearances because the world is filled with people who are suffering unique sets of challenges. And, right now, one of the most popular means of expressing these intimate stories—the genre where some of the most important narratives are appearing—is the graphic novel.

## CHAPTER 5.

*JIMMY CORRIGAN: A DIFFIDENTLY GOTHIC TALE**Introduction*

Gothic, like an undead, centuries–old aristocrat, is still hanging around and doing quite well. In its newest incarnation it has infected graphic novels. And it seems almost inevitable that comics and Gothic should have once again teamed up, like a couple of caped crusaders fighting for respect and recognition. Or maybe they’re more like a middle–aged couple that happen to rediscover one another at the evening meeting of a twelve–step recovery group; after realizing how much they still have in common they get together for coffee afterwards and rekindle the old relationship.

Back in the 1950s Gothic in comics was a popular commodity, with comic book titles like *Tales From the Crypt*, *True Crime Comics*, *Vault of Horror*, and *Haunt of Fear* (Sabin 154). Much like current television programming today, people were drawn to sordid stories of a gruesome and violent nature. Following Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, Senate hearings, and the new “kid–friendly” guidelines of the Comics Code Authority, however, neither comics nor its penchant for the grotesque was ever quite the same again.

Both comics and Gothic have followed very similar paths: “the Gothic has had a two–faced career—wildly popular, yet lurking ghostlike on the margins of canonical and academic discourse” (Heller 3). In her superlative work of criticism, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Anne Williams writes that “although ‘Gothic’ might reasonably claim kin with both the novel and Romanticism, its claims have usually been denied almost before the fact. To preserve the realistic novel as the High Prose Fiction tradition, critics have regarded the Gothic as long dead, or else (if alive) as irrational ‘feminine’ popular romance” (6). But this has changed considerably

in recent decades. By having been accepted by the Academy, Gothic has “been rescued from prejudice, has become something that the critics and authors commonly regarded as great, authoritative, or canonical, may now talk about openly with no embarrassment, save that of having to admit that their forebears were less enlightened” (Hughes 10). Comics has long been in a similar—although probably worse—place; it’s moving “from being an offshoot of dilettante reviewing to a highly professional scholastic activity,” as William Hughes writes of Gothic, and perhaps soon it too will be “solidly located within the modern academy” (23).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Gothic elements in recent graphic novels. My first task—one that presented something of a problem—was to define what Gothic is so that I would be able to identify it when I saw it, and to compare it in different works. Everywhere I looked for a definitive set of characteristics, however, I discovered different emphases, different “essential” features. I came to think of Gothic as one of those concepts that simply resists definition; much like the time in 1964 when the Supreme Court was debating about the nature of obscenity and Justice Stewart Potter famously stated, in regard to hard-core pornography, “I know it when I see it.” It was a relief to find others saying that Gothic is a “notoriously difficult field to define” (Punter<sup>1</sup> and Byron xviii), and that as long as we simply think about genre “in terms of ‘drawing the line,’ of distinguishing things *inherently* Gothic from things that are not, we will be trapped” (Williams 15). John Ruskin wisely suggests that it isn’t an absolute quality, but something that appears in various degrees: “but if we withdraw one of its mental elements from the Gothic style, it is only a little less Gothic than it was before, and the union of two or three of its elements is enough already to bestow a certain Gothicness of character, which gains in intensity as we add the others, and loses as we again withdraw them” (2: 155).

A part of the problem, it seems to me, is that Gothic literature, like any form of vibrant art, is something that develops and evolves over time. Judith Wilt writes that “Gothic is a faithful record of human engagement with visible, political, cultural issues—race, class, gender, science, empire, authorities of all kinds” (41); and it’s obvious that political and cultural issues are going to change dramatically from the nineteenth to the twentieth to the twenty-first century. But not only in the matter that it addresses, Gothic can also adapt its style to fit in with science fiction or a postmodern framework. Emma McEvoy writes that Gothic is “dynamic and endlessly reinvents itself” (“Traditions,” 7), and Catherine Spooner describes it as being “not doomed to cyclical repetition, but perfectly capable of change and variation” (43).<sup>2</sup>

What is it, though, that makes Gothic Gothic? Despite its adaptability, there must be essential qualities that define it, because otherwise it would evolve into something not-Gothic. I could easily make a list of distinguishing attributes, but these vary greatly from one work to another, and from one medium to another; instead, I want to point out one of Gothic’s most important functions: its penchant for exploring and challenging boundaries—social, cultural, sexual, and others (Wilt 42). And, in doing so, it is a genre that specializes in ambivalence. Gothic not only sets up one value against another, but it also challenges the validity of these categories themselves.

Gothic investigates the difficult questions that we can’t bring ourselves to ask: “Gothic is so pervasively organized around anxieties about boundaries (and boundary transgressions) that the border between self and other might indeed characterize the ‘essential situation’” (Williams 16). Jimmy Corrigan, in fact, suffers from chronic anxiety about social boundaries between self and other, and, in addition, the graphic novel that bears his name utilizes many other Gothic characteristics as well. Ware’s is a fascinating, complex, enigmatic use of Gothic conventions



and tropes, which doesn't reside on the surface, but dwells further down at the heart of the narrative—it is an ambivalent example of Gothic ambivalence. One might never suspect *Jimmy Corrigan* of harboring a furtive Gothic fugitive merely by flipping through the book, yet it is, in fact, apparent upon closer scrutiny. Not only is Ware's use of Gothic interesting, but he also utilizes realist elements as well. Although this work is full of fantastical, imaginative elements, it also presents the world in "its very ordinariness, and the moral project of realism is—in resistance to conventional art—to dramatize the ordinary" (Levine 7). In addition, Ware's protagonist is a dynamic character who develops over the course of the story, which is unlike Gothic, and he defies Gothic expectations in his representation of the past.

*The Family (dys)Fun(ction) of Gothic*

Everyone lives with fear—or at least the temptation to fear, worry, or fret. These anxieties can take many different forms. We fear those who loom over us, in terms of wealth, power, talent, or social station; we also worry about retaliation from those over whom *we* loom. We are anxious that our government isn't doing enough for us, that it isn't protecting us or providing for our needs; at the same time we also are afraid that the government is doing *too* much—being too invasive in other parts of the world, and spying on us as well as our enemies. We fear what we know as well as what we don't know. We worry about the things that are happening, and even things that aren't happening and probably will never come about at all.

These types of fears, as well as so many others, are the very fabric of Gothic—the emotional experience of uncertainty or ambivalence. Even though these types of stories often utilize fantastic elements, Allan Lloyd-Smith writes that "Gothic interest in extreme states and actions can also be seen to correlate with widespread social anxieties and fears. Significant among these are fears having to do with the suppressions of past traumas and guilt, anxieties

concerning class and gender” (*American Gothic* 7). Another one of these “significant” fears is that of the family—its past mistakes and continuing dysfunction; the family is the essence, the distillation, of social dynamics that take place on a larger scale. American authors have come to see Gothic as an “appropriate mode for dealing with contemporary experience; its distant but all-controlling institutions, its mechanisms of alienation and destruction, and its continuing atrocities” (Smith, A. L. 9).

This description is quite fitting for Chris Ware’s work in *Jimmy Corrigan*, which is all about a family that continues to suffer in the present due to its sins from the past. This theme has long been an important one in American literature; among the earliest American writers who employs this idea is Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter*, as most of us learn in high school, was Hawthorne’s attempt to reconcile his own conscience with his ancestor’s participation in the Salem witch trials. And far more similar to *Jimmy Corrigan* is *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which Phoebe Pyncheon returns to her ancestral home, which is a symbol of past corruption and decay. Phoebe, however, represents a new, redeemed generation of Pyncheon that finally overcomes her family’s failings of the past.

The house of the seven gables—as well as the family that it represents—fits the definition of *grotesque* according to Marshall Bruce Gentry in his study on Flannery O’Connor: “the term ‘grotesque’ describes images of degraded physicality with an effect at once humorous and disturbing. The notion of degradation, of descent from a higher to a lower grade” (10). Gothic nearly always utilizes the motif of appearance versus reality; another way of representing this dynamic is with the terms *ideal* versus *actual*. In *The House of the Seven Gables* the matriarch, Hepzibah Pyncheon, strives to maintain her family’s honor—she strives, that is, to maintain the appearance that her family still represents the New England ideal. What we, as readers, are

acutely aware of, however, is just how far from the ideal that the Pyncheon family has descended; *House of the Seven Gables* is an exploration of the hidden, dark reality, the actual state of the Pyncheons. The family is tainted by suspicions of witchcraft and fraudulent dealings in the past; as the story opens, Hepzibah's brother, Clifford, is about to be released from prison, having served thirty years' time for murder.

*Jimmy Corrigan* is a similar story set in the late twentieth century. Jimmy, however, unlike Phoebe Pyncheon, is ill-equipped to overcome his family's curse of nine decades of patriarchal dysfunction—a family that has degraded quite significantly. Just as the grotesque is an integral aspect of Gothic literature, so too are stories that focus upon families (Williams 11). Within a family, unlike society at large, our circumstances are forced upon us—we're stuck with whatever we get (or whatever we don't get, for that matter), which can create a claustrophobic sense of apprehension; in a job by contrast, no matter how inconvenient it might be, one always has the choice to seek employment elsewhere. Williams writes that “family structure also generates the plots that occur within Gothic, for it imposes a certain balance of power, both personal and political: power that may redound through the generations as surely as fortunes—or family curses—may be inherited” (22).

This emphasis upon family has long been prevalent in American Gothic literature in works such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” as well as *The House of the Seven Gables*. This is due, in part, to the fact that

By the end of the nineteenth century, patriarchy was in crisis, a crisis visible in the changes in women's political and social status, in the fear of change, in the waning of faith in Progress, and in the dreadful suspicion—encouraged by Darwin—that nature does not bear the signs of God the Father after all. The

horror of *Dracula* is the horror of man confronting a universe that no longer confirms or conforms to the patriarchal structure of reality. (Williams 134)

As I argued in the last chapter, *Jimmy Corrigan* is not concerned with the political facets of the late twentieth century, but it does address the anxiety that we all experience. And it is by no means alone in its exploration of this topic—many of the recent outstanding graphic novels have had as their primary focus social problems and apprehension. In *Jimmy Corrigan* this motif takes on two different aspects.

The first is the Corrigan fathers who have tended to be insensitive—at best—, neglectful, and even abusive. The chain of selfishness begins, as far as the reader is able to discern, with Jimmy's great-grandfather, William Corrigan. His wife dies in childbirth, which results in his spending the next nine years resenting his son, James Reed Corrigan; in this storyline, set in the 1890s, we see several examples of cruel treatment on William's part. It is clear that James has known nothing in his short life except intimidation, fear, and mistreatment. In addition to his behavior toward his son, though, we discover that William has not merely moved back home out of concern for his dying mother: "Besides providing a convenient excuse for stationing himself on the family property come 'claim time,' Mr. Corrigan now has the opportunity to reestablish himself as the caring son he always knew he was" (Ware 81). Furthermore, as the reader learns later in the story, William impregnates his mother's African-American maid and then fires her because of the audacity of her fertility. Finally, the *coup de grace* to William's already critically injured character is his abandonment of his son on the day of his ninth birthday, atop a palatial structure of Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

And this is the nature of paternity in a Gothic narrative. Williams writes that, "Like all dreams—even nightmares—Gothic narratives enabled their audiences to confront and explore,

and simultaneously to deny, a theme that marks the birth of the Romantic (and modern) sensibility: that ‘the Law of the Father’ is a tyrannical *paterfamilias* and that we dwell in his ruins” (24).

Jimmy’s own father, James William Corrigan—he carries the name of his grandfather tucked away inconspicuously, like an atavistic defect, between his first and last names—demonstrates many of these same characteristics, although not nearly to the same extreme. His most egregious offense is having left his wife and never having contacted his son since he was a young boy; however, we see that even as an older man in his sixties he is still rather insensitive and often lacks compassion. When Jimmy arrives at the airport, for instance, to first meet him, his father has lost track of the time and is watching a boxing match in the bar. Later that evening they go to grab a bite to eat at Burger Kuntry; James comments about the girl working the cash register, “I hate that little teenage bitch. She always treats me like I’m some old moron with half a brain” (Ware 45). Over his shoulder, from Jimmy’s perspective, we see that she has a baby behind the counter that she’s most likely trying to care for as a single mother; in the next panel James comments, “she’s got a great pair of tits on her, though, doesn’t she?” (Ware 45). James appears to be unaware of the plight of others around him. As a final example, the following morning James has unknowingly woken up his son making his coffee and then huddles over his small television sitting on the kitchen table listening to the news. Jimmy overhears his father mumbling comments about the shooting of one Marc Trujillo: “**Huh** . . . figures . . . ssssrp. Stupid goddamn spicks. Let ‘em all shoot each other dead for all I care” (Ware 63).

The other side of this coin—the repercussion of these problems—is seen in the victims, most notably in Jimmy himself. Ware eliminates any redundancy in his story by observing James R. Corrigan’s childhood in the 1890s, and alternately focusing on Jimmy’s challenges as an adult

in the 1980s; in essence, we witness the span of a lifetime by examining two different lifetimes that are separated by nearly a century—the experiences of James and Jimmy are conflated so that they comprise a single portrait.

In Jimmy, therefore, we find a textbook case of arrested development. The mainstay of Gothic literature is anxiety and fear<sup>3</sup>, and we certainly find these elements in Jimmy's life; however, in this instance it is fear and uncertainty about buying an answering machine so that he doesn't have to answer the phone when his mother calls, it is insecurity at finding himself seated next to a talkative, attractive young woman on the airplane, it is nervousness at being engaged by a loquacious older man at the airport who rambles on about the headlines in the paper. The overwhelming anxiety in Jimmy's life isn't the vampire that might or might not reside in the basement, but rather the minor, mundane incidents that most people encounter and handle nonchalantly every day. Growing up without the tutelage of a father has rendered him incapable of navigating life's littlest streams. Jimmy lives and works in the real world, but he doesn't really *function* in the real world or participate; he isn't nourished by his interactions with those around him, whether strangers in public or even co-workers in the office. Even as an adult at the age of thirty-six he is still incapable of growth or development. Jimmy seems to be living with the trauma that has been generated in James's life.

Although the reader observes all of this, he or she really understands more clearly the nature of Jimmy's angst through his fantasies. The real violence and horror are enacted upon the grand stage of Jimmy's imagination. In something of an homage to William Faulkner's or Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic, Jimmy dreams that he's just an old country boy living on the farm with his brother Amos and his Paw. His father is an irascible, continually infuriated man who, after dinner, first kills Jimmy's brother with a shovel for appropriating the family truck so

that Jimmy can go on a date, and then comes after Jimmy for having passed the potatoes at dinner when the father thought that he had asked for muffins. In another scene, after having just met his real father for the first time in an airport bar, Jimmy visualizes *this* man in bed atop his mother and then imagines a casual conversation with his father sitting on the side of this same bed (fig. 29). Jimmy takes the large, glass beer mug that he's holding in this fantasy sequence and crashes it into his father's head and then proceeds to tear a gash down his back with a shard: "You . . . **oh**-ngh-sweet Christ **oh stop** oh sweet **ahagg**" (Ware 41).

