Pedagogy of Graphic Novels

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PEDAGOGY OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

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Master of Arts

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Valarie L Phelps

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# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......................................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF IMAGES ................................................................................................................................. vi

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. vii

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER I ........................................................................................................................................... 8

Evolution of Graphic Text .................................................................................................................. 8

CHAPTER III ......................................................................................................................................... 14

Literacy Issues .................................................................................................................................. 14

Change in the Millennial Classroom ................................................................................................. 17

Modern Public Education and Literacy ............................................................................................ 18

The Turn of the Twentieth Century .................................................................................................. 22

The Millennial Generation .................................................................................................................. 24

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 28

CHAPTER IV ......................................................................................................................................... 30

Graphic Novels and Plays .................................................................................................................. 30

Criteria for Using Graphic Novels in a Classroom .......................................................................... 35

Romeo and Juliet by Pocket Classics ................................................................................................. 37

Presenting Original Text .................................................................................................................... 37

Use of Images ..................................................................................................................................... 39

Supplemental Material ......................................................................................................................... 41

Romeo and Juliet by Classics Illustrated ............................................................................................ 42

Presenting Original Text .................................................................................................................... 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Romeo and Juliet</em> by Pocket Classics</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Romeo and Juliet</em> by Classics Illustrated</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Romeo and Juliet</em> by Sparks Notes</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Maus</em> by Art Spiegelman</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Fun Home</em> by Alison Bechdel</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PEDAGOGY OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

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Abstract

Graphic texts, or graphic novels, have spent many years on shelves with comic books about superheroes and adventurers. They officially gained notoriety in 1992 with Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and at this time, critics and scholars began to take notice. However, graphic novels have not been fully adapted by academia. Graphic novels have the ability to offer new levels of instruction and learning in upper-level classrooms.

The following is a study in the multitude of uses of graphic text in academia. Chapter 1 looks at the history of graphic text to understand the present and future of graphic novels. Chapter 2 focuses on literacy issues to develop a basis for the use of graphic novels in the classroom. Chapter 3 offers a method of using graphic novels to broaden a students’ understanding of plays. Chapter 4 moves on to a study of graphic novels as works of literature. Through this look of historical data and an analysis and discussion of the modern form of graphic novels, we will come to the conclusion that graphic novels can be useful assets in the classroom when they are taken from the shelf of comic books and used to their full potential.
INTRODUCTION

“You don’t have to burn books to destroy culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

Ray Bradbury

I was first introduced to graphic novels as an English undergraduate at Western Kentucky University, and at that time, I fell in love with them. I had an interest in art, along with a minor in Art History, and through graphic novels, I saw a merging of the two forms, English literature and art. Between my undergraduate and graduate studies, I noticed further uses for graphic novels, and this came from my own daughter being a senior in high school and struggling with the literature assigned. She is a part of the Millennial generation, and she has never been in a classroom that did not have computers, beginning in her preschool classroom. In addition, as I think back, my daughter was a reluctant reader from an early age, stating that reading did not keep her interest; this issue was solved with Japanese anime not dubbed but subtitled. She and her generation have been constantly stimulated with images in every aspect of their lives and they are not relating to academia as their predecessors did. This is where I first saw the potential of graphic novels to improve this generation’s growing literacy decline.

The medium of graphic novels is still fairly new, so scholarship is limited, specifically for graphic novels, but not for comics; scholarship also is scattered among multiple disciplines—literary studies, library studies, film studies, rhetorical studies, for instance. I came across this distribution while doing research for the keyword “graphic novels” and eventually had to expand into scholarship on comics, comic strips, and even comic books. I have learned that it is not that graphic novels are a taboo subject but a subject that is still in the naming stages. Many people have given their definition of a
graphic novel such as Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, and Gretchen Schwarz, each definitions having a similar root but varying branches. Will Eisner, the man who first used the term graphic novel, prefers the term “sequential narrative.” Scott McCloud uses the terms “graphic novel” and “comic” interchangeably. Gretchen Schwarz, a graphic novel scholar, uses “graphic novel” because she perceives there is not a better term to use.

When graphic text was first viewed as a medium that could get reluctant readers to pick up something to read, it was attacked. In the 1950s and 1960s, when comic books were becoming popular, psychologist and academic Fredrick Wertham claimed that comics were going to destroy reading. In 1954, he published *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he argues that comics are part of the reason that children are not reading, and children who read comics are actually only spending their time looking at pictures: “they are book-worms without books” (Jacobs 19). His viewpoint comes from the comic book form being in its early stages, only coming into existence in the 1930s, and the focus of the stories being hero or adventure tales. Comics were not created to be canonical work but were created to be entertaining and comics got children comfortable enough to pick up something book-like. Fredrick Wertham is not the only author out there who has attacked graphic text. Douglas Wolk wrote the book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* in 2008. When I came across this book, I thought it would be a one of my biggest supports in arguing that graphic novels do belong in an academic classroom, but I was wrong. Douglas Wolk starts off stating that even though comics have matured, they are still not anything to use for academia. His work is similar to Wertham’s in that it is completely one sided. Wolk even says that the only distinction
between comics and graphic novels is “just a case of snobbery (in the sense of wanting to make a distinction between one’s own taste and the rabble’s taste)” (12-13). Ideas like Douglas Wolk’s are close-minded to this new medium, and this attitude is what I will argue needs to change.

When Will Eisner first used the term graphic novel, “A Contract With God a graphic novel by Will Eisner,” he, as a comic book writer, saw a new medium and realized it was something beyond the comic books that were and are being created—something more advanced. Since Will Eisner, there have been many others who have followed suit and are working on changing the public view of graphic novels. Will Eisner and Scott McCloud are the leading names in books that instruct what a graphic novel is and how to create one, and through creation, one also learns analytical skills. Will Eisner has written such books as Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative and Comics and Sequential Art. Scott McCloud has published Understanding Comics and Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels. There are also journals, sometimes covering a broad spectrum of disciplines, that are publishing original scholarship on graphic novels, and there are up and coming scholars on graphic novels. Journals such as Modern Fiction Studies (MFS) have published entire editions (Winter 2006) based on graphic novel scholarship; Journal of Modern Literature (Summer 2009) and Women’s Studies Quarterly (Spring/Summer 2008) have published individual scholarship on Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home; Biography (Winter 2008) published the article “Self-Regarding Art,” which discussed artistic and biographic scholarship of Fun Home, Maus, and other graphic novel biographies; and The Journal of Popular Culture
(February 2011) published scholarship on the medium of graphic novels. These are only a
limited few who have discussed the form, the writing, or the art—or a combination of all.

There is also scholarship focused on the applications of graphic text on improving
literacy and teaching writing skills. In the area of literacy, scholars such as Gretchen
Schwarz and Maryann Mori, have discussed ways to improve literacy skills in students—
high school and beyond; Gretchen Schwarz and Dale Jacobs discuss the use of graphic
text to improve the literacy skills in English language learners. Rocco Versaci in The
English Journal (2001) discusses the literary merit of comic books. There are also
specialists such as Mark Crilley who discuss using graphic novels to improve writing
skills—Getting Students to Write Using Comics. Graphic text’s multitude of uses in the
classroom is beginning to be noticed.

There is also published information offering a sample of graphic novels to use
with students and some instructional material to help the instructors know how to teach
with graphic text. Phillip Crawford in Library Media Connection discusses using graphic
novels in schools and then offers some suggestions on titles to attract reluctant readers.
Elizabeth Thoman, a contributor to the website Center for Media Literacy
(www.medialit.org), discusses a method for conducting analysis on graphic text. Michael
Bitz writes in the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy about how to conduct a
workshop for instructors on how to teach graphic texts to students. A selection of the
texts that have specific focus on graphic text are “Graphic Novels: The Good, the Bad,
and the Ugly” by Jacquelyn McTaggart and “The Graphic Novel: Writing as Close
Focus” by Kevin Haworth. In “Bringing Comic Books to Class,” George Dardess reviews
and evaluates the usability of books published by Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Roger
Sabin, and David Kunzle. Katherine T. Bucher and M. Lee Manning, in *The Clearing House* (2004), focus on the middle and secondary classrooms and offer suggestions about types of graphic novels and reasons to use them.

There are texts that do not discuss graphic novels specifically but do give instructions on how to conduct a rhetorical analysis on visuals and/or graphic text. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* by Barry Brummett has the chapter “Visual Rhetorical Criticism,” and *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Text* by Deana D. Sellnow has the chapter “A Visual Perspective: Visual Perspective Theory.” Rachel Marie-Crain Williams in *Art Education* (2008) articulates the ties between graphic novels and art, and she uses her own experiences teaching graphic novels to students to do this. These works show the expansiveness and adaptability of graphic texts.

Others have also published pedagogical studies of graphic text in the classroom through collaboration with the library. Elizabeth Downey in *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (2009) focuses on how libraries can build their graphic novel databases to help K-12 teachers’ abilities to incorporate graphic novels into the curriculum. Terry Thompson in *Library Media Connection* (2007) examines how school libraries can help get graphic novels into classrooms. With cooperation from multi-disciplines, the acceptance of graphic novels into academic classrooms should be forthcoming.

Lastly, there are other scholars who focus on graphic novels being used in specific areas such as English as second language, language arts, and specific literary study classrooms. Christian W. Chun in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (2009) considers graphic novels an asset to teaching English language learners. Katie Monnin
(2009) discusses a focus on literary heroines in graphic novels and using this focus to teach secondary English language arts classes. Marion D. Perret in *College Literature* (2004) specifically focuses on comic books of Shakespeare—mainly *Hamlet* and *Othello*, and Sharon A. Beehler in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1990) discusses the uses of graphic novels to help students relate to Shakespearean words in order to expand students’ cultural experience. Scholarship on the pedagogy of graphic novels is expanding and developing as quickly as the medium is growing. There are multifaceted areas that recognize how valuable graphic text can be in the classroom.