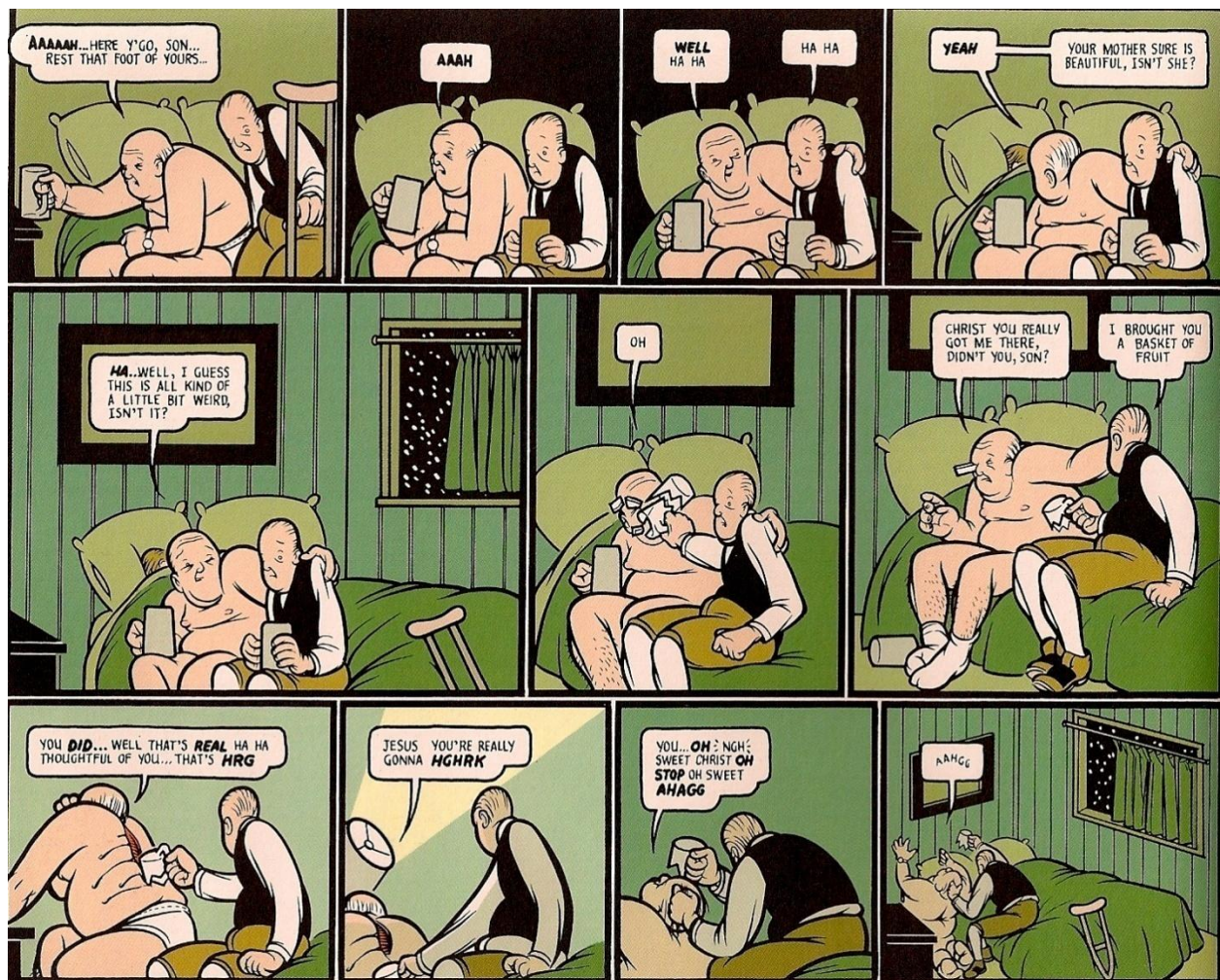


Figure 29. Jimmy's anger and hostility are manifest through his fantasies.

Because he can't cope with reality, Jimmy largely lives a life of interiority. In Ware's story, fantasy does not equal appearance or illusion, but the emotional reality; in order to grasp

*Jimmy's* reality, we must have access to his rich, diverse, and deeply revealing fantasy life. A recurring symbol throughout this work is the image and idea of the Super Man. In reality Jimmy is the Clark–Kent type—an emotional as well as a physical weakling; in his imaginative world, however, he can be a powerful being of courage and strength and initiative. This isn't just merely fantasy, however; this is a valid means of understanding who Jimmy is: "Romanticism's enthusiastic endorsement of the imagination is simultaneously a license for the legitimacy of Gothic delusion as a source of extended vision or emotional experience" (Martin 197).

Some suggest that this tendency to explore the emotional aspects of characters was evident in American Gothic works before it appeared in European examples. The witch trials in our early history gave rise to paranoia and conspiracy theories: "such concerns gave the first American attempts at Gothic fiction an acute and forward-looking psychological slant that set them apart from their exotic Old World models" (Rigby 9). In the twenty-first century of course, this type of emphasis is far more widespread.

In France, for instance, David B's *Epileptic* is an outstanding example of a work that is a psychological exploration, and that also depicts characters using fantasy to cope with real-life circumstances; like *Jimmy Corrigan*, this work also finds its locus in family relationships and displays a darkness that is closely tied to Gothic narratives. Pierre–François, unlike Jimmy, however, actually is a child throughout most of this story, so it's a little more natural for him to rely upon his imagination as a coping mechanism. Throughout much of the story, the epilepsy is a long, serpentine monster that intertwines itself among the family; sometimes it is depicted as a mountain that Jean–Chrisophe and the family are unsuccessfully attempting to scale; and occasionally it is a ghost that lurks and haunts their lives.



*Epileptic* isn't nearly as tightly focused as *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, because its narrative is more evenly balanced between family and society at large. The story addresses the predicament of Jean-Christophe's epilepsy and the tension, chaos, and destruction that creates among the five members of their family; they face a common, external enemy, which draws them together, but it also creates stress that occasionally turns them against one another. At the same time, though, *Epileptic* also does a brilliant job with showing the astounding social repercussions that this disease has as well. In their attempt to find a cure, and because they have been shunned by society, Pierre-François and his family find shelter—at least temporarily—in alternative, experimental communities that have the potential for a cure through diets and lifestyles. *Epileptic*, in fact, is something of an odyssey as the parents seek solutions in community after community, religion after religion.

As far as other Gothic elements, the father *is* a commanding, stern figure, but he is not the catalyst for the story; instead it is the disease that has taken possession of Jean-Christophe's body, and his father is simply another victim, trying to the best of his ability to manage the crisis that has beset his family. *Epileptic* also shares with *Jimmy Corrigan* an interest in the past, but again it is more of a contrast rather than a similarity. Pierre-François takes an avid interest in his family tree, but the role of past figures is much more passive; rather than these people shaping present circumstances, they provide exempla of the ongoing struggle of life and how to survive.

Another intriguing example of family dysfunction includes *Funhome* by Alison Bechdel. Unbeknownst to Alison or her brothers, their father is harboring a secret—the concealment of which has had devastating consequences on their family. Although as children the Bechdel siblings all knew that there was tension in their parents' marriage, they were totally unaware that their father was furtively having homosexual relationships with young men. This family secret

creates difficulties that Bechdel is only able to fully understand as she reflects back on her childhood as an adult. Also intriguing is Bechdel's own preference for same-sex relationships, which she discovers during college; this predilection, then, appears to be something that runs in the family.

*Fun Home*, however, despite the strong emphasis upon a domineering father and a family secret, just doesn't have a prevailing sense of anxiety in the same way that *Jimmy Corrigan* does—it's difficult to point to prevalent Gothic characteristics. Instead, Bechdel's narrative has more the feel of a childhood recollection—a memoir—with questions that had long gone unanswered. This missing Gothic tone is actually quite surprising; since her father has taken over the family business—running the funeral home (an abbreviated form of which makes up the title of this book)—one might expect Bechdel to have utilized more widely the conventions of Gothic.

Chris Ware, by contrast, places great stress upon the powerful influence of one's family in a way that is reminiscent of Gothic. We discover that William Corrigan's misdeeds in the 1890s are still sending ripples through lives even in the 1980s, when the story of *Jimmy Corrigan* is primarily set. This idea of a family curse is also evident in nineteenth-century American Gothic works such as those by Hawthorne and Poe. The past leaves its imprint upon the present.

### *Living with the Past*

This relationship of past and present is such a central issue in *Jimmy Corrigan* that it can't not be addressed—whether one is discussing themes, symbols, plot, structure, art, characterization, or any other element of the story. To take this examination a step further, however, we need to consider the many interesting ways in which the past impinges upon the

present in a distinctly Gothic fashion. One can easily, neatly identify the portions of the story that take place in different centuries: pp.1–73 twentieth century, pp.74–90 nineteenth century, pp.93–102 twentieth century, pp.103–7 nineteenth century, pp.108–35 twentieth century, and so forth. This exercise, however, completely fails to capture the nature of connectedness of past and present in this story. They aren't merely pages bound together nice and neat in their respective portions of the book; instead the past refuses to remain in the past and, like a hand-written book left out in a rain, it mysteriously bleeds into and stains the subsequent pages of the present.

Beyond mere symbols that connect the different chronological points in the story, there is a haunting of the present by the past. And one of the things that I find most intriguing is the fact that Jimmy is never aware of any of his own back-story—only as readers are we privy to all of the sordid details of Jimmy's family's past. He is haunted by a family curse that he knows nothing about. So, besides the dynamic of past versus present, there is also one of knowledge versus ignorance. And yet, despite Jimmy's ignorance, indelible traces of the earlier period *are* very much evident; it is almost as if the events of the nineteenth century were the subconscious, seeping into the consciousness of Jimmy's life in the twentieth century—asserting its power and influence.

One of the most obvious connections is the penchant for redheads that both Jimmy and his grandfather, James, share. We discover that as a boy James has found a photograph of his mother in a book in the attic, along with a strand of her red hair. This shared attraction to girls with red hair, though, isn't really terribly remarkable, and might be dismissed as a shared genetic predisposition. What is more interesting, however, is the fact that both Jimmy and his great-grandfather William suffer injuries to their legs. When we find Jimmy on the airplane on the way to meet his father early in the story, he inexplicably has a cast on his leg and is using a crutch to

walk; no explanation is provided for how this injury occurred, but Jimmy seems to share a weakness inherited from his ancestor<sup>4</sup>. William has fallen while installing glass on a building that is part of the Chicago Exposition.

And what is more interesting still is the similarities between James' and Jimmy's fantasy lives. Peaches appear throughout the nineteenth-century storyline in casual, unobtrusive ways; they take on symbolic significance for Jimmy, however. When he fantasizes about his coworker, Peggy, peaches float around his head, rather than hearts. In another scene, after his imaginary Paw has killed his brother Amos, there's a peach hanging from the branch of a peach tree as his father heads toward the barn after Jimmy with his shovel; these branches and peaches are also in the next panel on the facing page, as Jimmy transitions from dream to consciousness on the plane.

In another example, Jimmy imagines himself as a robot in a Jules-Verne-looking zeppelin, observing his life taking place below; he has a tin-can-looking, cylindrical head with a single cylindrical protuberance that serves as an eye and casts a searching beam of light over the landscape below. In the other storyline, James and his father are entertaining a lady by showing illustrated slides of the Great Fire in Chicago, which are illuminated by an oil-burning lantern inside the projector. As he falls asleep on the stool, James dreams of casting the beam from the projector out the window: "A senseless stream of predictable pictures pointed at the moon only occasionally cut by the knife edge of a leaf, or a chimney, a bird, an aircraft, or a man falling, falling, falling from a very tall building. Each successive sausage slice of light revealing one earlier event of the evening's entertainment" (Ware 141).

Jimmy has a fantasy that he's sitting on the side of his son's bed telling him about how he first met his mother: "Billy! Why, Billy look! Look who's on the windowsill! It's Superman! It's

Superman and he's really small and he's waving at us! Ha ha! Why isn't that wonderful, Billy? Look!" (Ware 54). But in the next frame, we see Super Man's giant, gloved hand reaching down and picking up the house that Jimmy and his son occupy. After flying aloft Super Man drops the house and offers a characteristic friendly wave good-bye. The house is crushed on the ground, and little Billy's body parts are scattered all over the yard; Jimmy finds his head and cradles it as it says, "Dad . . . Dad, it hurts. It hurts so much. Make it stop make it stop" (Ware 57). Back to the 1890s plot, on the day of his grandmother's funeral James's little redheaded friend, upon whom he has a crush, has humiliated him and beaten him up. Later, lying on a bed up in his room and crying, he recalls the view from atop one of the Exposition's soaring buildings: "His eyes closed, the image of his house seen from the rooftop returns to him, a puny pillbox, and he, a giant, plucking it from the earth. The girl begs for his mercy"—we see a tiny figure caught between his thumb and forefinger headed toward his mouth (Ware 219).

Probably the most unusual example is the recurrence of horses in both plots. James likes horses and has the opportunity to care for one since his father owns a horse-drawn buggy. In a dream sequence, while he's out in the yard looking for a tooth that he threw out the window in a fit of panic so that his father wouldn't be angry with him, a horse passes behind him and onto the front porch of the house. It then proceeds into the house and up the stairs into his grandmother's bedroom. Another important instance of this image is a toy. The one boy who extends friendship to James—this lonely, neglected child—is the son of an Italian immigrant, whose father makes little lead figures. As a gesture of amity this boy makes a little horse for James that he cherishes. He even visits the boy's home, which is the only scene in which he is depicted as having fun and laughing. Back to Jimmy, in a bizarre twist of his dream sequence on the farm, Amos has become a miniature horse, not much larger than a puppy. He is called before Paw, as he cradles

Amos to his chest, and is given a lecture: “You know that if’n I caught that rat tryin’ on my pants again something was gone happen an’ now someone’s been tryin’ on my pants again so something’s gone happen ain’t it, James?” “Paw he ain’t a rat he ain’t no rat . . . Amos’ a horse just like all the others . . . He just small, that’s all Paw, he don’ mean no harm Paw he don’ mean no harm likin to dress fancy every oncet in a while” (Ware 58). Paw then hands Jimmy—or James, as he is referred to—a revolver, “you know what you must do.”

This is a common feature of Romance that we find in *Jimmy Corrigan*, the fact that the “labyrinth of Gothic” doesn’t merely occupy the third dimension—castles and tunnels and caves, but the fourth as well—it is a maze that spans time as well as distance (Lloyd-Smith, *American* 120). Emma McEvoy writes that many Gothic texts are “characterised by their experiments with time—featuring moments that stretch to eternity, years that are traversed in seconds—and their radical dislocation of chronology. A feature often, though not always, associated with this temporal experimentation is the use of extremely complex framing structures” (“Romantics” 22).

And comics is a genre uniquely suited for this type of operation—for the utilization of “complex framing structures.” Between every panel of a comics strip or comic book, time is manipulated, either contracted or dramatically expanded; it might be a matter of seconds that pass in the course of a conversation, but it might just as easily be years in the past or the future even. This is the complex mental operation that is involved in reading comics: there is never a static, consistent relationship between any two panels. An artist might indicate a dramatic chronological shift by altering her visual style or there might not be any visual indication. An example of this is Charles Burns’ *Black Hole*, a story whose sequence of events is far more convoluted than one initially realizes at the beginning of a first reading.

Jimmy seems to share some sort of a psychic link with his grandfather; without his understanding why or even where they come from, Jimmy's mind is flooded with images that originate from nine centuries in the past. He is in a ghost story of which he has no knowledge, and only we as readers ever get to see the full picture of the sequence of events, from the 1890s through the 1980s. This link between the two Jameses is similar to the one described by Lloyd-Smith in relation to Faulkner's work: "the present can only be understood in terms of a working out of events from the past which emerge in uncanny interconnections and buried lineages" (*American Gothic* 116). Past and present don't exist in a clear, stable relationship, but have an ambivalent relationship that is illogical yet evident nonetheless.

And because of Jimmy's ignorance, his lineage is, in fact, buried—he knows nothing of his father or family until he receives the letter from his father to visit over Thanksgiving. In addition, because he doesn't know who his family is, he also is ignorant of who *he* is: "From its beginnings, the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge. Far from knowing everything, like an omniscient narrator, characters—and even narrators—frequently know little or nothing about the world through which they move or about the structures of power which envelop them" (Punter and Byron 273). This mystery of identity is further compounded by the fact that three generations of Corrigan men all share the same first name: James Reed (born 1884), James William (born 1921), and Jimmy (born circa 1950).