Even with the booming studies and criticism on graphic novels, they are still not widely accepted or incorporated into academic curricula. Graphic novels are still thought of by instructors as “too easy to read” and sometimes still “blamed for a multitude of sins from illiteracy to delinquency” because those are the historical views of comics (Thompson 29). Some other academics see graphic novels as “recreational reading for busy college students or … [that] children are expected to ‘grow out of [visual text]’ and start reading ‘real books’” (Downey 181). Graphic novels are not just another simple form of comic books, and many of the story lines are focused toward advanced adult readers, so graphic novels are the real books these children should be expected to grow into.

Thus, I present the question I asked myself when I initially began this project. Can graphic novels, or graphic text, be a useful asset to the classroom—particularly high school and beyond? I have spoken of how other scholars have explored this issue, but from my research, I have not been able to locate a full study done on the matter or even a full overview of scholarship. This topic has been touched on by many scholars but never
compiled or organized in the manner I have set forth. I begin in Chapter 1 with a look at where graphic text originated, showing that the combination of text and visuals is not a new concept. This chapter shows how graphic images have been used since prehistoric times to communicate, and the church has historically used graphic text to spread religion to the illiterate. Then the chapter moves on to a focus of modern graphic text—comics to graphic novels—and their growth. This look at the past of graphic text gives us a better understanding of the now and future of graphic text—we are nothing without our roots. Chapter 2 explores literacy issues to understand a basis of why there needs to be a new medium introduced into classrooms. The chapter looks at how public schools have progressed and how literacy scores have fluctuated, thus showing that public schools could use graphic novels to help in keeping the literacy scores more level. Chapter 3 looks at one method of using graphic novels to improve analytical and critical thinking skills and through this improve literacy issues. In this chapter, I complete a short analysis of three different graphic text versions of *Romeo and Juliet* to show not only how a graphic text can be analyzed but also the changes that have occurred to graphic text in such a short time period—thirty years is my focus with these three text. Finally, Chapter 4 discusses how graphic novels are works of literature—able to have the same methods applied to them as any canonical work. This chapter presents two graphic novel works and how they can be viewed and studied as equally as any other canonical work, and how they are not a longer comic book mainly for juvenile entertainment. Overall, we will come to the realization that graphic novels can be useful assets in the classroom.
CHAPTER I

Evolution of Graphic Text

Literature has historically been known to be admirable if it included enough detail to paint a mental image for the reader, and graphic text just expands on that model. Graphic texts are not a new concept to the study of literature. Recently they have been seen as a modern and mainstream idea to make life easier for younger readers, but they are deeper than that. One can obtain comparable information, if not a more advanced knowledge, from a graphic text as one would from just experiencing the written word; therefore, the incorporation of the graphic text in an academic setting can be a benefit in advancing literacy.

Most people have a mental bank of images that subconsciously translates from a form of text. When one views a word, he or she does not view the stark letters of the word but an image of what that word means. For example, when one sees the word cat, he or she does not picture the letters c-a-t but an actual image of a cat. Before the symbols of letters were created to represent sounds and words, man used images to express a narrative: “Language originated with visuals—real things used as signs or visual gestures…language was metaphoric, imagistic, and poetic from its inception” (Hobbs 61). The original peoples communicated through images instead of language, and even the words we read are created from a systematic order of characters or images. We view the world as groups of images and our mind labels these images with the words that we have stored in our mental databanks. Our mind creates an organized stream of words to be able to express what we see. The mind takes the jumble and makes it linear.

Catherine Hobbs, composition professor, explains this concept:
The visual world is holistic and is seen instantaneously as a picture.

Verbal language is linear, occurring sequentially in units over time.

Language decomposes holistic reality, allowing writers to convey what is really seen out there in the world into the mind, where we can once again recompose it to represent the holistic world. It also analyzes that reality by breaking it into bits. (65)

The use of graphic novels aids in the reconstruction of the holistic world that the writer of a text skillfully conveys while expanding beyond what cannot be placed in the linear timeline of verbal language. Here we see how language and images are an interlocking concept; we cannot have one without the other. Therefore, this concept of combining images and text is a logical concept to look at when discussing literacy and literacy issues.

The use of visual text to aid in literacy is not a completely new concept, even though the genre of graphic novel is, so a quick look at the history of visual text is needed to expand comprehension. Our short history lesson of the graphic text will start during a time where text and an image occupying the same page began to predominate as an aid in the expansion of knowledge, and the Middle Ages was where this form of literacy began to explode. The Middle Ages was a time of illuminated manuscripts, prayer books, and stained glass windows. Formal education, especially in the form of reading and writing, was not available to the masses during this era, so the religious sector noticed a need for a new way to get information to the illiterate. Religion is not our focus for this thesis, but religious teaching is where instructing the illiterate with visual text began.
Religious sects have used images with the holy text as far back as “a collection of figured poems composed for Louis the Pious in 814” with images of Christ intertwined with the written text of a poem (Kessler 89). Kessler continues by explaining, “In the ninth century, Jews also constructed pictures from words, straddling the line between verbal and visual representation” and that “illustrations in many medieval books provided a direct visual reading of adjacent texts to which they were closely allied” (89). The church used the images to translate what the text said in order to explain their religion to the illiterate; this method is still used today with holy cards, or imaginettes, that carry images of saints. George and Salvatori explain that these holy cards are a “child’s first lesson in orthodoxy and every day manners… a modern version of the Bible of the illiterate” (251). These cards are used, just as Medieval graphic text and modern graphic novels, to express a translation of the written word expanding the meaning of the written.

While religion is a good place to start the discussion about the connection of graphic text and literacy and/or knowledge of the illiterate, religion is not the focus of this discussion, so we need to move on to a look at the history of graphic novels. Graphic novels had a meager beginning though comic strips, to comic books, and the final development into the graphic novels we know today. This comic book history is marked by beginning with “Rodolphe Topffer, [a forefather of comics, created]… light satiric picture stories, [he] start[ed] in the mid-1800s, [he] employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe” (McCloud, Understanding 17). Topffer was one of the first artists/cartoonists to start breaking the boundaries for the comic strip, and eventually the graphic novel, to come through.
The development of comic strips by mass media came around in the late 1800s with “Richard Felton Outcault’s…Hogan’s Alley [eventually named The Yellow Kid]” (Blackbeard, Crain, and Vance 10). Outcault’s comic began as a single frame with extensive viewpoints. This individual comic by Outcault opened the door for other comics. Comics that started off as single frames eventually became comic strips, and the comic strips became the funny pages. This evolution of comics was important enough that even newspaper publishers began to notice the attraction to the people who could not read, and this is when the funny pages came into existence. Author David Hajdu tells of this development:

Near the end of the nineteenth century, decades before the rise of the comic books, more than thirty daily newspapers were competing for the allegiance of New York’s reading public, and publisher Joseph Pulitzer decided to experiment with his populist New York World to increase its appeal to the public that did not read… [by] producing full-color pictures on newsprint and introduced [in] the Sunday color supplement. (9)

Groundbreakers like Topffer, Felton, and Pulitzer helped move the concept of an individual framed comic to a sequence of images that tell a narrative and further on to a collection of these narratives that became the parent to the comic book. Their contributions to building collections of visual texts and their ingenious aiming of the comic toward non-readers was the beginning spark toward a new view on literacy issues.

Comic strips developed into comic books, short collections of strips or longer stories, around the 1930s. The beginning of comic books was a “comic strip collection
published regularly in a standard comic book format [titled] *Famous Funnies* in 1934” (Krensky 9). Comic books began with tales, or narratives, of heroism or humorous tales of modern life. Comics are used as a way to tell a story with “recognizable reproductions of human conduct” (Eisner 11). These narratives were in response to a world in unrest from the World War. People were looking for a way to escape from their everyday lives, and comics offered that. A reader could be the savior of the world like Superman or coexist with wild animals like Tarzan. Comic books originally consisted of tales of superheroes and adventurers who were reacting to world issues, but they were also directed toward a juvenile audience.

In 1978, Will Eisner took this comic book form even farther and created the first graphic novel, *A Contract with God*. The world was accustomed to comic books, but graphic novels were a confusing concept. Thus, with the new concept of graphic novels the world also needed a definition and even now, almost forty years later, the definition is still progressing. Gretchen Schwarz, a scholar in the area of graphic novels, defines “The graphic novel, [as] a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a ‘real’ book” (58). Bucher and Manning expand Schwarz’s definition by stating, “A graphic novel is a ‘dynamic format of images and words that delivers meaning and enjoyment’… readers must not only decode the words and the illustrations but must also identify between the visual sequence” (67). After so many years of the graphic text format being presented in the serial form of a comic book, depicting important subject matters but through juvenile representation, when the graphic novel was born, it was looked upon in much the same way. The graphic novel was not taken seriously as a respectable reading and definitely not as academic reading. Even though graphic novels began by taking on
serious issues—such as race, gender, or politics—their format weakened their acceptance. Publishers of graphic novels, during their heyday between the 1970s to the 2000s, ran into multiple problems such as rejection by bookstores and people lacking the ability to grasp the novel/comic format (Price 27). Even though writers and artists created this new medium, the graphic novel’s predecessor’s reputation kept it from being viewed as serious literature.

It has not been until this last decade, the first decade of a new millennium, that graphic novels have been viewed more closely as serious reading. Part of this change in attitude has been the addition of graphic novels to tales of the comic book superhero and partly due to the addition of canonical literature being represented in graphic form. Ada Price explains that big publishers, such as “Marvel and Image Comics to trade book houses such as John Wiley, [and] Penguin…as well as educational publishers like Capstone and Abdo, are adapting classic works of prose into comics,” and now graphic novels are being “‘accepted as a legitimate medium’” (27). The transformation from the single comic frame, to a comic strip, to a Sunday insert, to a small serial publication, and finally to a graphic novel gives room for the medium to be examined in the classroom. The medium of graphic text has matured not only in form but also in content. The Millennial generation students are visual learners and are in need of a new method of receiving knowledge, so giving a closer look to graphic text to teach these students should be deemed important. Students can receive distinct knowledge and skills, if not even more advanced skills, from studying a work of graphic text. Otherwise, there is the problem of illiteracy that this and future generations might develop, and academia needs to notice this issue and begin to address it.
CHAPTER III

Literacy Issues

Not everyone was supporting the invention and use of graphic texts when they first came up on the market. Not everyone saw this new medium as a way to escape to a world of heroism. Dale Jacobs quotes author and psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s 1954 view on comic books: “Reading troubles in children are on the increase. An important cause of this increase is the comic book. [Children] are not really readers, but gaze mostly at the pictures picking up a work here and there” (19). Jacobs debunks Wertham’s statement by saying that comics should be “seen primarily as a way to motivate [troubled readers] through their popularity and to help slow-learning students, especially in the acquisition of reading skills” (20). Comics were not just a form of entertainment but became a way of spreading information to the literate as well as the illiterate. They became a way to spark the interest and understanding of reading in the younger generations.

Wertham’s vision might have been brought on by the fact that the canon supplied the idea that good academic reads were classic prose. Rocco Versaci even points out that students now “perceive [‘traditional’ literary works] as occupying a space above their level of thought, and the important question of why or by whom these works were deemed ‘literary’ never comes up” (66). Students are not interested in the canonical reading choices and do not understand how these works are important to their current studies. However, the idea that canonical literature is too advanced and combining it with “comic books [having] a reputation for being ‘disposable’ and not ‘real’ literature” (Versaci 66) causes a conflict of interest between academia and students. These two ideas
need to be brought together, and people need to realize that traditional literature and comic books can coexist in the same world.

We keep coming around to the idea that graphic novels are just dumbed-down reading, but “[e]ven if it were true that the genre is too basic a form of reading, current best practices in reading recognize the value of both light reading and wide reading on comprehension, fluency, and endurance” (Thompson 29). Graphic novels help more than the students who are struggling with literacy or are learning disabled; they also help the average student connect to reading and develop more advanced literacy skills. Average students do not have difficulty reading; they just have lost the desire to read, and the graphic novel can assist in this issue. One area that at times is overlooked is that the desire to read changes the older a student becomes; this desire is also subject to the reader’s gender. Bruce Pirie discusses this phenomenon in his text Teenage Boys and High School English; he notes that the “National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, or The Nation’s Report Card)” has done numerous studies on student reading levels, and on average there are “10 percentage points” between the girls’ reading levels and boys’ reading levels, with girls being in the higher percent (2). These numbers seem like a small percentage, but these are students who are in the same schools, same classes, and same levels, but their scores are different. Pirie believes this split comes from boys seeing reading as time wasting or “something that girls may enjoy, only because they don’t have anything better to do” (77). Boys are not finding reading interesting enough to waste their time on it, but graphic novels can change this dynamic. Graphic novels present tales of all type:
superhero tales; realistic stories; science fiction and fantasy novels; future, contemporary, and historical adventure stories; and manga (Japanese) tales, as well as humorous works, political satires, and adaptations of classics …[and] widened to include more sophisticated subject matter, including nonfiction, biography, and autobiography.

(Bucher and Manning 68)

With a wide array of story lines, graphic novels have something for every reader. Maryann Mori, an educator, tells that when her school began a manga reading group, it attracted “40 to 50 teens, with an overwhelming majority of the participants being boys, the so-called ‘hard to reach’ gender” (31). Her observation suggests that boys still like to read, but they when they get older, they begin to see it as a girls’ thing unless they are given something to hold their interest. However, this leads to the question: if students are reading graphic novels or manga with superheroes or fantasy, are they really learning anything? Gretchen Schwarz answers this by saying that they are an “appealing way for students to analyze literary conventions, character development, dialogue, satire, and language structures as well as develop writing and research skills” (Expanding 58).

Therefore, graphic novels are not a lower form of literature but just a new form that still supplies crucial items needed for a literary analysis and critical thinking.

Literacy issues are not a new concept in academia. When education became public, the literacy of the mass public became more noticed, and there have been many ways devised to combat this problem. We now take a look at how literacy percentages
have fluctuated in the last one hundred years, and finally how the new generation of students that are affected by the public education and how they are approaching literature.

**Change in the Millennial Classroom**

In the beginning of the twenty first century, the government enacted the No Child Left Behind Act which increased the focus on the educational issue of *teaching to the test*. This piece of legislation holds educators accountable if students do not produce the end of the year test scores set by the Act, and the schools can lose much-needed funding. This type of pressure causes the students to develop a waning desire to read.

Not only are students losing the desire to read, but they also are living in a fast-paced culture where they are “criticized for their short attention spans….a function of an environment where constant stimulation is the norm” (qtd. in Short and Reeves 417).

Instructors are forced to keep up with not only the curriculum but also the outside influences on students. Donald H. Graves discusses in his book that “schools don’t escape the influence of our high-speed culture. Teachers face increasingly inflated school curricula that leave them with less time to teach…pressured as well by the demands of standardized tests… Real learning, learning that lasts, is a major casualty” (1). If teachers are allotted only enough time to teach students enough information to pass the standardized tests, then they never get a chance to teach students how to develop a desire to read. Graves states that when discussing a story, a class does not get enough time to focus on more than the plot, and so students never get the chance to “get at the heart of what reading and interpreting a text are all about” (1-2). Students never get a chance to create a bond with their reading but learn to view reading as just a way to have the right answers. Graphic novels draw the student into the text, which creates the bond.
Modern Public Education and Literacy

The issue of teaching to the test is only one of many that modern public education has to deal with; the ways that literature is presented to students creates more problems. Instructors are attempting to find the perfect midpoint to be able to cover the prescribed material and to give students an in-depth knowledge of literature, but many times these areas do not coincide well. Kelly Gallagher in Readicide discusses that trying to find this middle point only develops other issues. He articulates that the “four major contributing factors” to reading problems of this new generation are:

- Schools value the development of test-takers more than they value the development of readers
- Schools are limiting authentic reading experiences
- Teachers are overteaching books
- Teachers are underteaching books

Each of these issues has contributed to the developing literacy problems even though they are created from trying to repair any literacy issues. Gallagher expands on these ideas by stating that “the overemphasis of teaching reading through the lens of preparing students for state-mandated reading tests has become so completely unbalanced that it is drowning any chance our adolescents have of developing lifelong readers” (7). This method is doing nothing more than teaching students that reading is only valuable for remembering enough to answer a test. When students cover massive amounts of material for a test and are being taught to only pick through the reading, then it does not give the opportunity to delve into the reading and “authentic interest [in reading] is generated when students are given the opportunity to delve deeply into an interesting idea” (Gallagher 10). Teaching
students to read only closely enough to pick out key things that they can be tested on only further exacerbates their already overdeveloped short attention spans.

Gallagher also discusses the concept of overteaching and underteaching books. Overteaching is when a teacher tears a book apart trying to get in as much material and/or learning that students can get. Gallagher argues that when a teacher stops constantly to discuss or do worksheets, it disrupts the “reading flow,” the place where the reader “experiences the thrill of becoming utterly lost within a book” (60-61). When students are not able to experience this reading flow, then they never get to learn the pleasure of reading. Overteaching is not the only problem of teaching a text; sometimes when instructors attempt to avoid overteaching a text they actually end up underteaching. The process of underteaching books is when teachers are assigning “difficult books and asking [students] to fend for themselves” (Gallagher 87). This method just weighs students down, and they push reading aside because they feel it is too hard. He agrees that there needs to be a middle ground between overteaching and underteaching that does what literacy instruction is supposed to do: help improve literacy. Therefore, students are feeling like the texts are being chopped to pieces with over-analysis, and they can never get into the reading flow, or that they are being weighed down by an advanced work of literature, and from all of this, they have only learned to scan a page to get what information they need. Thus, graphic texts can tackle these issues and allow students to develop a more pleasurable connection to literature.

A graphic text can address each of these issues that Gallagher and Graves discuss. A graphic text is not always read from left to right like a traditional text; sometimes they are read in a myriad of directions thus following the natural flow that the students have
learned to scan a screen to obtain information. Nielsen Norman Group did a study on how people scan a computer screen, and they found a viewing pattern that emerged:

The pattern looks like the capital letter F. At the top of the page, users read all the way across, but as they proceed, their descent quickens and horizontal movement shortens, with a slowdown around the middle of the page. Near the bottom of the page, the eyes move almost vertically, forming the lower stem of the F shape. (Baurlein 144)

Mark Bauerlein uses this study to explain how students use this method to read texts not on a screen. However, graphic novels can handle being scanned because the student is absorbing information from the multiple layers in a graphic novel. They can also be chopped up to be analyzed and over-taught; it should cause little harm to a student’s interest in the story because the combination of images and text should be stimulating enough that students can visualize the analysis along with having it told to them. Graphic text should also not overwhelm students when a text is under-taught because its images along with the text should be stimulating enough to keep students interested enough that they enter the reading flow. Students should find graphic texts less daunting and become books to which students can relate.