This conflicted relationship with the past is a motif that is common to many graphic novels. In Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Bruce Wayne has retired as Batman but has spent a dissatisfied ten years since hanging up the cowl and cape. Throughout the story he keeps returning to the place and, in his mind, the evening when his parents were killed in a

robbery on their way home after the theater. This event, in fact, was the motivation for the life that he had spent fighting crime, and now that he has given up his *raison d'être*, he is haunted by that evening. Similarly, Daniel Clowes' protagonist Enid Coleslaw from *Ghost World* has trouble letting go of her past. Now that she has graduated high school, she is anxious about the next step for her life; Enid compensates for this insecurity by venerating and longing for the past. She goes to great lengths searching for a record that she enjoyed as a child, and she and Becky even visit a childhood vacation spot, which, not surprisingly, fails to meet her youthful recollections.

In both of these examples, however, unlike *Jimmy Corrigan*, the past remains a distant memory that one recalls at will; this is a common example of what we mean when we use the phrase, *haunted by the past*. This isn't a literal haunting, of course, like the one that we find in *Jimmy Corrigan* or in Alan Moore's epic masterwork, *From Hell*. Although it's not quite as central to the story as in Ware's work, Moore also seems to have a fascination with the workings of time. *From Hell* is one possible solution for the mystery of one of history's most notorious serial killers, Jack the Ripper; Moore did copious amounts of research and in his graphic novel he presents the crimes, and most of the players, with a high degree of historical accuracy. The identity of his Ripper is a medical doctor, a man highly respected socially, William Gull. As he is passing down an alley following his second victim, he passes a window that has the curtains drawn back; glancing inside he sees a man in a room with a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a television, and a Marilyn Monroe poster on the wall. Gull and this man both stare at one another in amazement. Moore, in his investigations, came across this story of a man who periodically sees a couple pass outside his window in nineteenth-century dress and proceed down the alleyway; he incorporated it into his narrative, except that instead of the past merely haunting the



present, Gull is also able to see through this portal into the future as well—he is a living ghost, cognizant of his haunting presence manifesting itself in the future.

This type of event occurs twice more and each time Gull advances further ahead in time. The last woman identified and associated with the Ripper murders, Marie Kelly, was brutally mutilated in what appears to be a ritualistic fashion. As Gull is bent over the bed he rises to find himself in a late-twentieth-century office, replete with copier and computers. He steps onto a desk and proceeds to lecture everyone—although they're oblivious to his presence: "See me! Wake up and look upon me! I am come amongst you. I am with you always" (Moore 10: 21<sup>5</sup>). The next panel shows us Gull back in Kelly's apartment, actually standing on a chair, not a desk; and then, in the next panel, we return to the perspective of Gull's vision and he's back in the office once more, continuing his lecture.

Is the man simply insane? Well, Moore gives indication earlier on that he is, actually, which creates a fascinating dimension of ambiguity. Previously Gull suffers a stroke but even after he recovers he continues to suffer from some type of psychosis. He has been inducted into the secret society of the Masons, and he has come to believe that all of history is being guided by occultic, supernatural forces; he comes to understand the history of civilization through the paranoid mind of a conspiracy theorist. But, if he *is* merely insane, then how is he able to imaginatively construct the skyscraper that he sees in Mitre Square after he kills Catherine Eddowes? How is he able to accurately perceive late-twentieth-century technology? Moore is clearly challenging any attempts that we might make to come up with a simple, conclusive explanation like insanity; he leaves us in a state of unresolvable ambiguity.

Gull gives voice to some surprisingly lucid thoughts; Moore endows him with a sort of prescience in which he grasps the nature of the twentieth century, and the significance that his

acts will have. After his final murder he states, “It is beginning . . . . Only just beginning. For better or worse, the twentieth century. I have delivered it” (Moore 10: 33). Using terminology of childbirth he sees his actions of violence and bloodshed as typifying the future of humanity. And as he embraces the remains of Marie Kelly after his final vision, he says, “You’d all have been dead in a year or two from liver failure, men, or childbirth. Dead. Forgotten. I have saved you. Do you understand that? I have made you safe from time and we are wed in legend, inextricable within eternity” (Moore 10: 33). Without a doubt, Moore achieves an intriguing conflation of past and present.

Ware and Moore are continuing an aspect of storytelling that has long been a part of Gothic. Within our own country Hawthorne was among the earliest to explore these types of themes: “No American novelist before Hawthorne had undertaken to meditate on the interpenetration of past and present” (Lloyd-Smith, “Nineteenth-Century” 116). An interest in the past is also an interest in the mortality of those who have lived before, and, by extension, it is an interest in our own mortality, since we, too, will one day be spoken of in the past tense. Gothic provides an opportunity to explore questions of what happens after we die, it “always blurs or even dissolves the boundary between life and death. . . . the killing and dying are gateways to this domain, as part of a continuing debate about the limits of human will and agency” (Wilt 41). Chris Ware utilizes this aspect of the Gothic genre in order to explore who Jimmy Corrigan is and *why* is the way that he is. Jimmy is haunted by the past actions of his grandfather to demonstrate how they continue to stay with us, even as we are unaware of their existence.

*Gothic Monstrosity: Where Are Our Sympathies to Lie?*

If an interest in the past is a primary trait of Romantic and Gothic literary works, so too is an exploration of monstrosity. This might take the form—in more fantastic stories—of a literal monster that challenges our sense of reality, or it might even appear as moral monstrosity—someone who exceeds the social boundaries to such an extent so as to shock our sense of decorum or morality. Unlike realist works in which a character might transgress social propriety, in Gothic fiction these characters are pushing the outermost limits of believability or acceptability. Just as Judith Wilt points out that Gothic “blurs or even dissolves the boundary between life and death” (41), monsters, “whether in appearance or behaviour, function to define and construct the politics of the ‘normal.’ Located at the margins of culture, they police the boundaries of the human, pointing to those lines that must not be crossed” (Punter and Byron 263). Monstrosity is a means of exploring not only physical ambivalence, but moral and proprietorial as well.

Much like comics itself, Gothic monstrosity is a hybrid construct, as David Punter and Glennis Byron describe:

Monsters, as the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed or, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term, ‘abjected’ within a specific culture not only establish the boundaries of the human, but may also challenge them. Hybrid forms that exceed and disrupt those systems of classification through which cultures organize experience, monsters problematize binary thinking and demand a rethinking of the boundaries and concepts of normality. (264)

Many graphic novels are utilizing this aspect of Gothic to highlight personal problems or social ills; although, maybe surprisingly, monstrosity can often be a difficult verdict to render and then

simply walk away with a sense of satisfaction—job well done. Probably the easiest decision to arrive at is in a work like *Epileptic* where the malevolence, as the title informs the reader, is a disorder that causes seizures; the identification is unequivocal because it's an abstraction, so it's easy to assign blame. Comics is uniquely capable of translating this condition into monstrosity. Although we can see the way that diseases such as HIV or cancer ravage human life—its effects—we are unable to see the monster itself, which is a microbe or a chemical imbalance of the brain. In David B.'s graphic novel, however, this disorder is a literal monster that writhes and slithers and entangles itself in the lives of his family.

In a work like *Jimmy Corrigan*, as well, we're quick to point the finger at William Corrigan; after all, he neglects, abuses, and ultimately abandons his son. Lloyd-Smith writes that characters such as this, who flout convention, are a common occurrence:

Freethinking characters appear frequently in the Gothic, and they are generally up to no good, disbelieving in the significance of virginity, for example (while obsessively eager to deflower those who maintain it), and proclaiming their own superiority and inherent freedom as rational beings above the shibboleths of convention and religious faith. . . . it is not difficult to see in these contrasts that the Gothic is in essence a reactionary form, . . . one that explores chaos and wrongdoing in a movement toward the ultimate restitution of order and convention. (*American Gothic* 5)

Unlike other villains, however, William is not self-aware enough, nor smart enough to see himself as a Nietzschean Übermensch; he's simply a middle-aged, self-centered man who brings much pain and suffering to a young boy's life.

Much more heinous, much more monstrous, however, are the wrongs committed in *From Hell*—not only by Gull, but also by the authority that sets him upon his tasks: Queen Victoria. This is a standard feature of Gothic: “Often framed in terms of institutional power and oppression, Gothic records the pleasures and costs of particular social systems” (Goddu 63). Victoria’s son, Prince Albert, has secretly married a common girl, Ann Cook, who works in a candy shop, and had a child by her—without having revealed his true identity. First, Victoria orders the abduction of Ann who is admitted into an insane asylum for women; she approaches Gull about performing a lobotomy on her in order to protect the integrity of the crown. Then she asks him to eliminate a small group of prostitutes who have learned of the real reason behind Ann’s disappearance, and who are trying to blackmail Albert’s mother. Granted, Victoria is unaware of his psychosis, which causes him to carry out the homicides in a most gruesome, ritualistic fashion, but even after he begins his killing spree she never does anything to terminate his carrying out his appointed task. This, then, is true monstrosity: when a ruler uses the authority of the state over its own citizens in order to cover up family indiscretions. Gull even goes to Scotland Yard before his first murder in order to inform them of his plans, as well as on whose authority he is acting.

Does this alleviate some of the responsibility of Gull, since he is acting on behalf of a direct order from Queen Victoria herself? Is Gull any less guilty of his crimes because of his insanity? Do we sympathize with him? He clearly is not in his right mind, and by the end of the book he is, in fact, locked away in a sanitarium, but only after Detective Abberline has uncovered the nature of the plot behind the crimes. Gull, then, has gone from victimizer to something of a victim himself. And what about William Corrigan? Is there something in his background that might make us sympathetic, or at least more understanding, of the man that he

has become? We are given a glimpse of his more human side when James comes into the house to find his father crying over the death of James's grandmother. Is a monster simply a victim whose background we don't yet know? We want reality, and especially notions such as good and evil, to be clearly demarcated, but it is only very rarely the case that we find such absolute values. This ambiguity is not uncommon in Romantic literature: "Limits and boundaries can therefore be reinstated as the monster is dispatched, good is distinguished from evil and self from other. However, the very dependence of the one term upon the other introduces an ambivalence that becomes increasingly notable in Gothic of the twentieth century" (Punter and Byron 264).

A classic example of this dynamic—victim turned victimizer—is found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I would imagine that most people, upon first picking up this book, are surprised to learn what an intelligent, sensitive, and inquisitive being the monster is. Within the first third of the book, and by his own admission, we discover that it is Victor Frankenstein who is the true monster, rather than his repugnant creation: "The proliferation of the monstrous body is the anxiety that afflicts the mad scientist hero" (Mulvey-Roberts 211). As with the young James R. Corrigan, the "monster" is given life and then utterly abandoned. As he gains learning and understanding, so too does his resentment grow. He is like Adam and Eve, who are told, "when you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5, NIV). As the monster comes to understand the nature of Frankenstein's mistreatment, he seeks to harm him in return, to seek revenge. We read, in his own words:

Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous,

guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (Shelley 98)

There is no doubt that the monster has been wronged, but his response is not to strike his maker, but rather to hurt those who are dear to *him*. He is familiar with God from *Paradise Lost*, but if he has read Deuteronomy 32:35, “It is mine to avenge. I will repay,” he either doesn’t understand the principle or he chooses to ignore it (NIV). Most anyone can sympathize with the pain that the monster suffers, but he *is* morally culpable—he murders innocent people: Victor’s brother, adopted sister, newly wedded wife. So where is the tipping point? When do we, as readers, cease to sympathize and instead see his physical condition as a reflection of his moral one?

This conflictedness on the part of the reader is an elemental aspect of Gothic: grotesque. Even if we hold the monster responsible, which we must do, we surely feel regret and sorrow as well that Frankenstein’s faults and those of the monster have led them to this unfortunate, mutually destructive end. Ruskin writes that whenever “the noble grotesque fixes upon human nature, it does so with much sorrow mingled amidst its indignation: in its highest forms there is an infinite tenderness” (3: 150).

This motif appears again and again in a variety of fascinating situations. In *Epileptic*, for instance, even though *the* monster is the epilepsy that plagues Jean–Christophe, he becomes more and more of a monster himself. He grows increasingly abusive throughout the story as he is frustrated by his own challenges and lack of ability on the one hand, and he is envious of the

superior talents of his younger brother, Pierre-François, on the other. As Jean-Christophe grows older, he fails to develop emotionally or accept what is happening to him. In his teen years, when he has the body and strength of an adult, he attacks his parents in moments of frustration, and one night he even sneaks into Pierre-François' room with a large kitchen knife apparently intent on killing him.

From victim, then, Jean-Christophe is transformed into victimizer; his identity is never a simple, stable property: he is both adult and child, he is both loved and resented by his family. In increasing degrees throughout the story he transforms into the likeness of the monster that is his disorder; toward the end of *Epileptic* David B. depicts him visually in such a way that he takes on similar features as those of the monster Epilepsy—as if he is possessed by its spirit. And then we see the ravaging effects that the drugs have had on his body, causing him to become bloated. In fact, he is completely unrecognizable by the end. The book actually opens with Pierre-François returning home as an adult; while in the bathroom he is shocked when a large man walks in who turns out to be his brother because he can't immediately make out his identity due to the numerous scars that Jean-Christophe has accumulated through decades of violent seizures.

But the process doesn't end here, however. Pierre-François is also dragged into monstrosity without his realizing it. Even from the time that they are small children, Pierre-François becomes the dominant figure: he is smarter, he is more creative, he is better at drawing—and while he might not be stronger than his older brother, because of his greater confidence he always gains the upper hand in their physical confrontations, which continue throughout their teen years. Whenever Pierre-François is consumed by hatred in one of his fights with his brother, he too is portrayed as having some of the same physical traits as Jean-Christophe when he is consumed by anger—his face is covered with dark patches (fig. 30).



Pierre-François arrives at an early understanding, “I realize that I have a terrifying power over my brother,” and he comes to relish his superiority and often antagonizes and torments Jean-Christophe (Beauchard 38). He should love his brother and hate the disease, but for him his brother has become the disease—he has devolved into something that he neither respects nor cares for. Not until he is living on his own at college does Pierre-François become fully cognizant of *his* role as victimizer, and he is then tormented by anger at what his family has had to go through, and also plagued by guilt over how he has contributed to his brother’s suffering; at one point he even contemplates suicide.



Figure 30. When they are consumed by anger, Jean-Christophe’s and Pierre-François’ faces become darkened.

A very different example is that found in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Bruce Wayne has adopted a life of vigilantism because his parents were killed in an armed robbery. So now, as Batman, he is a victimizer whose victims are other victimizers. But is this admirable? Justifiable? And don’t make the mistake of thinking that Wayne does this merely out of concern for the welfare of his city; he enjoys causing pain and suffering in criminals, and I think it’s even fair to characterize the treatment of his victims as terroristic. Batman is trying to extricate

information from an informant that he has thrown through a window on the fire escape outside: “You’ve got rights. Lots of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy. But right now you’ve got a piece of glass shoved into a major artery in your arm. Right now you’re bleeding to death. Right now I’m the one person in the world who can get you to a hospital in time” (Miller 45). Why does he adopt methods similar to those of the very people he despises? Even among superheroes Batman is a rogue element in Miller’s story; the government has declared a ban against all superheroes, and yet he still emerges from retirement. Superman, on the other hand, represents moral, as well as physical, strength and superiority. He is brought in by the President of the United States, whose orders he now follows—working primarily against the Soviet threat—to bring Batman under control or to stop him forcibly.