Therefore, possibly the next things one needs to ask is—why do students study the written word and why do students think they need to study them? When Rocco Versaci asked his students “What is literature?” they responded with “literature makes us think about ‘big ideas,’ literature is difficult, literature is boring, literature is something that people have decided was ‘good’ or ‘important,’” and this is not the viewpoint that any
academic desires a student to have (61). This is the impression that students have
developed over their years of studying the written word, but academia has a different
viewpoint.

Gallagher states that schools are removing novels from the curriculum but that the
novels are not the problem; “the problem lies in how the novels are taught” (40). He
continues with saying a teacher can use any novel to teach the basic structures and forms,
but novels should be used for much more because they exercise the brain and make
students think more critically (40-41). Bauerlein concurs by stating:

Books afford young readers a place to slow down and reflect, to find role models,
to observe their own turbulent feelings well expressed, or discover moral
convictions missing from their real situations. Habitual readers acquire a better
sense of plot and character, an eye for the structure of arguments, and an ear for
style, over time recognizing the aesthetic vision of adolescent fare as, precisely,
adolescent. (58)

Therefore, novels need to be left in schools so that students can not only improve literacy
skills but expand their world experience.

Schwarz, a leader on the study of graphic novels in academia, states that from
studying the written word, students are to learn to “analyze literary conventions, character
development, dialogue, satire, and language structure as well as develop writing and
research skills” (Expanding 58). She continues by stating that students can learn all of
these skills with the use of a graphic text along with the skills of having to “consider
visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering
style” (Schwarz, “Media” 59). Therefore, while students are learning the traditional
methods of studying the written word, they are also adapting new skills through the images. Rocco Versaci expresses that students can develop this new skill with graphic text because “[u]nlike more ‘traditional’ literature, [graphic texts] are able to quite literally ‘put a human face’ on a given subject…a [graphic text] ‘does not ‘happen in the words, or the pictures, but somewhere in-between, in what is sometimes known as ‘the marriage of text and image’” (qtd. in Versaci 63). Therefore, using graphic novels in a classroom still aids students in developing the prescribed skills along with adapting new skills into their repertoire.

The idea that literature is old fashioned and only used by teachers to torture can be changed if “we increase and diversify the voices that our students experience in the classroom and suggest to them that literature may take various forms, even comic books,” then they may look upon literature in a more pleasant light (Versaci 66). If instructors treat graphic texts “with the seriousness they deserve, [then instructors] enact a powerful lesson for students about the dangers of literary presumptions” (Versaci 66). Graphic novels may not be the ultimate fix to the way literature is taught, but they should be viewed as one aspect that could improve the issues that are ever expanding.

**The Turn of the Twentieth Century**

We have looked at how religion used images and word, graphic text, to educate the illiterate and to teach the young, and we have pointed out that literacy is part of public education—so most people can now read, right? When comics, the grandfather to graphic novels, were first born, many people were still illiterate. One hundred and ten years later the idea of illiteracy seems to be a small problem, but looking back to the turn of the twentieth century, we see something different. According to the United States Census of
1900, the “Total Illiterate population ten years of age and over” and of the age group of ten to twenty years old there was a total of 1,207,670, or 7.5% of the population between the ages of ten and twenty, categorized as illiterate (U.S. Census). This seems like a small amount, but this is the age range of population that we now know as *school age*. Free public schools came into existence in nineteenth century and was in most American states by the twentieth century so “[i]n 1870, 20 percent of the population reported themselves illiterate,” but “[i]n 1910 almost one-fourth of the population had [still] not made it to the fifth grade” (Kaestle 127). The populace was becoming educated, but literacy was still an issue. Lawrence Stedman and Carl Kaestle explain in their report that “in 1979, only .6 percent” reported themselves as illiterate (11). Children are given the opportunities to improve their literacy, but the literacy issue still existed. The “2009 Nation’s Report Card” from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows literacy improving but the progression is slow. Looking at only the eighth grade level:

   The average reading score in 2009 was one point higher than in 2007 and four points higher than in 1992 but was not consistently higher than in all the assessment years in between. … In 2009…one-third (32 percent) performed at or above *Proficient* … [only] Three percent of eighth-graders performed at the *Advanced* level. (1& 36)

This report shows that a large percentage of this millennium’s students are not as illiterate as they were at the turn of the twentieth century, but they are not profusely progressing either. Thus, these numbers show that new methods of literacy instruction need to be incorporated.
The Millennial Generation

Census numbers from one hundred years ago are important, but now one has to wonder how this affects academics today, in a completely new millennium. America has had over one hundred years of free public education, so literacy should not be an issue. However, this new generation of students, the Millennial generation, or the generation “born from 1982 through the present” (Howe and Strauss 1), could be heading toward a new period of illiteracy if academia does not step in.

The students one hundred years ago were not as conscious about the importance of education as this new generation of students, and the method of obtaining knowledge has changed. Mark Bauerlein states that this new generation “wears anti-intellectualism on its sleeve, pronouncing book-reading an old-fashioned custom, and it snaps at people who rebuke them for it” (41). However, he continues by discussing that these same students spend multiple hours keeping track of the “latest films, fads, gadgets, YouTube videos, and television shows” (42), thus showing a group of students that are more inclined to obtain their information through images rather than words. This is a generation that has no problems becoming weakly literate because they think it “pose[s] no career obstacles” (Bauerlien 53), so it poses no issue to their futures. This new generation has so much information at their fingertips that they feel they do not need an outdated skill of reading and critically analyzing literature. These students are a new oxymoron: they desire to achieve but do not desire to be proficiently literate.

Even though these students realize that achieving is important (“Millennials have shown a great propensity to achieve” [Howe and Strauss 3]), their desire to read has been on the decline. Even though these students are not illiterate, they are becoming weakly literate—able to read but not to think critically about their readings. Bauerlein presents
High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)’s reading data from 2005 and 2006; this is data collected about 80,000 high school students’ reading routines:

One question asked, “About how much reading do you do in a typical 7-day week?” Fully 7 percent said that they spend three hours or less per week on “personal reading.” In 2006, the question changed slightly, but showed equally abysmal results. About one in six students logged zero hours of “Reading for self” per week, while 40 percent scored less than an hour. Only 5 percent surpassed 10 hours. When it came to “Reading/studying for class,” only 2 percent exceeded 10 hours, and 55 percent came in at one hour or less. More than half the high school student body, then spend few moments reading because they have to or because they want to. (52)

This shocking study shows how this new generation is not spending time on leisure reading instead of academic reading; they are just not reading at all. However, if a generation categorized as being achievers is not reading books, then what is this generation reading? Surely, they are acquiring information from some source.

The one place that this new generation of students is getting its information that follows their desire for visual stimulation is the Internet. These students are “[g]rowing up with television and video games; contemporary young adults look[ing] for print media that contain[s] the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contributes[s] to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy” (Bucher and Manning 67). This generation has never known a time that a computer was not incorporated in the classroom and, as Mark Baurlein quotes the Nielsen Norman Group, “they live ‘wired lifestyles’”
This generation of students turns to the Internet to find any piece of information that they desire.

The students’ reliance on the Internet is a valid place to turn, but are these students using this resource to its full extent? Nielsen states in their study that “teens display reading skills, research procedures, and patience levels insufficient to navigate the Web effectively. … Teenage users scan skippingly…and they likewise struggle to stay on point as they travel from [Web] page to [Web] page” (Baurlein 146). Students are looking for something to read that can stimulate them visually, and the proposed idea was the computer/Internet, but students are not using this resource to advance their literacy because “Teenagers don’t like to read a lot on the Web. They get enough of that at school” (author’s emphasis; Baurlein 147). Therefore, the Internet is not looking like the answer to the illiteracy issues. Nielsen even states that from their study’s result, the best way to improve literacy among teenagers is “not more computer literacy and screen time, but more basic literacy and more patience, things better attained elsewhere” (qtd. in Bauerlein 147). They also agree that students need to turn off the screens and unplug themselves in order to improve their literacy skills. However, students have a desire to be visually stimulated and have become accustomed to visual learning, so a new form needs to be incorporated to address this issue; the use of graphic novels can supply this visual stimulation along with helping students to develop literacy skills.

Graphic novels provide the visual stimulation that this new generation needs to develop the skill and the desire for reading. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm expresses in his text You Gotta BE the Book, where he does a study of his own seventh-grade readers, that some of his students “indicat[ed] a preference for visual notemaking,” or drawing pictures instead
of “writing down what they were seeing and thinking in a particular point in a story” (42). The students are creating their own visual texts of story in order to create a deeper understanding. However, he also had students, whom he labels LD, or learning disabled, who were “less proficient readers,” and each of them did not create visual notes from their stories (45). He discovered that they “seemed to be entirely unable to visualize a secondary world without some sort of artistic aid,” and once these students got the visual aids they needed, he states that these LD students “became excited about reading” (Wilhelm 65). This demonstrates that even though many readers automatically recall a visual image of an object when they see the word; there are also many who do not have this visualizing capability. Elizabeth Downey, professor and librarian, states, “Some students simply are not capable of conjuring images in their mind from reading the text and therefore are dependent on visual cues; graphic novels provide images that help the students interpret the text as well as denote particular thematic connotations, purposes, or ideas” (183). The students who cannot bond well with just the text can use a graphic text, so the image and text combination stimulates the connection for the student to the text and the bonding can develop.