Maybe the most interesting example of this shift from victim to victimizer is that found in *Black Hole*; this is a drama that is almost entirely peopled by victims. The focus of the story, however, is upon teenage kids that have been infected with a sexually transmitted disease that results in physical deformity of varying degrees. Needless to say, only a very few are able to pass as normal, while the rest live out of tents in the woods. Surprisingly, the bug, as the kids call it, is not the focus of the story; Charles Burns wants to relate the social pressures and anxieties that all teens experience, and he uses this disease as a hyperbolic metaphor for teen alienation. Some of the kids are disturbingly mutated, and “[i]t is horrific, but only through the psychological and emotional traumas the kids undergo” (Smith, A. W. 259). Sex, then, is a rite of passage, an act that changes kids forever from what they had been before. Burns uses the virus “to allegorize the often humiliating transition, steeped in sexual anxiety, from innocence to experience” (McDevitt 63).

One character, however, Dave, doesn't mind his life living out in the woods, hungry, cut off from all of the healthy kids who are still living at home and attending high school. He was near the bottom of the social hierarchy: "I'd never go back, not in a million years. Anything's better than all the crap I had to go through . . . going back to school and getting beat up almost every day . . . all those stuck up girls laughing at me . . . **fuck 'em! fuck 'em all!**" (Burns 338<sup>6</sup>). Dave is confiding all of this to Chris, a girl who has just recently been infected and is struggling, especially since her boyfriend Rob has disappeared, to make the transition from straight-A student to pariah, and to whom Dave is attracted. When he tells her that she wasn't like all of the other girls, she thinks to herself, "Oh, I remembered him alright . . . him and his friends. Geeks . . . losers. The shy, ugly kids who laughed too loud, wore the wrong clothes. Nice? I many have been nice to him but I was as guilty as everyone else . . . I thought he was creepy. I didn't want to have anything to do with him" (Burns 339).

What we discover in the course of this story is that Dave has been acting out in a manner similar to that of Frankenstein's monster: he and his friend Rick have been raping and killing girls at night. Rick is sequestered even from the rest of the infected kids in the woods—an outcast among the outcasts, and Dave manipulates and controls him so that he does whatever he's told to do. Dave supplies him with food, pornography, girls to rape, and in return Rick does as he's instructed—like killing Chris's boyfriend Rob to make room for Dave in her affections. James Pyman characterizes the story in his review: "One by one the students fall prey either to the disease or, in worse instances, the diseased" (37).

Another parallel, besides Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is an event that took place four years after Burns began writing *Black Hole*: on April 20, 1999 Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School killing one teacher, twelve students, and wounding twenty-three others

before taking their own lives. In the aftermath people's hearts were torn between hating these two teenaged monsters and yet—at the same time—sympathizing with stories of the way that they had been mistreated by their fellow classmates. The athletes at Columbine had been accused of racial and sexual harassment with very little consequence, and in their statements leading up to the attacks these were to be the primary targets of Harris and Klebold (Moffatt 139). And yet, while these two boys might have suffered abuse at the hands of athletes, only a fraction of the students targeted actually *were* athletes (Moffatt 156). Gothic tales challenge us to reexamine the boundaries along which our emotions lie; good and evil are often not so easy to delineate. Is the proper response to this tragedy to despise Harris and Klebold or to sympathize with them? This ambivalence with which we struggle is a primary element of the grotesque.

Jimmy Corrigan's own situation is also unique. As with Dave and Rick, though, there is no single person to blame—he is a victim without an apparent victimizer. His condition is the result of the patriarchal dysfunction that has plagued his family for at least four generations. Jimmy is the product of the gross neglect and abuse suffered by his grandfather; as a result, he is extremely timid. He is so apprehensive, in fact, that throughout most of the book he is simply incommunicative; Jimmy conforms to a sense of the grotesque in adopting this “freakish” behavior (Cornwell 273). This inability to communicate—and therefore commune—with other people is a form of isolation or even burial according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; in Gothic it “is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past, the details of its family history; it can be the free air, when the self has been literally buried alive; it can be a lover; it can be just all the circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep” (12). According to her last example, the trauma that Jimmy suffers as a result of his family's past creates a state similar to

that of a coma; this is actually a pretty accurate description of his perpetually helpless and anxious state.

Jimmy's powerlessness to communicate effectively, though, does have repercussions: "the important privation is the privation exactly of language, as though language were a sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside which being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive" (Sedgwick 18). Because of his "privation," Jimmy compensates through dreams and fantasies, which usually represent the subterranean, essential parts of our being, the "privileged abodes of primal material" (Sedgwick 31). His imagination is the place of the victim-turned-monster; within this realm he is confident, aggressive, abusive: he imagines killing his father; leaving a girl who won't have sex with him—"I for one have got better things to do than waste my time with some cocktease whore" (Ware 51); torturing his pesky mother with an anonymous phone call; and living a life of luxury on a yacht with his father.

In *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, an alphabetical listing of terms and names, Christoph Houswitschka writes the entry for the term *Zerrissenheit*, which

describes a feeling of self-estrangement between the "rent/lacerated consciousness" (Hegel), caused by the tensions between the individual's desires and the limitations of experience, the fragmentation of man's perception in the empirical sciences and the disintegration of his social substance. This stage of alienation or disunion, which emerges from a simple unity (in primitive or archaic cultures; childhood), is eventually reconciled in the higher unity of the absolute, characterizing the stage at the end of a series of cognitive and practical activities. (258)

Jimmy, then, is “rent” or torn between the world of reality and the world of his inner life—and although the central focus of this story isn’t a battle for his moral salvation—a psychomachia, Jimmy’s id *is* at war with his superego. But, even further, he is also conflicted *within* his imagination; besides his arrogant, strident fantasies, he also imagines being killed *by* his father, and his mother confronting him in the hospital asking him why he has come to visit his father at all. Through the figure of his mother his conscience acts out and intrudes upon the normally safe place of his haven of fantasy. The only conflict within *Jimmy Corrigan*’s twentieth-century storyline is that located within Jimmy’s “own interior will” (Fitzgerald xiii).

This type of conflictedness is also found in volume five of Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* series, *A Game of You*. In this story Barbara has been having a recurring, episodic dream in which she is a princess in a magical land of fairytale creatures. This kingdom is being oppressed by the Cuckoo, and it is Barbara’s responsibility to avoid detection by this monster and arrive at a safe haven where she will have the opportunity to set things to right. She is eventually caught—betrayed by one of her companions—and is brought before the Cuckoo, who turns out to be a childhood incarnation of herself. The land is one that she visited in her dreams as a girl, and its inhabitants are embodiments of her toys as a child. Barbara wants to blame the destruction of her friends on the Cuckoo, “It’s because of **you** Martin Tenbones is dead,” to which the child responds, “Because of us, Princess Barbara. Because of **us**” (Gaiman, *Game* 124). This child-monster has taken possession of her dreamscape through force.

Although his story doesn’t do so through violence, Chris Ware conforms to—and at the same time modifies—the Gothic idea that those who are abused often become the abusers themselves<sup>7</sup>; Ware accomplishes this not through outward actions but through an inward acting-out. Ware also follows tradition by casting his protagonist as someone caught in a state of abject

helplessness: “the fate of children, their powerlessness in the face of persecution, is another recurring Gothic theme” (Punter and Byron 289). And Jimmy, despite his age, *is* a child emotionally, psychologically, and socially. He suffers from a trait often found in Romance, a “helplessness of the ego” (Sedgwick 42).

Ware also conforms to tradition by creating his drama within the realm of the real world. In “true Gothic,” according to Ruskin, the artist taps into disturbing elements of reality; Ware doesn’t present Jimmy as an absurd creation—despite his own grotesqueness—but he instills an anxiety in the reader that is rooted in “true things,” and “however fantastic its expression may be, there will be reality in it, and force” (3: 142). In Jimmy the reader might feel disgust in his nearly complete inability to function in society, but he also feels sympathy for the trauma that he has suffered. Jimmy is a realistically portrayed character, which means that this could have happened to us, and *is* happening to people every day. Ware is faithful to the expression of Gothic fear such as that found in Dave and Rick in *Black Hole*—sometimes kids really do lash out against social oppression, and that found in *From Hell*—sometimes the monster is those whose responsibility it is to protect and serve.

#### *Coming of Age in a Haunted World: Gothic as Bildungsroman*

So far *Jimmy Corrigan* and the other examples that I’ve examined have largely conformed to one’s expectations of Gothic; they have offered some interesting twists and interpretations, but have fundamentally stuck to the standard traditions of this genre. There are two important ways that Ware departs from academic expectations, and the first is that *Jimmy Corrigan* is a Bildungsroman. Unlike Gothic stories, but more typical of their realist counterparts, there is an arc of development in the protagonist of this graphic novel; although this might not be obvious to the casual reader, I would argue that Jimmy passes from “shy, potato–

shaped Untermensch” (Poniewozik 116) to (at least something of an) Übermensch in the course of the story. And this is a much more common component of late–twentieth–century graphic novels compared to nineteenth–century Romantic literature. But not only do these examples I’m going to examine depart from the tradition of Gothic, they also depart from the tradition of comic books as well, where superheroes are romantic ideals that generally don’t develop very much as characters, nor do they age.

I want to consider two dramatically different examples, apart from the discussion of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Enid, the protagonist of Clowes’ *Ghost World*, lives in a fantastic, bizarre world of her own making. She delights in grotesqueries and heightens the sense of the dark, the mysterious, and the conspiratorial through her imagination and discussion with her best friend, Becky. An older couple who are eating at their favorite diner become the “Satanist couple”; granted, the man does resemble Anton LaVey, but that’s the extent of their evidence against the couple. Bob Skeetes, “some creepy Don Knotts guy at the counter,” has his own take: “I have my own little fantasy . . . I like to think they’re brother and sister secretly married and living together incestuously” (Clowes 13). Skeetes gives Enid his business card at another chance meeting and offers to give her a free psychic reading; she returns the favor by making a prank call: “Listen Skeetes, I’m on to you . . . I know about you and those Satanists . . . I’ve been watching you and I saw what you did . . . you’re not fooling anybody with that toupee” (Clowes 28). When she tries to get in touch again later in the story she apparently has run him off because his number is no longer in service.

Enid is herself an example of grotesque in her hypercritical assessment of everyone and everything—except herself. Slowly the reader comes to realize what Enid is not capable of grasping: she adopts an attitude of superiority as a defense mechanism—she overcompensates



for her insecurity and adopts typically adolescent behavior. Enid has just graduated high school and is anxious about her future. She responds by idealizing her past and adopting an attitude of uber-cool, although we eventually do learn her secret: “I just totally hate myself” (Clowes 61). She criticizes and hurts others because she herself is hurting.

Toward the end of the story, she shares a secret with Becky: “Before I was going to college, my secret plan was to one day not tell anybody and just get on some bus to some random city and just move there and become this totally different person” (Clowes 74). And, once she gets the news that she has failed to get into the college of her choice, she follows through on her “secret plan.” As she walks past the diner for the last time and sees Becky sitting with Josh, upon whom Enid has had a crush throughout the book, she whispers, “you’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman,” and boards the bus which drives off in the final panel (Clowes 80). Although this is a story filled with anxiety and childish petulance, ultimately Enid is able to move on to make a life for herself. Clowes, as Gentry comments upon O’Connor’s work, transforms “these images of negative modern grotesquerie into part of a redemptive process” (13).

On the more Romantic end of the narrative spectrum is Morpheus from Neil Gaiman’s epic narrative, *The Sandman*. In volume 7, *Brief Lives*, the entire story is a study on the nature of change. Morpheus—also called Dream, because he is its deified embodiment—and his younger sister, Delirium, set out to find their brother, Destruction, who has been missing for three centuries. Peter Straub, who authored the afterword, writes, “The entire search has been conducted in resistance to change. Delirium does not merely want her brother back because she misses him, she wishes to restore the old order. She wants things back the way they used to be.

Dream, less naïve, merely wants things to remain as they are and assumes that they will do so” (np).

The protagonist of *Brief Lives*, then, is unwilling to admit or recognize the changes that he is undergoing, even though this fact is commented upon by others throughout the story. Destruction, having remained hidden for several centuries, is delighted to see Morpheus, “and **you**, my brother. You **also** seem different. Perhaps you **too** have grown”; to which Dream responds, “It is not likely” (Gaiman, *Brief* 7: 24<sup>8</sup>). At the end of their time together, just before Destruction leaves, never to see any of his family again, he tells his brother, “You also have changed more than even **you** know, I suspect” (Gaiman, *Brief* 8: 17). At the very end of the story Dream has suffered two losses: his brother has left for the last time and his son, Orpheus, has asked his father to take his life in order to end his meaningless existence. As he finally arrives home, Dream is “so altered by heartache the Gryphon attendant on his door does not recognize him” (Straub).

The role of Morpheus comes to an end in volume 9, *The Kindly Ones*, largely of his own volition. Two events have brought about his death. First, in volume 1 of this series, Dream has been captured by a magus, an old man dabbling in witchcraft, and as a result he is imprisoned for over 80 years. Although he is slow to come to this realization, Morpheus has become sensitive to the sufferings of others; through this ordeal he has become less god-like and a little more human. The second incident is his killing his son: “I killed him twice. Once, long ago, when I would not help him; and once . . . more recently . . . when I did . . .” (Gaiman, *Kindly* 11: 6). Morpheus gains a new perspective on the way that he has treated his son: “In my pride I abandoned him for several thousand years” (Gaiman, *Kindly* 11: 6). So, as the Furies<sup>9</sup> come to take his life for taking that of his son, Morpheus accepts their punishment. When presented with the possibility of

fleeing, he responds, “No one else can live our lives for us. And we must confront and accept the consequences of our actions” (Gaiman, *Kindly* 12: 21). He accepts defeat and death rather than abdicating his responsibilities; he comes to recognize that over time everyone and everything is subject to change: “Since I killed my son . . . the Dreaming has not been the same . . . or perhaps I was no longer the same” (Gaiman, *Kindly* 13: 6). The Gothic of Gaiman’s *Sandman* is not just monsters and curses, but existential quandary: “The domain of the gothic is not just the philosophical problem of evil but the problematic of being itself, which refuses either to stay in place or to wind itself to a close” (Wilt 41).

*Jimmy Corrigan* falls somewhere between the points on the generic continuum staked out by *Ghost World* and *The Sandman*. The structure of *Ghost World*, though, is very similar to that of Ware’s *magnum opus* in that Jimmy Corrigan remains a static, stock character until the very last several pages of the book; and, like Morpheus, he is almost entirely unaware of his own growth.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the story he is very passive—he’s a broken, misshapen emotional grotesque that has been created in the laboratory of a broken home. Jimmy ends up, however, following a very different course than that taken by Frankenstein’s progeny; for in this story the cycle of destruction is gradually undone as the father reaches out to his son. And with this shift in plot Jimmy takes on the role of mythic hero who must successfully navigate the Thanksgiving holiday with the man who abandoned his mother:

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there’s something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to

discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning.

(Campbell, J. 123)

Jimmy's quest is to journey into the labyrinth of the past and face the monster that dwells there at its center—his father—who has destroyed “standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct” (Campbell, J. 222). Our hero isn't terribly heroic and the monster doesn't turn out to be so monstrous, but Jimmy does accept the invitation and he confronts his past.

I want to make the argument that Jimmy returns home from his quest as a vanquishing hero, even though he doesn't seem to know it himself, and, I have to admit, I even had trouble seeing this outcome myself until I looked a little bit closer. But, you might ask, why did I even bother looking for these heroic-quest-type elements? Because, throughout this gloomy—some might even say depressing—story, there isn't a single glimmer of hope or reprieve throughout 375 pages, until the last three. In these closing pages Jimmy returns home, and goes to his office on a snowy evening where he's all alone at the end of the holiday weekend, until . . . a red-haired girl shows up. She's going to be starting on Monday and wants to get things set up before her first day. Ware leaves us with a glimmer of hope that Jimmy's future is beginning to brighten. I thought to myself, “why this shift in tone? why a sudden sense of hope? what has happened to Jimmy to indicate that his life is going to be any different? that he is capable of change?”

Two indicators—almost unnoticed by even a close reading—hint at the fact that Jimmy has begun to change and mature. And the background to these two signs is important as well. For the first time Jimmy has gotten to know his father, and he's learned that he has been a loving, supportive man to his adoptive daughter, Amy. While his father spends the night in ICU, Jimmy spends that time at his grandfather's apartment looking through family photos with Amy. For the

first time that he is able to remember he sees his father and mother together, and Amy helps make him feel like he's part of a family; furthermore, as he heads toward the door to step out for a breath of fresh air, his grandfather stops him—whose story we've been following in the 1890s, and says, “you're a good kid, y'know?” (Ware 336).

The next morning two significant events take place. First, on the drive back to the hospital, Jimmy imagines that he and Amy arrive to find his father sitting up eating breakfast; after Amy has some time alone with him, Jimmy tells his father, “And . . . I just wanted to say that I'm not mad at you anymore . . . And—gn—that I—I f—forgive you . . . and I'm sorry for messing everything up . . .—snf—” (Ware 343). Unfortunately, Jimmy never actually gets to articulate these thoughts to his father, who has passed away in the night; however, what's important is the fact that he *has* gotten to this point emotionally. Forgiving his father enables him to move past the trauma in his life.

The second important achievement occurs as Jimmy and Amy—sitting side-by-side—receive news that their father has, in fact, passed away. She has sat immobilized since the doctor first sat down with them on the previous page; then, as she is overwhelmed with grief, she begins to shake. Jimmy, noticing this, reaches over and covers her hand with his own. His compassion for her overcomes his peculiar social and relational phobias. This act is the first time that we have seen him reach out to someone else out of concern. On this trip—this quest—Jimmy has learned to forgive and to express compassion to others.

We might not recognize the significance of these events at the time, however, because there aren't any bells, whistles, or fireworks. When he reaches out to Amy, in fact, in her grief she responds with violence, shouting “get away from me!” and shoves him off of his seat (Ware 348). He gets in a taxi, boards a train, and goes home. At the end of the book, then, when Jimmy

is alone in his cubicle at work, the story couldn't possibly have reached any lower point emotionally; the reader is left feeling despondent. Not only is Jimmy sitting alone in his office in the dark over a holiday weekend, but Ware further heightens the effect by using the metonymy of a snowfall outside the large office windows, to represent emotional coldness. Jimmy sits in the dark, looks out the window at the building across the street, and imagines himself leaping from the same ledge that Super Man had earlier in the story, when he hears someone shuffling papers in the cubicle across from his. One turns the page and in the last two pages of the story we are introduced to Tammy, a new, talkative, red-haired girl who has no one else with whom to spend Thanksgiving.

In terms of the hero motif, Jimmy returns from his adventure victorious to receive his prize. As Gentry and Joseph Campbell have commented, in Gothic stories, as well as heroic ones, there is a cyclical process: "The grotesque degrades the ideal, but, as I have said, the ideal that is grotesquely degraded is not obliterated: the grotesque retains traces of the ideal. The retained connection between the ideal and the grotesque indicates that one 'destination' of the grotesque is a reformation of the ideal" (Gentry 17). Even though he must still confront the same world with the same problems as before his trip, Jimmy has taken significant steps in his emotional development. Jimmy has faced his fears and learned to cope: "in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to 'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival" (Moretti 10). Furthermore, Jimmy is at the beginning of a new, romantic relationship and, in terms of the mythic quest, he has vanquished the monster. Although Jimmy hasn't killed his father—he isn't morally culpable in any way, he *has* confronted the demons of his past and they have been exorcised. As James William Corrigan dies, so too does the spirit of

William Corrigan pass away as well, as if he were the reincarnation of the qualities of his ancestor, which more primitive cultures believe (Frazier 298–9).

*The Brightly-lit Gothic Tale*

In addition to using Gothic tropes to relate a coming-of-age story, another means by which *Jimmy Corrigan* defies generic expectations is one that is unique to comics. Most Gothic stories are set in environments that evoke fear and uncertainty: old, decrepit houses, haunted locales, dreary basements or caves; and key events always seem to take place at night rather than during the day. Initially, according to Lloyd-Smith, “Landscapes in the Gothic similarly dwelt on the exposed, inhuman and pitiless nature of mountains, crags, and wastelands. In time these tropes of atmosphere, architecture, and landscape became as much metaphorical as actual, so that a simple house, a room or cellar, could become a Gothic setting, and the mere use of darkness or barrenness could call up the Gothic mood” (*American Gothic* 7). A classic example, again, is found in *The House of the Seven Gables*: “That the house embodies the family history reminds us that the word ‘house’ has two meanings relevant to Gothic fictions—it refers both to the building itself and to the family line” (Williams 45).

In a medium like comics, of course, the story does not have to rely upon mere evocation or a reader’s imagination, but the reader actually gets a visual depiction that is an essential aspect of the work and operates alongside the verbal component of the story, the plot. This partnership is not a new one for Gothic, however, as one of its “characteristic preoccupations,” according to Sedgwick, includes “affinities between narrative and pictorial art” (8).

This Gothic atmosphere is a common feature in many nineteenth-century Romantic paintings. These works often achieve their effects through desolate landscapes that evoke a sense of the sublime, or through a depiction of ruins that serve as a *memento mori*. Caspar David

Friedrich is a good example of an artist whose paintings exemplify these characteristics.

Throughout his career he frequently painted very powerful landscapes that are evocative of the Gothic spirit (fig. 31). Friedrich achieves his effect through the bare trees of winter, the



Figure 31. Caspar David Friedrich: *Cloister Cemetery in the Snow*, 1810.

cathedral ruins, the cemetery, the isolated figures walking through the scene, and the monochromatic palette. All of these elements bring to mind thoughts of coldness, death, isolation, decay—all very conducive to Gothic.

Turning to comics, *Black Hole* is a good example how visual and graphic components work in a complementary relationship, each one heightening the effect of the other. Burns tells his story using only black and white—as we see in Friedrich’s work—described as a “pitch-black style, like the product of a woodcut therapy class for a serial killer” (Pyman 37), and as a “sharp-edged, black-inked stoner-goth mélange [that] brims with the nervous tedium of teenage beer buzzes and awkward sex” (McDevitt 63). In order to highlight a story that is emotionally tense, Burns uses a visual style that is graphically terse (fig. 32). The visual aspect of the story



reinforces the reader's emotional reaction to events taking place in the plot where kids are being mutated by the virus that is being transmitted sexually, they're tripping on LSD, and they're living in the squalor of their camp in the woods. Burns largely conforms to our expectations of a Gothic story. And we find a similar dynamic between these two components in other works like *Epileptic*, also created in black and white, and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Darkness, gloom, and dreariness are prominent visual motifs.



Figure 32. Charles Burns: *Black Hole*.

Chris Ware, however, departs significantly from our expectations; he catches the reader completely off-guard, in fact, by utilizing bright colors and precise, carefully rendered images; while most “cartoonists use the colors of kindergarten crayons . . . Ware uses the shades in the Crayola Big Box—Aquamarine, Goldenrod, Burnt Umber” (Nissen). The entire book, however, isn’t merely rendered in one style, as I discussed in an earlier chapter. The storyline with Jimmy, set in the 1980s, shows an environment that is emotionally flat, torpid; James and his childhood, though, set in the 1890s, is elegant and extravagant (fig. 33). Visually, the past isn’t depicted with Gothic architecture, but the Columbian Exposition reveals serene, neoclassical architecture. It is presented with a realist sense of grandeur, beauty, and magnificence; it reflects nobility, reason, and civilization. But it is from the top of one of these beautiful buildings, symbolizing

human achievement and cultivation, that James's father throws him from the top—at least that's the way that he recalls the scene in his imagination eight decades later.



Figure 33. Ware's depiction of the past is a place of visual beauty.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the physical structure to which the title refers reminds us of the dignity of the Pyncheon family's past as well as its current state of financial and moral bankruptcy. Ruins, decay, and decrepitude are what we expect to find in Romantic tales:

Among the most striking features of the Gothic genre is the style of its architectural settings. In early Gothic these were often medievalist, involving ancient stone buildings with elaborate, 'Gothic' arches, buttresses, passageways, and crypts. This was to become the *mise en scene* of Gothicism . . . . In some respects this was an aspect of the new pleasure in lost 'pastness' that intrigued Romantics, an aesthetic appreciation of a previously scorned inheritance. An element no doubt was also distaste for the changes brought by increasing commerce and industrialism that inspired nostalgia for the supposedly simpler and more pleasing structures of the past. But it was also an expression of fear of those structures and the oppressive society they suggested. (Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic* 7)

Ware, however, leaves the reader conflicted and ambivalent in his emotions about the past: while it is beautiful visually, it is dark and twisted emotionally, filled with pain and suffering. He leaves one feeling both nostalgic as well as apprehensive. There is a splendor in the past that we don't find in the modern landscape, but there *is* the same family dysfunction that quickly dispels any idealized notions that we might be tempted to have. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, moreso even than in his other works, Ware sets the visual and verbal components of his story at cross-purposes, rather than having them work in tandem.

### *Conclusion*

Chris Ware's work in *Jimmy Corrigan* is an intriguing blend of genres, which really shouldn't be so surprising in a hybrid medium like comics; transgressing boundaries and the resultant ambivalence are natural, inherent elements. Comics *is* an ambivalent medium. It relies upon both verbal and visual elements—the relationship of which is never static but always in flux in every panel. Ware doesn't hesitate to incorporate both realist and romantic aspects in his story, to explore the ambivalence of social, historical, chronological, narrative, and biographical tensions and anxieties because ambivalence is the *lingua franca* of comics creators.

Ware, then, like any great writer, both fulfills and defies generic conventions. *Jimmy Corrigan* satisfies Gothic expectations in its depiction of the tyrannical father who abuses and acts with impunity; it conforms in its interconnectedness between past and present, in the way that James and his grandson, Jimmy, seem to have a psychic link; and, finally, *Jimmy Corrigan* is traditional in its revelation that Jimmy contains his own, inner monster that has been produced by the abuse that he has suffered.

At the same time, *Jimmy Corrigan* also reflects realist conventions, from the opposite end of the generic continuum. While Gothic nearly always includes connections to the past as well as

family entanglements, Realism also involves a “centrally nineteenth-century recognition of the ways in which every individual can only be understood *in relation to* the social complex and the larger movements of history” (Levine 11). Although Ware does utilize these two features in a primarily Gothic fashion, he also presents us with a protagonist who grows, matures, and develops as a result of his experiences in the story, which is more of a realist practice. Jimmy clearly is a product of the “social complex” and the events of the past, and it’s also clear that he is *continuing* to be transformed—he is a dynamic character.

Ware also breaks from tradition by valorizing past architectural styles, which reflect dignity and beauty, much like a painting by Jacques-Louis David. Instead, it is the present that has been “Gothicized” as an emotionally flat, dead environment—a cultural wasteland of stagnation. Because of the horrible events that take place in the past, it is viewed in terms of beauty and horror, which creates emotional friction—an experience of the grotesque. If anything, Ware might actually heighten a reader’s sense of horror at the events in the nineteenth century if she is caught off-guard by Ware’s use of warm colors.

Gothic has proven itself to be a highly adaptive form, which has especially been evident in the United States within the last several decades. Lloyd-Smith writes that because our country does not have a “feudal past, or those relics so important to the English or European Gothicism, castles and monasteries, the American landscape seemed inherently resistant to Gothic stories and settings. But . . . the culturally specific anxieties and tensions of the new country could determine alternative settings and plots to renew the genre” (*American Gothic* 26–7). The works of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the nineteenth century and Flannery O’Connor in the twentieth century are superlative examples of what he’s describing. Literary critics today take great pleasure in distinguishing feminine Gothic from its masculine counterpart, and in labeling

generic subcategories like Southern Gothic, urban Gothicism, techno–Gothic, and cyber–Gothic, just to name a few.

Ware’s work is a reflection of these recent tendencies, these efforts that “renew the genre.” Gothic has a natural penchant for blurring boundaries such as life and death, past and present, victim and monster. Ware, however, seems to take this practice in a different direction altogether; not only by transgressing the generic categories of Romantic and Realist, but also by grafting superheroes with Civil War scenes with deadbeat dads with stories of immigrants with escapist Freudian episodes with allusions to Dante and Emily Dickinson—all of this in such a way that most readers don’t even realize the myriad disparate strands that are seamlessly woven into a single narrative. One might even make the case for Ware’s expanding Gothic into the realm of the postmodern: “If, as Jameson further argues (in *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) the Past has become a museum, a repository of images that can be pillaged at will in the recreation of post–modern culture, then the *pastiche* that is a hallmark of postmodernism . . . may conjoin with the ‘counterfeit’ aspect of the Gothic . . . to offer a range of possible Gothic styles” (Lloyd–Smith, *American Gothic* 126). And, I would argue, Ware’s is one of these “possible Gothic styles”; I can’t begin to know how to put a label to it, but there are clear Gothic elements in his work. Under no circumstances can one say—and surely no one would make this argument today—that Gothic is merely an artifact of the past, a style that is occasionally resurrected as a disturbing curiosity—an oddity. Rather, as Lloyd–Smith states, it is “one of the most powerful genres” precisely because “it stubbornly resists its own obsolescence . . . through *hybridity*” (*American Gothic* 127).

## CHAPTER 6.

### CONCLUSION: COMICS' PRESENT AND FUTURE

#### *The Struggle for Acceptance*

There's no doubt about it, comics is a unique genre with an interesting and peculiar history. Is it a viable artistic genre? Yes. Has it produced some poor-quality work along the way? Absolutely. But, it has also faced some exceptional opposition and challenges. How many other genres have spawned investigations and hearings by the United States Senate? The content of comics was unregulated up through the 1950s, and in a desire to capitalize on the tremendous growth in this market many publishers were creating works that were clearly inappropriate for children. The attempt of the industry to police itself resulted in comic books that were more age-appropriate for kids, but they also became insipid works of which no one really took notice except children.

The climb to respectability has been a long and arduous one, with many false starts. Underground comix is one of the success stories as comics successfully drew audiences outside of the male, adolescent demographic. The work of Harvey Pekar is another example of how this genre has evolved in surprising ways so that it continued to be relevant to adult audiences. In 1986–87 Frank Miller, Art Spiegelman, and Alan Moore all carried on with this same work of expanding the role of comics while also attracting new readers and media attention; ultimately, however, these works in the late 80s proved to be yet another false start—comics didn't continue to ascend into ever-larger adult markets.

When I began thinking about this dissertation topic several years ago I was confident that graphic novels were finally going to make their way into the mainstream. If anything, after all of the reading that I have done, I am now feeling even more confident. Even in just the last couple

of years comics has made important strides in gaining recognition. While it certainly hasn't experienced recently anything like the dramatic rise in popularity that it did with *Maus* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, it *is* experiencing a more gradual—a more sustainable—climb toward the peak of respectability.

This effort to garner recognition and appreciation is by no means unique to comics, but is analogous to efforts in other hybrid popular forms. In the spring of 2008 the city of Los Angeles designated 10,000 square feet of wall for graffiti artists to decorate, but with the outcry of environmental groups the city council has reversed its position and made \$70,000 available for the removal of the work. The initial project was organized by Alex Poli, a graffiti artist himself and gallery owner. He is saddened because when it comes to this art form, “People still have trouble considering it art because we use a spray can” (Dillon). Like comics, graffiti has struggled to gain public and academic acceptance. This, in spite of the work of people like Keith Haring who began by making public art throughout New York City, but then started receiving commissions for more traditional paintings and sculptures.