As aforementioned, this new generation does not understand why they should have strong literary skills when they have so much information at their fingertips. Literature gives students a perspective into cultures, society, psychology, and many other areas within the characters, plot, and setting. Donald Graves explains that when “students deepen their reading experience … [they] begin to understand how to ‘read’ people, they interpret the world more effectively” (17). Therefore, by expanding students’ literacy their *world knowledge* also expands. Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood state that “the
abundance of media messages (both image based and verbal) in the home and community suggest that there is an urgent need to help students learn how to evaluate such messages for their social, political, economic, and aesthetic contents” (qtd. in Gretchen Schwarz “Media Literacy” 1). When students expand their world knowledge, it causes a progressive loop because then they will create “visualizations [that are] related in many ways to their own real-life experiences, and sometimes [build] on them” (Wilhelm 62) when they continue to read; therefore, students will be expanding their mental analytical skills. Wilhelm also states:

Because literature encourages the reader to enter the experience and perspectives of others, and to measure one’s understanding in relationship to others’ ideas, it is a doorway into the world of conversing with and understanding others. It offers choices and possibilities for the world and how we want to be in that world. (37)

All this shows that reading literature is not an old-fashioned concept but a valuable skill to have no matter what generation a person is from.

**Conclusion**

Free public schools were formed because the nation saw a need to educate the youth, and as we can now see, schools are still struggling with the complex task of getting people fully literate. Academia and instructors are constantly trying to keep up with the next generation. As we can see, there needs to be something to help students in the area of literacy, something that is new and aimed toward this new generation’s mode of learning. Graphic novels cover this requirement. They allow students to enter the reading flow because they respond to students’ needs for multiple stimulations. Students
need to notice that reading is not what is old-fashioned but maybe just the reading pedagogy is what is out of date.
CHAPTER IV

Graphic Novels and Plays

Performed plays are merely an interpretation of a written work. They are a creation of images combined with the text. Sharon Beehler explains the issue of the translation of plays into live performances when she says:

Every production, whether amateur or professional, involves multiple interpretations—those of the director, the actors, the script editor, the stage manager, the lighting technicians, the set and costume designers, and the promoters. (Filmed versions involve additional interpretive gestures.) Each of these people ‘reads’ the play differently. (200)

Graphic novels are a merging between a text and an image, much in the same way a play is. However, a play takes actors, props, scenery, and many other items, but a graphic novel can provide this same interpretation without all of the excessive needs. A play is limited to a place to be performed and usually a multitude of performers, but a graphic novel can go anywhere because it is performed on the pages, so it never changes, and it is always available. A graphic novel can be as valuable in teaching or learning about a play as a play or the written text can.

Text has come to mean more than the written word. Sharon A. Beehler explains: “The term ‘text’ has ceased to refer exclusively to the instructive book used by a student in class; it has come to mean any sort of phenomenon (a film, a situation, a news story, a conversation) that invited engagement by a ‘reader,’ that is, by a receiver” (199). With these items being deemed as texts, then the integration of the graphic novel for instruction, especially if it is an interpretation of classic work, should be an easy
acquisition. She continues by stating that through discussion of a text, a student can evaluate the “problematics of (1) interpretation, (2) performance, and (3) communication” and that the study of a text is to “help [students] gain the ability to think critically” and to be able to do so instructors must find the best method to aid in a student’s learning (Beehler 195 and 199). The best way to develop students’ critical thinking is through classroom discussion where they have to learn to question a text. A graphic novel with its combination of text and images gives many levels of interpretation for a reader and allows for critical analysis of not only the words but also the images. The ultimate goal of analyzing a text is to critically think and analyze, so if these skills can be acquired through the interpretation of a text into a play, then the same skills can be acquired through the interpretation of a text into a graphic novel.

There are numerous plays for a student to study, but for this discussion, we are going to focus on William Shakespeare, the classic bard, in the academic classroom. His plays have been performed since their inception in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries up to today in the twenty-first century. His plays have been presented in their classical form and even adapted to modern translations. He is a widely used playwright for numerous classrooms.

Even though Shakespeare is written in Elizabethan English, which is an early form of modern English, many students have difficulty understanding the language. Modern publishing of Shakespearean work explains the language problem by stating such things as: “Most of his immense vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are not, and, worse, some of these words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Mowat and Werstine xv). This variation in
language between centuries aids in the misunderstanding, or misinterpretations, of the plays. The best way for a student to experience and connect with a play is on the stage because “In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for [students] by actors who study the language and articulate it for [students] so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least felt” (Mowat and Werstine xv). However, plays take time to result in a final production, so they are not a constant or immediate source of interpretation for a student. However, a graphic novel of a play is a one-time interpretation of a play that can be consistently called upon, thus being an immediate source to aid in a student’s better understanding of a work. Marion Perret agrees with this concept by stating:

Just as every performance of a Shakespeare play offers an interpretation—or several, for each actor’s conception of his character and the director’s broader vision mend into an understanding of what the production should emphasize—every comic book version of a Shakespeare play offers interpretation by the artist and the adapter. Though their aim is to introduce readers to the stories and characters entertainingly, comic book versions of Shakespeare’s plays are not just illustrated digests of plots and sketches of character: inescapably, they interpret as well as inform. (73)

Furthermore, a graphic text can incorporate a deeper concept than to just entertain its reader. A graphic text gives the reader essential information from the images to support the text, and when students enter the reading flow, get drawn into the text, then they can feel the text as well.
Many of Shakespeare’s plays have been converted to graphic novels, and as the medium of graphic novels progress, so do the interpretations. One of the advantages of using a graphic novel in a classroom is as an aid for the understanding of a text’s language. Graphic novels have the ability to use the images to explain the context or meaning of a word. Marion Perret explains about the diversity of the graphic novel audience:

Whatever the age of the target audience, interpretation appears, in the form most appropriate. For the youngest reader… explaining the meaning of a word they may not know…. For older children…reveal[ing] a deeper level of meaning in words and action. For young men and women…a consciousness of subtext to a more adult understanding of the emotion expressed in thought and action. (73-4)

Graphic novels can be used for more than picture books or for entertainment. They can express, explain, and teach with more layers than a written text alone can. They are a medium that can speak to a multitude of audiences.

An issue that needs to be discussed is how graphic novels present the language, left original or translated to a more modern form, and if they allow the images to carry the weight in establishing the understanding of the language. There are many different levels of readers, and a work with difficult language can be lost on the ones who have not developed analytical skills. Perret discusses the students who have not developed analytical skills and their reading methods: “Naïve readers…pay attention to the story rather than how the story is being shaped, while sophisticated readers recognize that visual perspective may convey an intellectual or emotional point of view” (74). Whether
the reader is inexperienced or advanced, the use of a graphic text still gives the
opportunity for any level reader to be given an interpretation and a more accessible use of
the language.

When plays were first being converted into graphic text, they were not viewed as
being a new form of text to help the naïve readers become more sophisticated readers but
were viewed more as the downfall of the reading culture. Delmore Schwartz writes in
1952 about Classics Illustrated, one of the first publications that converted literary text
into comic/graphic form, and how he believes this publisher’s conversion of literary text
into graphic text are “a distortion of the original work,” they lose much of what is present
in the original (54). Schwartz argues that when a student uses one of these interpretations,
it can cause the student to lose the desire to be exposed to the original text: “If [students]
get used to getting literature with illustrations—‘visualized’ is the phrase, I think—then
[the student is] likely to feel deprived when there are no illustration and [they] have to do
all the work [themselves], depending upon the book itself” (56). This viewpoint has its
place in the use of graphic text, but the problem is that this is still one of the viewpoints
in classrooms sixty years later.

The medium has developed and advanced and needs to be reevaluated as an asset
in a classroom. However, even Schwartz during his era saw how someone as widely
studied as Shakespeare could be better understood with visual text:

And the good side to Shakespeare’s plays as cartoon strips might be that
some juvenile readers who are oppressed and biased by the way in which
Shakespeare is for the most part taught…will now come upon Shakespeare
first of all as a cartoon and see that he is really a great deal of fun, he is not
a painful assignment in homework and a difficult, outmoded, canonized
ancient author who wrote strange plays which provide the teachers of
English with inexhaustible and eminently respectable reasons for boring
their students. (56)

Therefore, even sixty years ago, the visual text was looked upon originally as the
downfall of literacy, but even Delmore Schwartz saw the potential for the classroom. The
problem was that there was not a good form of graphic text available for the use of
academics; however, with the current proliferation of graphic novels, the genre has
improved and advanced.

**Criteria for Using Graphic Novels in a Classroom**

At present, it falls on the instructor to obtain graphic novels that offer proper
information through text and image in order for a student to acquire the skills of analysis
and critical thinking. However, there are many choices for graphic novels in the
bookstores today. There needs to be a list of criteria for teachers to follow to weed
through the multiple versions of graphic novels so that instructors can find a text that
works in an academic classroom. Since our discussion is about the translation of a work,
particularly a play, then we will be looking at how a graphic novel interprets or translates
the original text.

One of the first things to look for is how the graphic novel presents the original
text’s wording or language. To gain acceptance in an academic setting, a graphic novel
needs to be as true to the original form as possible so that nothing is lost from a work.
Once one is finished evaluating the text, then an examination of the images is warranted.
Since a graphic novel is where text and image coexist, the images must complement the
text; otherwise, it can cause confusion or a distraction from the text. In a graphic novel, the text can work with the image to create a better understanding or against the image, which can cause turmoil. However, even when the images and text do not coincide, this can still leave room for discussion, but this is to the discretion of the instructor. Finally, one might want to see what supplementary material is included or available for a graphic novel. Extra material might not be a needed aspect, but if it supports or replaces what some of the image/text conversion has to leave out, then an instructor might find this imperative. Let us take this list of criteria and apply it to three graphic versions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

The first is a version from 1984 by Pocket Classics of Academic Industries. The second is a 1996 Classics Illustrated edition, and the third is a 2008 Spark Notes version. Each edition has its own interpretation of the work *Romeo and Juliet*, but the question is which edition presents the information in a format where the work is not *distorted*, and which can aid in developing students’ skills of critical thinking. We are also looking at the three different versions to notice how within three decades the format has changed and progressed.