Songwriting, too, has faced similar struggles. Christophe Leobold has an article about the poetry of Bob Dylan and he writes that for many “it remains hard to conceive that an oral form that is hybrid by definition—and, in this case, popular—might turn out to be as artistically challenging and rewarding for the audience and the critic—in terms of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure—as the open forms advocated by the poetical avant-garde of the twentieth century” (58). He goes on to say that “the song as an artistic form was obviously deemed of less than secondary importance” (Leobold 58). Leobold does acknowledge the distinct nature of song lyrics compared to more traditional poetry, and he points out the need for a methodology of analysis that is unique to this genre.

Just by looking at these couple of examples, I find it surprising how conservative academia can be. Maybe just by virtue of its being divided into distinct departments, it is suspicious of hybrid forms—it tends to be reserved when it comes to breaking down traditional barriers between different fields of thought. This internal traditionalism is surprising since universities are often perceived to be so progressive in other ways, and also because there are so many new exciting developments within the arts and culture.

Unlike the examples of graffiti and songwriting, though, comics *is* making dramatic inroads into the consciousness of mainstream readers. From examining the activity of the last fifteen years, comics has taken a surprising, unpredictable, counterintuitive course. It has gone from a pop-culture product, held in low regard, to avant-garde; even though graphic novels aren't widely read by the vast majority of middle-class America, that *are* being reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review*. Comics is an *arriviste* art form. And now, from *this* position—an elevated one—comics is making its way into mainstream culture. Writing in 2007 for *World Literature Today*, Andrew D. Arnold states that “Comic artists, regardless of their subject matter, have traditionally hovered in the artistic hierarchy somewhere above pornographers but below children’s book authors. But that seems to be changing” (“Comix” 15). Arnold offers a grim perspective on comics creators—one that is a little behind the times; their change in status is already well under way and has been for ten or fifteen years. Susan Dominus, writing for *The New York Times* in the spring of 2008, paints a dramatically different scene: “the changing culture of the field, [has] somehow . . . become simultaneously more corporate and more cool, moving into Barnes & Noble and Borders and exerting a major influence on fashion designers.”

Those who keep up with the latest cultural developments are aware that graphic novels are no longer perceived in the same way that comic books were twenty years ago. They know



that some of the greatest work in story telling right now is emerging through the comics genre. Nick Hornby, a highly respected writer of both fiction and nonfiction, makes an astute observation: “asking whether graphic novels are a waste of time is exactly the same as asking whether all novels are a waste of time: the answer is that it rather depends on who’s writing them” (11). This reflects a much more knowledgeable mindset—of what graphic novels are and what they have to contribute. But this is still a verdant, burgeoning field, which means that there is excitement and enthusiasm, but also confusion and disagreement. There are many questions that remain unresolved. As Douglas Wolk points out, “there aren’t many identifiable schools within the field” (37)—stylistic categories are difficult to label, phases or periods are impossible to delineate for work of the past ten years. What we *can* discern irrefutably is that brilliant new writers and works *are* coming forward.

*Comics to Save the Day? The Crisis in Reading*

Up until the last several years, the brilliant new work in comics has gone largely unrecognized by middle-class America. Prior to the work of figures like Chris Ware, Art Spiegelman, and Marjane Satrapi, comics had been a lacuna, absent from the mainstream cultural milieu. One of the things that might help change this is the current state of reading in our country, which is experiencing a crisis—but who doesn’t know that already? A 2006 study reported that fifteen-to-twenty-four year olds spend an average of eight minutes a day doing voluntary reading, but they watch two-and-a-half hours of television daily; people between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four spent twelve minutes a day reading, and those sixty-five and older spent a little less than an hour a day reading (Howard 12). Kids, especially, are turning to electronic media like television, video games, and the internet, rather than picking up a book. Last fall the National Endowment for the Arts released a report, a part of which measures kids’

online habits. In 1996 just under twenty-five percent of kids between eight and eighteen were on the internet for forty-six minutes a day. In 2004 nearly one-half of that same age group spent an hour and forty-one minutes on the internet every day (Rich).

As a result of these changes, both reading habits and abilities have greatly declined, even among college graduates (Howard 12). Internet advocates argue that people are still reading, but that it's just the *nature* of reading that has changed: although kids might not be picking up books, they *are* doing hours of reading online. Ken Pugh, a cognitive neuroscientist at Yale, disagrees. After studying the brain scans of children who are reading, he concludes that "[r]eading a book, and taking the time to ruminate and make inferences and engage the imaginal processing, is more cognitively enriching, without doubt, than the short little bits that you might get if you're into the 30-second digital mode" (Rich). There's good reason to proactively engage young people in reading. Besides strong thinking skills, there's also data that suggest that "good readers make better citizens. They volunteer more. They go to art museums more. And, defying stereotype, they even exercise and play sports more" (Howard).

But maybe reading skills are even deteriorating among those of us who do read vast amounts of material on a regular basis. Nicholas Carr, who publishes articles on culture, technology, and business has noticed this change within himself. This past summer he published "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" in *The Atlantic Monthly*—an article that has garnered a lot of attention and discussion. Carr identifies with HAL from the movie *2001*, a computer whose databanks and memory are being slowly switched off:

My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. . . . I'd spend hours strolling

through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. . . . The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. (57)

Carr uses a very creative analogy—he writes, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” (57). Without a doubt, computer technology has changed our experience of reading. When I come across an allusion with which I'm unfamiliar in an article that I'm reading online, I can immediately pull up Wikipedia to fill in that blank and then go back to the original article. While I might be better informed as I'm reading along, my reading experience has become disjointed. Rather than immersing myself in the material I am popping in and out of it.

As adults, we are more likely to have—although maybe latent—reading skills that can be strengthened. The upcoming generation, however, is disassociated from the book—the actual physical object; they have neither the skills nor the interest in reading books. Graphic novels, though, just might be a means of reversing this trend. Since comics uses images as a key device in narrative, this genre is less threatening and more engaging. By using graphic novels in their curricula, educators have discovered a means of getting kids to pick up books again. There are a number of new books that have come out in just the last couple of years that are receiving good reviews, such as the following: *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*; *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*; *Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy With Preteens and Teens*; *Adventures In Graphica: Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Teach Comprehension, 2–6*. This development would have been absolutely incomprehensible in the late 1950s—in the years following the

crusade by Wertham. Educators aren't merely watering down curriculum, as I'm sure many are thinking and commenting right now in discussion forums. Comics isn't a stupid genre, nor is it in any way smart or clever. Educators have recognized that comics is a neutral tool that can be used or abused.

Mark Letcher, in *English Journal*, recommends using graphic novels to serve as a bridge to other texts and as a means of introducing literary terms and techniques (94). Students can find examples of digression, allusion, metaphor, foreshadowing, characterization—all of the same elements that one would look for in a prose novel. And Stephen Weiner has found that “the average graphic novel introduced readers to twice as many words as the average children’s book” (61).

So, if educators are seeing the value of comics to help get kids interested in books, how far behind can widespread cultural acceptance be? Not only has this genre gained the official stamp of approval of teachers, but also more kids are being exposed to comics than would have been otherwise. In recent decades only a relatively small percentage of adolescents has actively read comic books, but now that they’re being introduced into the classroom, a whole generation is growing up accepting this genre as normal and acceptable reading fare.

### *Comics’ Cultural Influence*

Yet another indicator of comics moving into the mainstream is its impact on other popular media. At present the vast majority of adults do not read graphic novels; but of those adults who watch movies, they have most certainly seen one based upon a comic book or graphic novel, whether they’re aware of it or not. The most obvious examples of this are the superhero and horror genres—such movies as *30 Days of Night*, *Alien vs. Predator*, *Batman*, *Blade*, *Bulletproof Monk*, *Constantine*, *The Crow*, *Daredevil*, *Fantastic Four*, *Ghost Rider*, *Hellboy*, *The*

*Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Spider-Man, The Spirit, Superman, Watchmen, and X-Men.* Superhero movies in the last couple of years have been coming fast—and—furious—they’ve been extremely popular so far, but like most popular trends in Hollywood, it’s not letting up until it has reached the saturation point. Entertainment executives only hope that they get their product out *before* that point. Coming down the pipeline, if you’re not sick of superhero movies yet, you can look forward to the following: *Ant-Man, Avengers, Captain America, Deathlok, The Flash, Green Lantern, Hack/Slash, The Haunted World of El Superbeasto, Iron Man 2, Madman, Magneto, Nick Fury, Punisher, Red Sonja, Ronin, Shazam!, Spawn 2, Spider-Man 4, Superman, Teen Titans, Thor, Whiteout, The Witchblade, Wolverine,* and *Wonder Woman.*

But, as wildly popular as these have been so far, the target audience is still only a portion of adults who regularly watch movies. I’m guessing, though, that many people have no idea that the following movies had their start in comics: *Road to Perdition, 300, Sin City, A History of Violence, From Hell, Ghost World, Men in Black, The Mask, Art School Confidential, V for Vendetta.* So, there’s a good chance that many adults have had a brush with comics, even if they’re not aware of it. None of this says anything about the quality of stories of comics, but it does speak to their cultural influence and their ability for generating *popular* stories.

While the crossover between movies and comics is an obvious one, there are even connections between graphic novels and traditional novels. Publishers have caught on that this is a growing segment of their industry and they are looking for worthwhile stories to help boost their struggling bottom lines. And another approach is that “some trade publishers are using graphic novels as a springboard for prose novels” (Weiner 61). Just as comics has inspired

movies, it is inspiring novels in the same way—if a story has proven successful in one genre, why not present in another one as well?

And yet another development is found in the work of writers like Jodi Picoult and her novel *The Tenth Circle* that actually incorporates comics into the story; one of the characters likes to create comics, so we get to read portions of the graphic novel that has stories that parallel the events in the rest of the novel. Zadie Smith contributed to and edited *The Book of Other People*; she invited twenty-three contributors, including Clowes and Ware, to submit a character that they made up for this project; other contributors include Edwidge Danticat, Nick Hornby, Dave Eggers, David Mitchell, and A. M. Homes. Writers of prose novels are experimenting with graphic forms of narrative as well. Alex Garland initially wrote and drew his novel, *The Beach*, as a sixty-two-page graphic novel before writing it in prose. Jonathan Lethem, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, wrote a series of comics books on a Marvel superhero that he enjoyed as a child: *Omega: The Unknown*.

By looking at these numerous, diverse examples, it is evident that comics is having a greater impact than it ever has before. Comics presently has unprecedented cultural influence, an unparalleled level of respect, and never before has there been so much top-quality work—there is a veritable flood of great works and new creators coming forward all the time. Heidi MacDonald reports on this topic for *Publishers Weekly*, and she writes, “I’ve been covering comics for 20 years, and I’ve never seen anything like the energy around this there is now” (Dominus). And although mainstream American might not yet be rushing out to grab the most recent publication of Adrian Tomine or Alison Bechdel, Andrew D. Arnold confidently asserts that the “debate over comics’ qualifications as art has been crushed, like an icky spider, under a pile of masterful books. . . . comic art can carry as much truth, beauty, mystery, emotion, and

smart entertainment as any of the other, more traditional, media of expression” (“Comix” 12). And I’m confident that it is only a very short amount of time before comics enjoys widespread acceptance, much more like that found in countries like France and Japan.

*The Contributions of Chris Ware*

By its nature comics is a sophisticated hybrid of visual and verbal means of communication—a complexity that is almost always underestimated. This aspect of integration, however, is greatly heightened in the work of Chris Ware—and, in fact, it is a useful rubric for examining his work. For example, not only does he conjoin words and images, but in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* he also utilizes an interesting variety of visual styles. His “visual style” isn’t just one thing, but rather a complex mixture of many different—seemingly discordant—elements. Although relying mostly upon cartooning, for instance, Ware also uses a more detailed drawing style to distinguish past from present, or iconographic from realist characterization. In a flashback we find out that William Corrigan intentionally shot off one of his fingers while fighting in the Civil War. The soldiers are drawn with great detail and each and every leaf on the trees is carefully articulated, which is unlike most of the rest of the book. Although both cartooning and drawing are present, the contrast is not something that most readers would consciously focus upon and recognize. But even if they aren’t fully cognizant of this shift, however, it will nonetheless communicate a change in tone, even subconsciously.

Another visual stylistic blend is Ware’s use of color: he presents the past with emotional depth through warm and rich colors—it is a visually beautiful environment. The present, by contrast—the storyline of the 1980s—uses flat, drab, acerbic colors. While abuse and neglect are present in both the 1890s and the 1980s, the past has a nobility and craftsmanship—evident in the drawing style and color palette—that are missing in the late twentieth century. Ware uses

color to immediately set an emotional tone—even before one has had time to begin reading the story; visual elements have an instantaneity that is simply not possible through written words, which require more time to process. To a greater degree than most other comics creators, Ware integrates different artistic styles and hues in order to create distinctive emotional tones.

Despite the differences in visual styles, in *Jimmy Corrigan* the past and present *are* connected, which is another element of amalgamation in Ware's work. His story clearly shows how the past continues to have an impact upon present events, and Jimmy has some sort of psychic or emotional link into the past with his grandfather, James Corrigan, whom he has never met. Throughout this graphic novel the past and present are connected in parallel events, like Jimmy's leg injury that is similar to that of his great-grandfather. Past and present are also connected through visual imagery such as the lantern in the 1890s that looks just like the head of the robot that Jimmy sometimes imagines himself to be. Also, the two plots are tied together by recurring images such as birds, peaches, and horses. And, finally, past and present are linked through characters: fathers who are neglectful, red-haired girls, and African-American women. Ware places a great deal of emphasis upon the connection between present circumstances and past events.

Another, related example of integration is the interconnectedness of childhood and adulthood. Although we tend to view these stages as distinct periods of development, Ware highlights the manner in which they are blended. Jimmy's timidity as a thirty-something-year-old man is the timidity of a child who feels overwhelmed and out of place. But even for the characters who have overcome the trauma of their childhoods, like Jimmy's grandfather James, their outlook is largely shaped by the events they experienced as children. And for Jimmy, it's his *problems* that have been shaped by his experiences as a child. Jimmy, of course, isn't the



“Smartest Kid on Earth.” The subtitle reflects the dark humor of this story, it “refers to the illusion that ingenuity—smartness—could help Ware’s protagonist transcend the structures of his crippling psychic development” (Prager 198).

A final example of hybridity in *Jimmy Corrigan* is Ware’s use of both realist and Gothic elements. These are two different narrative modes that, for the most part, have entirely different goals and strategies. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, elements of both are clearly evident. Ware hasn’t set out to tell a Gothic tale or to write with realist styles in mind, but as someone immersed in the milieu of hybridity he has intuitively adopted and adapted whichever means he has seen fit, regardless of generic associations. I stated this earlier, but no one picking up this graphic novel would immediately recognize the Gothic characteristics that become evident with closer scrutiny and a little thought and reflection. Rather than an either/or genre, comics is both/and. And this is especially true of the work of Chris Ware. True to the nature of comics his stories reflect a natural tendency toward pastiche and assimilation. The result isn’t just cumulative in an arithmetic sense—cartooning *plus* drawing, past *plus* present—it is exponential. Ware blends all of these many elements into an organic whole that creates a synergistic narrative experience. We are processing words with pictures, different visual styles, Gothic elements that complement realist aspects—all of which produce an encounter that is truly unique and defies simple categorization.

The genius of Chris Ware, in part, comes from his interest in and understanding of *past* accomplishments of comics. One might even say that the nature of much of his own work is somewhat archaeologuesque: he’s interested in a reclamation of the past. But rather than merely excavating the achievements of a long-dead and defunct form for the sake of history, Ware is also fortifying comics in the present so that it might flourish and be preserved for future

generations. In the 1920s and 1930s comics wasn't yet bound by rules or expectations; it was still a burgeoning, exploratory, avant-garde genre. These creators "had the rare kind of artistic freedom that comes from a total lack of rules or precedent. As a result, some of the wildest feats of artistic imagination in the history of the medium occurred at its inception" (Arnold, "Comix" 12). Ware has tapped into these achievements, employed them in his own work, and also used them to further his own thinking about the potential of the genre. He certainly isn't the only one doing amazing things in comics, but Ware very well might be the one best demonstrating the capability of this genre—he expands it, deepens it, enriches it. Critics have said that Ware has



Figure 34. Chris Ware: self-portrait.

"more in common with the high modernism of Kafka than with 'Beetle Bailey' or 'The X-Men'" —describing his style as a "visual stream of consciousness" (Prager 195).

I always think of these figures as being at the forefront of leading artists—Alison Bechdel, Adrian Tomide, Marjane Satrapi, Chris Ware, David B., Charles Burns. Douglas Wolk, however, points out that those who are currently recognized and celebrated "are comics' old guard at this point" (365). So, while my topic in this dissertation is probably still considered

cutting-edge in the English department, I'm actually a step or two behind in terms of developments in comics. While Chris Ware is continuing to write and to further his own ideas about the nature of comics, he is also the "old guard"—someone who both introduces new ideas but also inspires the new generation of writers with his past work. And, making this dynamic even more complex and interesting, much of Ware's work is committed to re-introducing early-twentieth-century concepts and practices that have been lost and forgotten. How many people in any field do work that is both preservation *and* innovation? He is helping to restore much of comics' former glory for a new generation of writers as well as readers. Ware is one of those largely responsible for the level of excellence in comics today and its new-found position of respect and appreciation.

*The Future of Comics: Shifting Attitudes*

Although Chris Ware is one of the most brilliant innovators today, there are scores of other creators who have only recently come forward in the last several years. The phrase "Golden Age," as used by comic book aficionados, typically refers to a period that began with the first appearance of Superman in 1938 and lasted through the late 1940s or early 1950s. These years were marked by a sharp increase in the popularity of comics and the general optimism and enthusiasm that marked the post-War era. Since this time, so the generalization tends to go, comics has never been quite so popular nor so exuberantly embraced. This valuation of comics' history is beginning to be reconsidered, however. Les Daniels, in his exceptional history of American comics books written in 1971, had already challenged certain tenets of this idea: "This was, admittedly, the era in which many of the most famous characters and creators got their start; it was the time when comic books came into their own. But it was also a period which began with crude drawing and somewhat simple-minded scripting, a period sustained more by the

excitement of novelty than by excellence of performance” (ix). He goes on to say that “the most remarkable thing about the era, really is the speed with which the level of performance was raised,” but that much of the work being produced at this time was derivative (Daniels x). More recently, Douglas Wolk has argued against the glowing characterization of a “Golden Age” as well, but for a very different reason: “there are a lot more comics in print that reward close attention than there have ever been before. . . . The best part is that it looks like the Golden Age is only beginning” (10).

Instead of lamenting about the “good ol’ days,” critics and commentators are beginning to recognize that comics is, actually, moving on to even greater heights than in the past. This is not unlike the realization that took place during the Renaissance when scholars began to reevaluate their own accomplishments; for centuries prior to the fifteenth century the authority of the past held sway over the present, like a standard that would never again be achieved by humanity. One of the characteristics of the Modern era was the realization that contemporary achievements had surpassed those of the ancients. In a similar manner comics has finally begun to outstrip its triumphs of past decades. If anything is surprising, it’s the fact that it took comics so long to achieve such broad acceptance and recognition. Writing in 1924, Gilber Selde in his book *The Seven Lively Arts* calls comics “the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day” (qtd. in Arnold, “Comix” 13).

But there *are* clear indications that comics is being taken more seriously by more people than ever before. One dubious distinction is an event that brought graphic novels into the national spotlight in fall of 2006: the city council of Marshall, Missouri met to consider removing *Fun Home* and *Blankets* from the public library. The woman who brought the initial complaint asked, “Does this community want our public library to continue to use tax dollars to

purchase pornography?” (Sims). Both books do contain images of nudity, and Alison Bechdel does depict sex between two women; however, does the sex act itself constitute pornography? How many other novels in the Marshall public library graphically depict sex? When asked how she felt about her work being at the center of this controversy, Bechdel responded, “My first reaction is, What a great honor! My second reaction is, it’s a very interesting situation, and it’s all about the power of images, which I think is something people need to talk about” (qtd. in Emmert). If graphic novels have come to be perceived to be a greater threat, then maybe that means that comics is seen to have greater value, a greater impact upon society.

Another encouraging sign is that academics are increasingly paying attention to comics. Although English departments have been largely resistant to adopting graphic novels into their curricula alongside fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* recently published an article by Hillary Chute: “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative.” She argues that comics deserve a place at the table, that they deserve more attention than they’ve received in the past. Chute writes that comics has expanded upon the “formal inventions of fiction,” and that “graphic narrative opens up some of the most pressing questions put to literature today” (462). But while English departments have been hesitant, history departments were very quick to use Art Spiegelman’s work in *Maus* to help their students to think about the Second World War and its aftermath. And with the powerful narratives that are being produced at present, it’s only a matter of time before graphic novels are being utilized in more and more corners of Academia.

### *The Future of Comics: New Technology*

One of the most-discussed developments, not surprisingly, is what impact computers and the internet will have on this genre. Comics would seem to be well suited for the internet since

both rely so heavily upon a striking visual presence. But what is so innovative about reading a graphic novel or a prose novel on a computer screen? Easy-to-use software like Flash certainly makes it possible to add motion or sound to panels, but this also turns the experience into something distinctly other than comics. What, then, *can* computer technology add to comics, if anything?

Probably one of the first people to come out and offer an opinion on this topic was, again not surprisingly, Scott McCloud. The follow-up to *Understanding Comics* is *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, published in 2000. McCloud forecasts many developments that have already come to pass in the last nine years. In terms of how technology impacts comics as an object, he points out that the “page is an artifact of print, no more intrinsic to comics than staples or india ink” (*Reinventing* 222). Comics no longer need equal square panels contained by a rectangular space. In thinking about the potential for comics in a digital environment, McCloud states that comics has the limitless space of an “infinite canvas.” A comics story might be arranged in a vertical line or a circle, or it might *be* a large square—one made up of tens of thousands of panels that is so large it is unreadable unless one is close enough so that the shape of the whole becomes indiscernible (McCloud, *Reinventing* 223–5).

Another place to look in an effort to find an answer is the group ACT–I–VATE, a collective of comics creators who produce their works on the internet. They got their start in early 2006. ACT–I–VATE was founded by a handful of comics creators who invited others to share their work in this public environment. Here is what they have to say about themselves on their website:

ACT-I-VATE's select artists produce their work without editorial oversight and offer their comix for free to an ever-growing audience of loyal readers. In addition to these high-quality comix, ACT-I-VATE is known for having lifted the veil between creation, creator, and reader by providing a forum for spirited dialogue between audience and auteur. The new website confirms one of ACT-I-VATE's core tenets: that the artists and writers of the comix community are the optimal providers of intellectual properties and comix content. (ACT-I-VATE)

So, maybe it's not so much about the form or experience of comics that is altered by the internet, but freedom of expression. Comics creators are able to bypass editors, executives, designers, and advertisers; they have complete autonomy to present their ideas *their* way. One of the complaints of comic book creators, dating back to the 1960s, is the assembly-line production process adopted by Marvel and DC. In addition to greater independence, the internet allows for easy, open communication; as their site points out, ACT-I-VATE is well known for providing the opportunity for lengthy, in-depth discussions between readers and writers. This sense of community is possible because of computer technology and has been unprecedented in the past.

Yet another perspective on the relationship between comics and computers is that of Chris Ware; in an interview several years ago he was asked to reflect and respond to this topic. Not surprisingly to those who know anything about Ware, he's pretty much a full-fledged, militant Luddite. He stated that while computers might make access to comics more convenient, he prefers "the compact, humble tragedy of a book, and the fact that all one needs is a moderately well-functioning pair of eyes to make it come alive" (Pera). Ware has no interest in the technological possibilities offered by computers; instead, his interest lies in the expressive possibilities of images—how one can tell stories with pictures, the types of things that images

can be made to communicate. “If anything, the visual language of the comic strip is what needs attention, not its distribution system” (Ware qtd. in Pera). Ware finds the idea of “football field-sized digital comics, which would then ostensibly be viewed through the cut-out facemask of a browser window” to be meaningless, absurd (Pera).

And although there are certainly many who would deride Ware’s animosity toward technology, he seems to have hit upon an underlying truth, even if it is unspoken or even unconscious within the comics community. Although the internet has been pretty widely available for at least fifteen years, what can one point to as evidence of its impact on comics? Wolk astutely comments that “despite early predictions that online cartoonists would change the format of their work along with its medium, not a lot of cartoonists have made particularly clever use of the ‘infinite canvas’” (366).

The trick is going to be finding a balance between ingeniously utilizing the capability of computer technology while still maintaining the integrity of the comics genre, because when one adds sound and motion the product of these additions seems to become something *other* than comics. But is this necessarily true? Why can’t one read a comic that has a soundtrack that changes as one moves through the story? Although I am personally uncomfortable with the thought of this development, comics has survived through its malleability—its ability to adapt to changing audiences, expectations, times. Or maybe comics will come to have textual links to sites like Wikipedia that will explain background information; or a graphic novel or on-going series might even have its own dedicated wiki with thousands of individual articles for that one title. Does hypertext conflict with the basic nature of comics? Why can’t comics adapt to the twenty-first-century reading experience described by Carr above? Why *shouldn’t* it?



So, by all evidence of what *isn't* happening with comics and computers, technology isn't really *the* important aspect right now, but that will almost certainly change in the future. The primary contributions—so far at least—are the convenience of access to comics, and the sense of community that is growing through the efforts of groups like ACT-I-VATE. An adjustment to the technological environment will almost certainly come in the future—it only requires the right person to discover the right adaptation that makes comics even more appealing to the next generation.

*The Future of Comics: New Paths of Progress*

My subtitle here is mostly misleading. As I've stated before, comics is developing so rapidly and there's such extensive innovation that it's impossible to get much of a handle on where this genre is going in regard to its formal development. Wolk corroborates this view; he writes that "there are so many emerging cartoonists who don't fit into any particular paradigm or are taking ideas from the artists who've inspired them in wildly different directions" (371). It's difficult to really grasp what is happening right now, at this moment—much less to try to assess or analyze developments—much less to pretend to prophesy what the future has in store.

Wolk, however, does describe two different aesthetic camps into which newer artists seem to be coalescing, what he calls the "smooth wave" and the "rough wave." The former is made up of cartoonists who adopt a "self-consciously pretty style" (Wolk 369). This probably describes most comic books, manga, or graphic novels that you're likely to pick up in a book store because the smooth wave has a much broader appeal. By the "rough wave" Wolk means artists whose styles are challenging, unappealing, and have an unskilled look about them. He describes it as "the anti-Hollywood narrative, anti-representational, labor-intensive, make-it-

nasty tendencies of contemporary visual art. . . . the first generation of cartoonists to migrate to comics from the fine art world” (Wolk 367).

Many comics artists rely upon visual appeal to attract and keep a reader; people are more likely to keep reading something that they find attractive and easy to process. This newest generation, however, takes something of an elitist stance like the Modernists who created novels and poems and paintings with a greater degree of complexity. One example is the work of Brian Chippendale (fig. 35). His works are challenging. Visually they are dense and crowded, so that

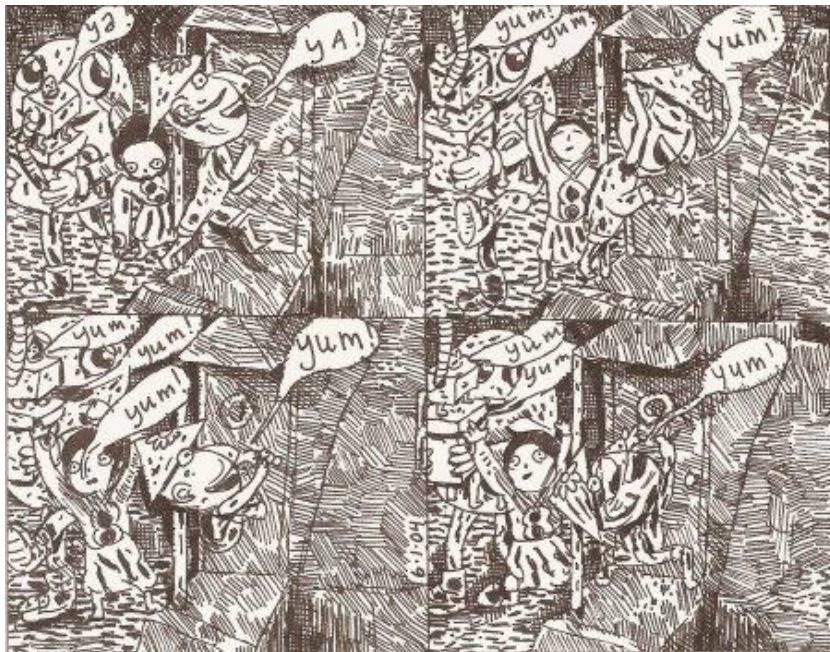


Figure 35. An example of “rough wave” comics from Brian Chippendale’s *Ninja*.

it’s difficult even to make sense of what you’re looking at. On a typical page Chippendale will include fifty panels, five columns of ten rows each, which, especially coupled with his visual style, would be confusing and overwhelming to the average reader. But even furthering the degree of complexity is the fact that Chippendale’s pages are often read in a snake-like pattern of left-to-right in one row and then right-to-left in the next, in addition to rough wave “storytelling techniques that hurl conventional plot dynamics out the window” (Wolk 367).



both comics and music I believe that these tendencies are a rejection of mainstream, pop styles that, once they become popular, become overused and overplayed *ad nauseum*.

Above I have been describing comics as an avant-garde genre, but these rough-wave writers are the true avant-garde within the comics community. They are producing brilliant new works, but they are primarily being read by only the most well versed, committed of fans—a small segment of an already small minority. And even though this might be apparent already, I also want to be clear in pointing out that these two “camps” described by Wolk are not absolute categories by any means. Many writers fall at various points along the continuum of these two styles. David B., Baru, and Lynda Barry, for instance, all incorporate rough-wave elements into their work, although I certainly am not comfortable positioning them next to someone like Chippendale or Bell.

### *The Future of Comics: Cultural Expansion*

If the future of this genre’s formal developments presents a problem of prognostication, there *is* one thing that I am comfortable in predicting: comics’ future is going to be a bright one. After the explosion and success of the 1980s “it was even suggested that the graphic novel might be the next stage in the evolution of literature, and could take over from the novel entirely” (Sabin 93). I can recall wondering the same thing myself years ago when I was in high school and was an avid reader of comic books, but it’s hard to imagine anyone holding this view today. In reaction to the recognition that Art Spiegelman and others were receiving, comics fans were given over to hysteria and paroxysms of happiness, which *is* understandable in light of how far comics had come in the popular media. Comics, of course, will never take the place of literature because each is a distinct genre offering a unique artistic experience. In the same way, film never has nor ever will take the place of live theater. But, at the same time, comics still has a good

ways to go in its rise to widespread popular acceptance. Stephen E. Tabachnick writes, “I think text-based books will exist for a long time to come, but I also think that the balance between purely textual books and graphic novels in terms of numbers of readers will continue to shift in favor of graphic novels” (27). Comics fans—and comics publishers even more so—continue to hope and dream of the prospect that the United States might follow the same course as France where one of every five books purchased is a graphic novel, called *bande dessinée* (Weiner 59).