One of the most studied scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* is Juliet’s speech the evening that she meets Romeo. Juliet has gone out on her balcony to be able to review her evening and to think over how she has finally met the love of her life. Romeo is stationed below her balcony in the garden, but Juliet is unaware of him. In the original text her monologue is:

*Juliet: Oh, Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?*
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name:

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.

*Romeo and Juliet 2.2*

We will be looking at this same scene in each of our versions (images supplied) to see how each version interprets it.

**Romeo and Juliet by Pocket Classics**

![Image of Romeo and Juliet by Pocket Classics](image1)

*Figure 1: Romeo and Juliet by Pocket Classics*

The first text we will be discussing is the 1984 version of *Romeo and Juliet* (Image 1) by Pocket Classics where the language is modernized and the images are drawn in great detail.

**Presenting Original Text**

We have taken a look at the original script, and now we need to notice how this version presents the monologue from our chosen scene:
Oh, Romeo, if only you were not a Montague!

Yet, if you won’t change, I’ll deny my name and no longer be a Capulet!

(Shakespeare 27)

The original script has been altered and shortened in this version. This interpretation loses the poetry and pace of the original Shakespearean writing. Even though the images explain so much about the scene, characters, and location, the extreme change in the language weakens the translation. “Cutting out words that reveal a character…can change [a reader’s] impression of that character” (Perret 76), and by cutting out and changing Juliet’s speech, the reader loses the impression that she is in love and is lost in her own heart and mind. The changes lose the forlorn and sad tone expressed by Juliet for finally finding her love and not being able to be with him and changes it to a more desperate and matter-of-fact statement. Delmore Schwartz explains that his problem with the Classics Illustrated versions of Shakespearean work is that the words, “which are in blank verse, are printed as if they were prose,” and this can be seen in the Pocket Classics edition (55). The natural rhythm of the Shakespearean verse, the iambic pentameter, is lost when the creators of this graphic text attempt to modernize the language; thirty years later some of the same issues arise when interpreting a classical work into a graphic text. Scott McCloud argues: “Words can be a powerful ally in the struggle to communicate. They bring with them an unparalleled level of specificity. There’s no image so vague that words can’t lock it into a desired meaning. But in comics, the two have to work together seamlessly enough that readers barely notice when switching from one to another”
This edition does not make this transition smoothly with its modern text and Neo-Classical images. It causes confusion for the reader, which can cause a disruption in the learning.

**Use of Images**

The images in this edition of *Romeo and Juliet* are presented in great detail and perspective. The scene of discussion places Romeo in the background and the reader at a high angle but close-up shot to Juliet. Valerie Muller explains that in film these methods have their own explanations: high angle shows intimacy, close-up shot shows emotion, and long shot (background) shows characters in relation to objects (34). In this edition, the images become the most important part of the texts because they are the focal point, so this means that the words become secondary. The artist has given great detail to placement and design of images, “virtuoso drawing technique,” so the author must have felt the images would make up for the loss of originality of text (McCloud, *Making* 47). However, this version is nice to look at, but the text and images do not flow well together. The artists use a “hairline border” to “[de-emphasize] the physicality of the balloon shape” on the words Juliet spoke—thus making the text secondary to the images by giving a lower emphasis to their importance.

With a graphic text, a reader must rely on the image to offer emotions that are usually described in a text-only work. With the absence of written plot and setting, readers must be dependent on the images accompanying the text in a graphic novel to complete their understanding, and “how a reader interprets both Body Language and Facial Expression will rely heavily on what they already know about […] characters. Those characters may not always show all their feelings on the page, but readers will be
able to infer a lot about them—based on what those characters know—what they’ve done—and what they want” and in this Pocket Classics edition the Juliet image is portraying more than her words (McCloud, *Making* 120). Juliet is facing the reader, but her face is slightly turned to the side and up; she has one hand out of frame and the other on her chest. The artist could be attempting to express a dreamlike state, the hand on her chest to draw focus to her heart, but this does not come across. The smooth expression on her face does not invoke anything but calm, the upturned face almost presents an expression of hierarchy, and the positioning of her hand makes one wonder if she is holding a necklace that she deems valuable. Nothing of this image expresses desire, hope, or forlornness. With her speech being changed and the image not portraying the correct expression, the only object left to analyze is what in a play would be called the stage direction but in a graphic text is called the banner.

The banner in a graphic text is the text that is not associated with a character speaking; it gives background, placement, movement, or any other information the reader might need to set up a scene. Marion Perret explains that in a graphic text “interpretation may be blatant or surprisingly subtle, visual or verbal….The understanding [readers] bring to the pictures frequently comes from verbal interpretation appearing in a caption block or banner at the top of a panel, just as our sense of the subtext to a line of play script may come from the stage direction accompanying the line” (74). This version incorporates the use of a banner to express scene action. The type of banner is a “duo-specific combo” where “words and pictures are telling the same story” (McCloud, *Making* 134). The banner tells the reader that Juliet does not see Romeo, so she speaks,
but from the positioning of Juliet with her back turned to Romeo, the banner is not a helpful object but a redundant one.

**Supplemental Material**

However, to create a graphic text of a play, much might need to be cut or adapted e.g. stage direction, so one needs to look to see if the text has accompanying material to support the reasoning behind the changes or to instruct in other information to aid a student in using this graphic text. This edition does offer three small paragraphs that give a biography of William Shakespeare but nothing discussing the original work or anything about the changes being made. Supplemental material in this version could have assisted the reader in an understanding of why the writer decided to change the most studied aspect of Shakespearean work, the language and meter, or why the artist used the form chosen. Shakespeare also has a rich history tied to literary studies that could have been explored more by this publisher.

As we have seen so far, this version of *Romeo and Juliet*, just from one well-studied scene, is not a good choice for academic use. Therefore, one can come to the conclusion that this edition is not material for use in an academic setting unless the instructor was using it as an accompaniment to the original or as a contrast to other interpretations.
Next, the discussion leads to a 1996 Classics Illustrated version of *Romeo and Juliet*. This edition does not modernize the text and the images do not overpower the text.

**Presenting Original Text**

This same scene is visually accurate, and the language has not been changed:

“O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name: or, if you wilt not be but sworn my

love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.” (16)

Here the creators do not adjust the language but remain true to the original text and rhythm and only use the images to help aid in the translation. Juliet’s speech, since it has
not been changed, portrays the emotion that the author desired to express, and the images help aid in expressing this moment to the reader.

Use of Images

The characters in this version are idealized, blond and beautiful Juliet along with strong and masculine Romeo. This version is in color, whereas the Pocket Classics version was in black and white. The artist expresses the intensity of this moment by using bold colors and a “diagonal” perspective, and this causes a temporary confusion or an emotional shift in the reader (McCloud, Making 46). The reader is still positioned above Juliet to express intimacy, but the artist uses a long shot to “show characters in relations to objects,” e.g. Juliet on the balcony above Romeo (Muller 34). Juliet is not focused on the reader but has her back to the reader; she is looking to the skies, above her Romeo. This positioning allows the reader to be voyeuristic on an intimate moment. The writer also places the text into a bubble showing the distinction of the text from the image, and this also shows that the image is a translation of the text.

This version also uses the “duo-specific” format, word and picture have the same meaning, to express the stage directions from the original text. Therefore, when this banner states: “Juliet not knowing that Romeo was in the orchard,” the image and the text blend better. The reader can see that Juliet is so infatuated by her love for Romeo that she does not see anything, even Romeo hiding below.

Supplemental Material

This same edition has supplemental material within the book that discusses the author and the Globe Theater, gives summaries of each Act’s plot, offers character
descriptions, explains the Shakespearian language, and develops reading discussion questions.

The Classics Illustrated version does not lose or change the original wording and allows the image to do what a play does, aiding in an understanding of the text. Therefore, one can conclude that this edition would make a better choice for use in a classroom than the Pocket Classic. One will also notice that the version that Delmore Schwartz debunked in 1952 has progressed and improved its craft within the forty years.

Romeo and Juliet by Sparks Notes

Figure 3: Romeo and Juliet by Sparks Notes

Finally, as the graphic novel genre/format becomes more predominant, there become newer versions. Sparks Notes have been a favorite fall back for many students to aid them in understanding a work assigned, and so this publishing company has also taken on the graphic novel in their inventory.
Presenting Original Text

Sparks Notes also does not keep completely to the original Shakespearean language but translates limited words into a modern form; however, it does stay close to the original iambic pentameter. Their version of Juliet’s monologue is stated as:

“Oh, Romeo, Romeo, why must you be Romeo?
Forget your father and shed your name. Or, if you won’t, just swear your love to me, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet” (60).

As one can notice, only limited words were translated to aid in the reader’s understanding—e.g. “thou wilt” has changed to “you won’t”—and even though it is closer to true form with the addition of the images, the language might not have needed to be translated. This edition makes subtle changes so that the meaning and rhythm of the original work is not lost. Thus, making this work valuable for use in a classroom setting.

Use of Images

Sparks Notes’ 2008 version of Romeo and Juliet (image 3) is geared toward the newer generation of readers. This new generation does not relate as well to the idealized and romanticized images of the blond and beautiful Juliet and the strong and masculine Romeo but relates to a simpler almost gothic image, which draws less on the romanticized love of the star-crossed lovers and more on the tragedy. Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley discuss this new generation and their culture in their book Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture. These authors state “to be emo is to tap into something sweetly innocent: an unjaded desire for romance and comfort, a nostalgia for things that haven’t happened yet, or an ache for things that barely were” (xii). This
generation that they are studying is the Millennial generation, the emo culture, which is also the generation that the use of graphic text in the classroom is aimed at. In addition, as Simon and Kelley explain, “William Shakespeare was emo to the core. [He was] sensitive and sexually ambiguous…also extremely prolific. …[his] works inspire a million basement poets” (4). Spark Notes must see this aspect of the new generation and have the understanding that Shakespeare is widely studied in academia, so through graphic novels they have connected them.