One naturally hesitates as she reads Stephen Weiner comment that “the comics field has no choice but to keep growing and producing works that entertain and educate and, on rare occasions, achieve great art” (Weiner 61). “No choice but to keep growing” is very strong language; but at the same time one can see that comics does seem to have built up a tremendous cultural and economic momentum that, like a hurtling, runaway locomotive, can only be stopped by the likes of Superman himself. It’s hard to imagine how comics can’t keep expanding in its media market share. Dominus offers a similar description of the genre’s prospects: “And whereas some midlist novelists would be disappointed with the sales figures and money the average indie graphic novel brings in right now, for visual artists the future looks brighter rather than darker. Given their new influx in libraries and bookstores, there’s only one direction they could go, and that’s up.”

I really enjoyed a comic strip that friend of mine sent me recently (fig. 37), but even more I reacted with surprise. Of course it is mocking comics snobbery—and, believe me, there’s *a lot* of it out there—but it is also an indication that people are *really* starting to understand the nature of comics, even those outside of the insular comics community. Although one is tempted to adopt a cautious optimism so as not to give way to the earlier hysteria of the 80s, I’m not sure that anyone can disagree with Charles Hatfield’s statement about comics that “its time has finally

come”: “the ‘graphic novel’ has become a kind of totem, enjoying strong presence among publishers, booksellers, librarians, critics, fans—and scholars” (153).

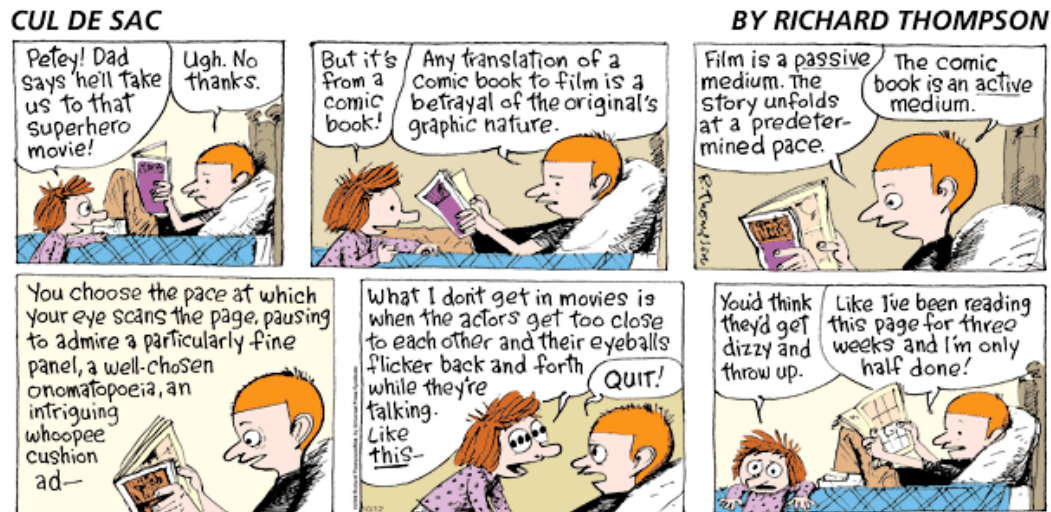


Figure 37. Comic Strip: a surprisingly sophisticated presentation of comics' nature.

Although this is a good and exciting time for comics, Michael Chabon offers a word of caution. His novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Klay*, a story about two comics creators in the 1930s, won the 2001 Pulitzer for fiction. He is worried that comics, now that it has achieved a position of prominence and is dressing itself up for all sorts of black-tie events, will forget its humble origins and neglect those who sustained it through the decades when it wasn't the “popular kid” getting invited to clubs and fancy soirées. Comics shouldn't turn itself into something that it isn't; just as comics is a hybrid genre and specializes in the both/and approach, it can simultaneously be both high art and continue as pulp entertainment. At a comic book convention Chabon leveled an accusation saying, “Children did not abandon comics; comics, in their drive to attain respect and artistic accomplishment, abandoned children” (qtd. in Gravett 184).

And let's be clear: it's not even so much that comics “owes” something to its original fan base, but it's also a very practical matter of future survival. Comics is entering among the cultural *nouveaux riches* who oftentimes forget who and what they really are, thereby losing all

that they had gained. Comics is in a very competitive environment when it comes to kids, with video games and cable channels that provide a similar type of entertainment around the clock. With so much available it easily possible for kids to reach a saturation point and not take any interest in yet another form of amusement that doesn't even have sound effects. In his book on comic book culture in the U.S., Bradford W. Wright offers a sobering perspective: "With so many appealing avenues for young people to indulge their angst and fantasies, the comic book industry has never faced more formidable competition" (284).

Furthermore, the genre itself has inherent challenges. Hatfield describes the difficulties in producing a graphic novel without first publishing it in serial form; it is a labor-intensive process that can take up to four or five years or more before the final product is complete. This is a difficult obstacle for writers as well as publishers, and it's one reason that many graphic novels *are* first published in a serial fashion. Hatfield goes so far as to say that "the prospects for such books are discouraging, due to the financial constraints that weigh on both authors and publishers" (160). So, although the future looks rosy for comics, there are certainly still concerns and difficulties that lie ahead.

### *The Future of Comics: Criticism*

Another aspect of comics that gives me confidence of its future success is the fact that there are still so many questions that need answers. Besides comics growing as a popular form of entertainment with mainstream America, critics are pumping the bellows that will fan the glowing embers of its nascent success. Now that English departments are finally beginning to embrace the introduction of a new member of the narrative genre, like any blended family there needs to be patience and acceptance of differences. Hatfield offers some important thoughts in the conclusion of his valuable work, *Alternative Comics*:

[A] too-exclusive embrace of the term *graphic novel* risks eliding much of what is interesting in comics history, mystifying the economic relations on which the art form depends, and cheating us of an appreciation for those great comics that do *not* look at all like novels. Future criticism needs to contextualize the graphic novel thoroughly, so as to understand more clearly the achievements of a Gilbert Hernandez or an Art Spiegelman. Critics should also be wary of importing aesthetic standards that cannot appreciate the varied forms that comics have explored, and will continue to explore.

The hopeful yet at times misleading reception of the graphic novel offers an unusually clear example of what may happen when a popular form, in all its repleteness and variety, is repositioned vis-à-vis literary study. . . . importing comics into prevailing canons of literary value, without regard to their special formal characteristics and the specialized circumstances of their making, may mystify their origins and impoverish our appreciation of the medium. (162)

Comics is clearly accomplishing similar goals as prose, but in very different ways. Critics and scholars who don't recognize and come to terms with these differences will only be frustrated. It is frankly hard to imagine comics being accepted as an equal any time in the near future.

Somehow there needs to be a broad reassessment of the nature of narrative genres and maybe a re-shuffling of the academic deck. Although film studies has only recently been considered appropriate subject matter in an English department, comics is a convenient bridge between literature and film, and these two media probably have more commonalities than differences—characterization, theme, plot, flashback, *deux ex machina*—the list goes on. Is it possible for the



barriers between these academic departments to be reconsidered after having been firmly in place for decades?

Postmodernism suggests that artistic categories like popular and elite are not terribly valuable or useful. This issue was explored in the 1960s by artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, and similarly graphic novels demonstrate a “a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself” (Hutcheon 9). Linda Hutcheon goes on to say that “if elitist culture has indeed been fragmented into specialist disciplines, as many have argued, then hybrid novels like these work both to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology, political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature, literary criticism, and so on” (20–1).

Another aspect of comics that has been neglected, surprisingly, is study solely of the verbal language of comics (Bongco 49). Comics *is* a blended genre, but so much attention is paid to the use of images that no one has done an in–depth analysis of its language. There is also a need for a study of the significance and impact of serialization—even on graphic novels that happen to be published this way. This is an issue that has been largely neglected even with such writers as Dickens and Thackeray, but is now being reconsidered. There are sure to be interesting connections between the serialized composition of prose and graphic novels. And although my primary focus here has been on the graphic novel, we must not overlook continued study of comic strips, cartoons, and comic books.

And finally we need much broader studies of writers’ oeuvres, such as Daniel Clowes, Alison Bechdel, and Chris Ware. Of course they are still actively writing, but an analysis of all of Ware’s works up until now will make his future work much easier to assess and contextualize.

He has been writing long enough now that creative shifts are clearly discernible from his work in *RAW*, to early weekly strips in Chicago paper, to *Jimmy Corrigan*, to his “Building Series” in *The New Yorker*, to his current work on *Rusty Brown*. The work I’ve done here has clearly only scratched the surface and no one has yet pulled everything together in a monograph that offers a more comprehensive study up through the present.

Comics is an exciting field not only because of the great new creators that are continually coming forward, but also because there is so much scholarship to be done. The coming decades promise a great deal of challenging work, but also very rewarding insights into the nature of comics and of narrative itself.

## END NOTES

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> A standard practice, following Scott McCloud's lead, seems to be developing—that is, to treat the term *comics*, when referring to the genre, as a singular noun. In much the same way one might say, “grits is a dish frequently found in the South.”

<sup>2</sup> “Interpreting a painting, then, like Andrew Wyeth's famous work *Christine's World*, is much like interpreting fiction. The painting acts as a text that, like a short story, is a complete invention and whose meaning is implicit rather than explicit. Therefore ‘reading’ Wyeth's painting should involve the kind of interpretive moves you might employ in reading any literature” (Ballenger 362).

<sup>3</sup> Scholars right now are trying to settle on a mutually agreeable term. Hillary Chute prefers the term *graphic narrative* because *graphic novel* implies fiction (453), and I agree—plus I think that her term is one of the better ones out there. I'm going to use *graphic novel* throughout my discussion, however, because it has the broadest cultural currency at the moment.

<sup>4</sup> Wertham had clearly transgressed the boundaries of his professional competence when he identified comic books as the seemingly sole source of society's ills. There were enough half-truths in his diatribes, however, to convince adults who were largely ignorant of the actual state of the comic book industry (Harvey 42), but members of the psychoanalytic community “attacked him in professional journals for subverting scientific ethics to promote a shaky thesis” (Daniels 87). It's not so easy to just dismiss Wertham as an uptight, out-of-touch crank, however. He has long been demonized by comic book fans and “often libeled as a pop-culture McCarthyite, when he was in fact a progressive scholar who ran a clinic in Harlem, and his research on black children was used in the legal challenges to segregation” (Heer). Jeet Heer cleverly goes on to compare Wertham to comic book villains like Lex Luthor “who start off with good intentions only to become prisoners of their own blind arrogance.”

<sup>5</sup> The book to read for an in-depth analysis—an entire book devoted to this topic—is David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America*.

### Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Carrier's specialization in philosophy is aesthetics and he has written extensively on the work of master painters like Nicholas Poussin.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes believed that the body and soul are distinct, but that they function as one entity—like a hand inside a glove.

<sup>3</sup> Here are just a few of his numerous publications to demonstrate his breadth: “Artistic Merit and Ethnic Literature”; *Charles M. Schulz: Conversations*; “Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship”; *Conversations with William Faulkner*; *Father of the Comic Strip: Rudolphe Topffer* (with David Kunzle); “The Fugitives and the Agrarians: A Clarification”; *Handbook of American Popular Culture*; *The Humor of the Old South* (with Edward J. Piacentino); “Lady Murasaki and the Craft of Fiction”; *Truman Capote: Conversations* (with Truman Capote).

<sup>4</sup> Storyboards don't actually qualify as comics themselves. Apart from one's knowledge of the film upon which it is based, there is not enough detail to distinguish different characters nor to adequately reconstruct the original story. Storyboard artists only need to include enough information so that the primary elements in a shot are apparent, and to indicate the movement of the camera and/or characters.

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Means a unified work of art, made up of different parts or media, that is integrated harmoniously; usually associated with the operatic works of Richard Wagner or Baroque architecture that combines design features with painting and sculpture.

<sup>2</sup> I'm using this term, *naturalism*, in its artistic sense. In the sixth century BC the Greeks had mastered sculptural realism, rendering the human body in proper proportions and accurate detail. In the fifth century, however, the Classical period, they surpassed this achievement and not only captured an accurate likeness, but the behavior of the human body as well; people were now depicted standing in a contrapposto stance—with more weight shifted one leg than the other. The next time that you're waiting in a long line, notice how people will do this: transfer their weight from one leg to the other, causing that hip to rise a little higher than the one "at rest." Naturalism, then, refers to an accurate, faithful, lifelike representation.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Ware does not number the pages of *Jimmy Corrigan*. There is one page number reference in the book, however: the instructions for a cut-out, paper construction of Great-great-grandmother Corrigan's house label those two pages as numbers 206–207.

<sup>4</sup> Kannenberg borrows the term from *The Page as a Stage Set* by Amy Spaulding, who adapted it from Roland Barthes.

<sup>5</sup> Back 100 pages earlier, on p.250, we learned that young James Corrigan, while taking the trash out on a snowy, February evening, unexpectedly met his "grandmother's old maid, the one whom my father had fired some months before." He notices that she seems to have a bundle hidden beneath her coat, but he's too young to suspect the truth, and a first-time reader might not pause to wonder about this detail.

### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> This "bid for acceptance" was acknowledged and granted, albeit somewhat ambivalently, when Spiegelman was granted a special Pulitzer for his work in both volumes of *Maus*. Many in the comics community took exception to the fact that he was awarded a "special" Pulitzer and not one for literature.

<sup>2</sup> *Fun Home* generated controversy in one Missouri town over whether to include it in the public library. In October of 2006 a patron in Marshall objected to this work as well as *Blankets*, by Craig Thompson, saying that they are pornographic and inappropriate for children. Although Marshall is a small town, the story gained national attention due to the positive critical reception of *Fun Home*.

### Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> And this coming from David Punter, whose *The Literature of Terror* (1980) was one of the most influential works in establishing the credibility of Gothic; it rejected "the assumption that Gothic is nothing more than escapism" (Hughes 19).

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion on how Gothic isn't just one category of ideas, but expands to include other, related, ideas, see Anne Williams' explanation of George Lakoff's concept of "chaining." While some ideas might be associated with Gothic because they are "'basic,' more authentically belonging to the group than others," these "central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on" (Lakoff qtd. in Williams 18).

<sup>3</sup> Anxiety isn't the quintessential ingredient, of course; Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a memoir about his experience of 9/11, but it certainly doesn't qualify as Gothic; and

while Craig Thompson's *Blankets* is an exploration of family dysfunction as well as his anxiety growing up as a kid, it also lacks many other key elements in order to identify it as Gothic.

<sup>4</sup> I also suspect that Ware is alluding to Oedipus, since as a baby his ankles are pinned together and it is prophesied that he will kill his father. While Jimmy doesn't actually kill his father, he does bring about his death as a result of his visit.

<sup>5</sup> *From Hell* is divided into sixteen parts, in each of which the pagination begins anew; so, the first number represents the chapter, while the second indicates the page.

<sup>6</sup> Since this was originally published as twelve separate comic books, from 1995–2004, there is no pagination whatsoever. I began my numbering with the first page following the full title page, which carries the first image.

<sup>7</sup> Maybe at some level this motif of Gothic is a Marxist warning against oppressing people too far, too long.

<sup>8</sup> See comment in endnote 5—the same numbering applies here.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as the Erinyes or Eumenides; these goddesses were responsible for, among other things, exacting revenge on those who had shed the blood of a family member. They seem to represent a principle similar to that of karma.

<sup>10</sup> Jimmy, in fact, is even less aware of his development than is Morpheus; he never has a moment of *anagnorisis*—discovery or recognition of who he is or what he is. I found this puzzling until I realized that Jimmy is rescued from his doom, he isn't a tragic hero as is Morpheus.

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