Sparks Notes also uses the “high angle” to show “intimacy” and a “medium shot (shows a character from the waist up)” to show something “natural, ‘common in our real lives” or as Scott McCloud says “a sense of ‘rising above it all’ emotionally as well” (Muller 34, 21). The artist allows the reader to be a part of the intimate moment but at the same time be a distant viewer or allowing the reader in on an intimate moment between Romeo and Juliet. This can also be expressed with the use of the word bubbles. The Pocket Classic used a “hairline border” and Classics Illustrated put the speech in a bubble, but Sparks Notes uses it as part of the scene to draw the reader’s eye (McCloud, Making 142). The wispy lines from Juliet’s mouth to the first part of the speech moves the eyes over to another long line that leads to the second part, which also draws the eyes to where Romeo is hiding in the bushes. This creates a sense that the reader knows something the characters do not and creates a flow, or order, for the text to be read. This is a useful tool in producing a timeline, or speaking order, for the reader; it also draws the reader in and creates a connection between the text and the reader by including him or her in storyline.
Supplemental Material
This Sparks Notes version is much longer than the other two. Also, unlike the Classics Illustrated, this text does not have extraneous material attached to the graphic novel; Sparks Notes produces accompanying text about the author and another of the original play—in original text paralleled with a modern translation—and these accompanying texts go into greater detail than the small section in the back of the Classics Illustrated edition. Therefore, looking at this text in correlation to the other two, one can see that the format is progressing. Less and less information is being removed and/or changed so that graphic text can be useful in a classroom. This extraneous material gives multiple accesses to other information to broaden students’ understanding of a play by offering well-rounded information.

Let’s Not Forget Film
A graphic novel can present the original work, the interpretation meant by the stage directions, and allow a student to focus more on the play and literature than trying to figure out what or who goes where. The best way to experience a play is still to see one performed. However, another way around seeing a live performance is to watch a movie version, but this has its flaws as well.

A film can do as well, if not better, than a play or graphic novel; however, a film costs a production company millions of dollars and so is hindered by what the paying public desires. This draw of funding can therefore sway the presentation of a play along with the distribution of a film. Many movies are produced to make money and not to present a text in its original form, so many times information is changed, deleted, or skewed for a popularized audience; therefore, the student might only receive a general idea of the actual play, and to receive the full effect, they must go back to reading the
original script. Beyond money being a creative factor, there are other differences between film and graphic novels, and George Dardess explains a couple of these differences:

One basic difference between graphic novels and films…is that graphic novels offer a reading experience in which, as in traditional reading, the reader controls the speed of perception and can linger or look backward at will. … Another basic difference…is that graphic novel illustrators can draw characters as he or she desires them to look, while film and drama directors are limited to the appearance of living actors available for the necessary roll. (4)

Film is a worthy opponent to the graphic novel, since film has become a part of literary studies and graphic novels are lagging behind, but such small differences do not make them mortal enemies. Moreover, students do not seem to understand why there is this divide between the two in academia. Rocco Versaci explains that “most of [his] students are surprised to learn that both film and the novel were considered ‘trash’ forms and not at all ‘literary.’ They are especially surprised about the latter genre, given the fact that most of what they consider to be literature are, in fact, novels” (66). Students are ready to embrace this new medium, but academia has not joined them yet.

Film and graphic novels have some similarities. Graphic novels are a combination of text and image, or a “sequential art narrative—for that name seems most fitting, or least unfitting—[that] is a serious story (…) told in comics form” (Dardess 214). Film is also a combination of text and images presented sequentially in order to tell a story. However, graphic novels are not yet seen fully in this manner of comparison so they have not been fully adopted by academia as a form of credible study. These points might seem
like minute differences, but they are important in the area of literacy studies. Students need to read and to understand a text before they can move on to a complete understanding of a film. By building critical thinking and analytical skills through literacy, a student can better understand a film.

**Conclusion**

Shakespeare’s plays are intended for the stage and are still a stage production, but as with any staged production, the presentation can be limited. If an instructor wanted to teach one of Shakespeare’s plays to students, there is always the script that a student can read, but a script is filled with stage directions and prompts for actors to interpret, and the reading becomes tedious either trying to skip the stage directions or trying to keep the information on a natural flow. The best solution is to see the play performed as it was intended, but many plays are not performed on a regular basis, so this can become difficult. The next step would be to see a recorded version of the play, as in a film, but this medium has its own glitches. If a student cannot see a play or a film, a graphic novel can solve this issue. A graphic novel can present a student with the text along with the visuals meant for a stage performance therefore making the connection the student is missing.

However, in a perfect world a separation should not be caused among these three mediums—plays, films, and graphic novel—but be used as a complement to each other. The combination of these three media gives a student a variety of information and a more diversified knowledge of literature.
CHAPTER V

Graphic Novels as Works of Literature

Graphic novels are not created to be just an interpretation or adaptation of plays; they are also created to be works that stand on their own as a work of literature. A couple of the many definitions for a graphic novel express this conversion: a graphic novel is “an extended comic book, written by adults for adults, which treats important content in a serious artistic way” (Tabachnick 3), or what “distinguishes a graphic novel from a comic book [is] that a graphic novel is longer and tells a complete stand-alone story” (Bucher and Manning 67). The use of the term “comic book” is what has caused much confusion in the academic field; however, this phrasing originated due to lack of a concrete term. Will Eisner even attempted a list of terms to express some semblance of defining this genre/format in the text Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principle and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist:

Graphic Narrative: A generic description of any story that employs image to transmit an idea. Film and comics both engage in graphic narrative.

Comics: A form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or a book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story. …

Sequential Art: Images deployed in a specific order. (xvii)

This issue of naming is only one of the problems with the acceptance of the graphic text in an academic setting. Paul A. Crutcher explains that “the comic medium underwent…massive censorship of the 1950s and 1960s for including content inappropriate for children, yet the medium remains understood as something juvenile”
He then points out that some people misinterpret the term graphic to mean nudity, language, and/or violence. Therefore, if this medium is going to be labeled graphic and not all of the novels are “graphic” in this sense, then the impression needs to be reassessed (64) because not all graphic novels have graphic content, even though most are written for a mature reader. Gretchen Schwartz expands on Crutcher’s statement when she states: “The term ‘graphic novel’ remains dissatisfying because the medium is not necessarily a novel, and the images transcend ‘graphic,’ but no one has come up with a better widely accepted term” (“Media Literacy” 2). Thus, the argument that graphic novels are juvenile is incorrect because academia needs to recognize the naming inaccuracy and realize that a suitable combination of words has not been formed to label this budding medium properly.

Another problem we run across is that there is not a defined method to be used for analyzing a graphic text. There is still, at times, a great divide between the image and the text. There are critics, like Carol Fox, who look mainly at the text of a graphic novel and see the images as secondary or only subordinate to the text; this can be seen when she states that she uses graphic novels in her classroom to “slow down reading” because the images slowing down the reading is “usually the solution to tackling the texts that readers find difficult to get into” and “students can become aware of the processes that happen when they read, because the authors are so good at showing the text construction” (18). There are also critics on the other end of the spectrum who see “graphic novels [as an] evolved…sophisticated artistic form” (Martin 30). This division helps fuel the controversy of the academic value of graphic text. Leading film critic W.J.T. Mitchell states his view on the separation of images and words by saying: “we might call the
division between words and image ‘the relation between the seeable and the sayable, display and discourse, showing and telling.’ No method…is going to rescue us from the dilemma of the ‘contested border between words and images’” (Chute and DeKoven 771). This is an interesting comment by Mitchell but with the development of multiple forms—film, graphic novels, and online video—we can eventually break through the border that divides text and image. Instructors can take the multiple forms of which this generation is accustomed to, and use them to teach and instruct them.

Graphic novels as their own form are slowly being seen and discussed by critics. Books are being written on the medium, scholars are publishing analytical works, and journals are publishing issues with graphic text as the focus. Each of these mediums has shown the wide range of discussion in the area of graphic novels. The author Douglas Wolk wrote *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* and makes such statements as:

I’m even going to take issue with Will Eisner, the late grandmaster of American comics, who liked to describe comics as a “literary form.” They bear a strong resemblance to literature—they use words, they’re printed in books, they have narrative content—but they’re no more a literary form than movies or opera are literary forms. …Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. (14)

This statement appears to come from the same 1950s viewpoint as Fredrick Wertham, but Douglas Wolk is a modern critic publishing in 2007. The validity of
graphic text (considering the actual graphic novel is a newer invention of the later twentieth century) is something that has been discussed by scholars and authors for many years; Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester published *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, that is a compilation of works discussing graphic text by such people as Delmore Schwartz and e. e. cummings. Pedagogical collections are also being developed to support the study and teaching of this medium, such as *Teaching Visual Literacy* by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts* by Deanna D. Sellnow, and *Teaching in the Pop Culture Zone: Using Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom* by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Rebecca Bobbitt, each devoting a minimum of a chapter each to graphic novels, specifically and sometimes visual rhetoric and/or mediated text. There are now many published scholars in the area of graphic novels and this area is also developing a collection of leading scholars such as Gretchen Schwarz and Rocco Versaci. In 2008, Rachel Marie-Crane Williams states, “Currently, there are three academic peer reviewed journals that deal with nothing but comics. There are also a number of universities that offer courses related to comics and graphic novels and well over one hundred dissertations [and in 2011 there are Master’s and Undergraduate Theses] written on the subject (http://www.comicsresearch.org/)” (14). Many journals are recognizing the value of graphic text and not only publish scholarship on graphic text but at times even devote entire issues to the scholarship of graphic texts, journals such as *MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Biography*. Graphic novels are gaining a footing in the eyes
of scholars and slowly in academia as being an important area to take a closer study of, and the use of graphic texts in a classroom can only develop this area even more. The current generation of students can offer new viewpoints on graphic text and can be the next generation of scholars which comes with having access to the proper training and encouragement in the classroom. If academia takes graphic text seriously, then students will follow along and will only improve the study of this medium, but if academia keeps the viewpoint that graphic texts are a trash medium, then future scholars in this advancing medium might not develop or flourish.

Graphic novels are a good medium to introduce students to individual works of literature. We have looked at how they help a student understand a play and how they can accompany the text of a play along with or without the third tool of a film. However, “In our current moment, … an array of new literary and popular genres aim to further the conversation on the vital and expanding literary field, absorbing and redirecting the ideological, formal, and creative energies of contemporary fiction” (Chute and DeKovan 768). Literary forms are progressing to address the needs of current readers. Graphic novels are a part of this progression, as Rachel Marie-Crane Williams explains:

Graphic novels and comics can be an innovative way to bring visual culture into the classroom. They can spark a wide range of interdisciplinary discussions and focus students on a variety of topics, ranging from war to fantasy to memory and childhood. Comics and graphic novels are tools to help teachers reach reluctant students and learn about youth culture outside of the classroom. (18)
Graphic novels teach not only multiple skills but also access many areas of study for a student. Schwarz explains that “[to] read and interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style” (“Expanding” 59). Graphic novels develop multiple skills for any student.

Graphic novels can be used as a work of literature either as a stand-alone work or as an accompaniment to other text, film, or text and film together. We will now look at a couple of works that are their own works of literature. The first work is *Maus I & II* by Art Spiegelman, a work discussing his father’s experience in the Holocaust and the first Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel. The other work is *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, a work discussing her father’s experience being a closet homosexual and a work that uses aspects of graphic nature. These works were chosen for their similar content of biography and autobiography; they were also chosen to show their transcendence beyond the idea of graphic novels being juvenile or dumbed down.
Even though *Maus* upon first glance, looks to be childish with the animal figures being used instead of human figures, it is actually a multilayer of meaning and comprehension. The storyline can be understood easily by a reader of any age, but the dissection of the use of the animals leads to a more advanced interpretation. The multifacets of this graphic novel caused a change in the way people viewed this medium: “when the graphic novel *Maus* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, the medium was legitimized and validated in ways that were heretofore unimaginable” (Chun 146). This work joined the ranks of other canonical works. Some people thought that graphic novel readers were a part of separate world, but “Those outside of the comic world who had previously felt that highbrow literature could only be found in print-text literacies actually found themselves [after accepting *Maus*] labeling a graphic novel as highbrow literature” (Monnin 21). *Maus* has caused an awareness of graphic novels becoming a part of serious scholarship having “80-plus entries…listed in the MLA International Bibliography” in 2006 (Chute and DeKoven 770) and in 2011 there are 393 listings. The
developing and ever growing scholarship on this medium can be incorporated in classroom studies.

*Maus* is studied mostly because of its narrative of the Holocaust, but it is also a groundbreaking graphic novel in the classroom. Many educators are beginning to see the validity of using this particular text in their classrooms. Carol Fox, teacher and author, explains that *Maus* is a “superbly explicit text for showing, literally in the graphics, how narratives work,” how “chronologies are represented…by the arrangement and shaping of frames on the page, by visual ‘shifters’,” and “variations of narrative voice” (19). Another instructor “used panels that discussed and portrayed racism to facilitate an analysis of race relations in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*” (Downey 184). *Maus* can be used in parallel with many other literary works, such as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, because they both use the characters of animals to tackle important historical and political issues; *Maus* just presents its characters in image form instead of in textual form alone.

*Maus* is a work that can be taught on its own or as an accompaniment to other texts. *Maus* can be taught alongside other Holocaust works such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* or the illustrations can be viewed along with other illustrated work from/about the time period, for example *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*. Christian Chun expresses that when a student reads works such as *Maus*, they “can mediate these historical realities with their unique visual narrative styles that allow many readers, especially adolescent ones, to imagine and interpret characters’ experiences that are far removed from their own daily lives” (146). Students become connected with the reading and not only learn life lessons
but also can insert their own life lessons in to make the reading more comprehensible to them.

*Maus* is much like the next graphic novel discussed in that it can be used beyond the literature classroom and into other areas of study. With the mature representation of the Holocaust and being presented indirectly from the accounts of a survivor, the information is an accurate look at an historical event. Looking at an historical event through the use of a graphic novel, especially one with as many layers as *Maus*, can bring a student more into the history than just a list of facts can, a boundary that many other text-only works cannot cross.

**Fun Home**

![Fun Home](image)

Figure 5: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*

*Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel is a graphic novel similar to *Maus*; it is not set during a notorious part of world history but is a child telling her own story while also telling her father’s story, and both works are a mix of biography and autobiography. Bechdel’s work discusses the taboo issue of homosexuality through the lens of her father’s denial and her acceptance. She does not use animals to represent people but does
create confusion with her use of drawn images; the narrative is told in mostly simple but at times in simple-detailed image. Each chapter of *Fun Home* begins with a realistic drawing of a photograph that causes a disconnection between what is reality and what is memory that it is all a story. This graphic novel can also be understood by many audiences while it also presents undertones of advanced issues that are aimed at a more mature audience. The author also uses many of the same literary devices to create this work as a text-only author would.

She moves this work from the viewpoint of being dumbed down or lowbrow literature to a more intricate work worthy of literary study. Ariela Freedman states, “Bechdel makes an additional play or high literary status by larding her book with the influences of canonical modernist literature, not only through frequent and explicit citation and reference but also by subtler formal, thematic, and textual gestures” (126). Bechdel was the child of English teachers, so in her work she uses multiple literary references along with her image-text because they were a large part of her growing up.

Even though Alison Bechdel’s work *Fun Home* is not as widely studied as Art Spiegelman’s works, she is still a valued study among critics; *Fun Home* accesses nineteen hits alone on the MLA database, and Alison Bechdel accesses twenty-six.

*Fun Home* is a text that can also be viewed on its own or as an accompaniment to other works. Bechdel is a writer who is aware of literature and uses literature to draw a parallel from her work to other literary works:

*Fun Home* draws on extended mythological and literary references that shape the autobiographical narrator’s richly intertextual framing narrative.

There is classical mythology—the narrative of Daedalus and Icarus, which
is both incorporated and strategically inverted—and there are ongoing references to Modernist literature, and most particularly to James Joyce and Marcel Proust. (Whitlock x)

Graphic novels have been discussed as dumbed down works for only entertainment purposes, and literature is thought a creation of work that addresses social, political, or just important issues, but Bechdel’s work takes these definitions and obliterates them. Her use of the graphic novel form to discuss important social and personal issues only supports the new definition that graphic novels are as important as literature. She creates a “disjunction between the cartoon panel and the verbal text, to disrupt the seeming forward motion of the cartoon sequence and adopt[ing] a reflexive and recursive reading practice” (Watson 28). Graphic novels can get students to read so that they are obtaining and advancing their knowledge and skills; therefore, graphic novels should not be attacked.

Bechdel is studied for her use of literary references and use of literary formulas, but she is another author who can cross disciplines. Fun Home can be studied for its content of homosexuality, a modern historical perspective, culture, feminism, along with the literary references. Disciplines such as history, folk studies, women studies, psychology, and even art—because of its multiple artistic forms used—can incorporate this graphic novel into the class curriculum. This text can also be paired with other texts. A class can look at the works and/or authors she references throughout her work—Joyce, Fitzgerald, Proust; a discussion of how homosexuality or even just sexuality is presented in classic
works as compared to this modern text—*Scarlet Letter*; combination of this text with a modern film pertaining to similar topics—father/daughter relationships (*XXY*); historical perspective (*Far From Heaven*); modern perspective (*Brokeback Mountain*)—these are just a few ideas and the list is vast.

Even though *Fun Home* does discuss some mature content, it is not *graphic*, and it should be looked upon as a work of literature and not only a juvenile work or a work to be slandered. It is a prime example of how the graphic form has progressed and has crossed the imaginary lines set by people of what is literature and what is not. It, like many other graphic texts, crosses the boundaries of academic disciplines and can coexist with many other literary forms. It has the ability to get reluctant readers to pick up a text and improve their literacy skills.

**Conclusion**

Graphic novels are not always an interpretation of another work, sometimes they are valid works on their own. They are a diverse form that depicts a wide array of subject matters; they just present it in a way that is aimed to attract a new form of reader who is accustomed to visual stimulation. Graphic novels go beyond the boundaries that a text-only work can go. Graphic novels are an asset to a diverse area of studies, constantly offering new aspects. Their new form and presentation of material interest a group of students that are accustomed to visual stimulation and make them a valuable asset in an academic setting.

Literacy issues are not as drastic an issue in the twenty-first century as it was in previous centuries, but it is still an issue. With seventy-five percent of eighth graders only having basic reading skill and with this percent not digressing as quickly as it should,
then new strategies need to be incorporated. Graphic novels are just one of the strategies that can be used by academia to improve this literacy percent. As we have seen, graphic novels have many uses and this form and its potential are at a constant growth. If academia steps in now during the beginning stages, then they can help structure graphic novels to make them a more valuable asset to improving literacy issues.
WORKS CITED


