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BEYOND THE CANONICAL LITERATURE: EXPLORING THE LITERARINESS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN WILL EISNER AND AMITAV GHOSH'S WORKS

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Abstract

This paper challenges the notion that graphic novels are solely for children and lack the depth of traditional literature. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the play of signs and Roland Barthes's "The Pleasure of the Text," this study examines the transformative power of words and images in the graphic novel medium. Through an analysis of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* and Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, this research highlights how graphic novels transcend perceived limitations to acquire a distinct "literariness." By emphasizing the interplay between text and visuals, these authors broaden readers' horizons and invite multiple interpretations, asserting the graphic novel's place as a unique and legitimate form of literary expression.

Keywords: Graphic Novels, Literariness, Derrida, Barthes, Will Eisner, Amitav Ghosh.

Introduction: The Politics of Neglect

J. B. Carter's assertion that refusing graphic novels in the classroom is a "powerful political statement" resonates with Roland Barthes's view of the text as that which "shows his behind to the Political Father." Despite growing academic interest, the graphic novel remains confined to the margins of popular literature, often dismissed as unworthy of serious "readerly attention." This highbrow attitude is a byproduct of structuralist tradition, which privileges a logocentric system where meaning is derived from a fixed relationship between linguistic signifiers and signifieds.

This paper will apply a post-structuralist lens, specifically using Barthes's concepts of the readerly/writerly text and Derridean deconstruction, to argue that graphic novels possess a profound literariness. By analyzing Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (2021), I will demonstrate how the graphic novel form, with its essential combination of visual and textual signs, not only fits within but actively expands our understanding of literary discourse.

A Brief Historical Context for Graphic Narrative

The combination of images and words for narrative is not a modern invention. M. H. Abrams notes that while terms like "graphic novel" emerged in the 1970s, the practice is ancient. Pre-modern examples include the 11th-century Bayeux Tapestry and the 15th-century *Biblia Pauperum* (Paupers' Bible). In the 18th century, William Hogarth's sequential engravings, like *A Rake's Progress*, were described by Charles Lamb as pictures we "read." Similarly, William Blake's illuminated books, such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789), are recognized as direct precursors to contemporary graphic narratives.

The modern graphic novel is often traced to Frans Masereel's wordless novels, which influenced artists like Lynd Ward and, later, Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi. However, it was Will Eisner who coined the term "graphic novel" to market his 1978 work, *A Contract with God*, a pivotal text in establishing the medium's seriousness.

Deconstructing the Canon: Literariness and the Tyranny of the “Center”

The conventional definition of literature, as Abrams provides, emphasizes “fictional and imaginative writings” distinguished by “form, expression, and emotional power,” often synonymous with *belles-lettres* or “fine letters.” This definition centers on the written word, creating a structuralist hierarchy that excludes other mediums.

Eisner’s *A Contract with God* faces exclusion on this basis. It is a work of imagination that moves its readers, yet it is deemed insufficiently “literary” because it relies heavily on visual images. This exclusion exemplifies what Derrida identifies as the “tyranny of the center”—the organizing principle (here, the “fine letter”) that limits the “play” of the structure. The canonical center forbids “the permutation or the transformation of elements,” rejecting any imaginative writing that lacks a predominance of words.

A deconstructive approach, however, reveals that Eisner’s text is replete with the very ambiguity and “play” that Derrida locates in language. The graphic novel does not abandon the system of signs; it transforms it, using visual images as signifieds, thereby challenging the Saussurean linguistic model and expanding the possibilities of literary expression.

Case Study 1: Absence and Play in Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*

A Contract with God tells the story of Frimme Hersh, a devout Jewish man who, after the death of his adoptive daughter, Rachele, feels his covenant with God has been broken. The narrative’s power derives not from a lack of literariness, but from a sophisticated use of deconstructive contradictions.

1. **Textual Omission (The Unwritten Contract):** The central paradox is the contract itself. The entire narrative revolves around this covenant, yet its specific terms are never revealed. This omission creates a void at the heart of the text. The signifier “contract” fails to produce a stable signified, plunging the reader and Hersh into a crisis of meaning. We are left, like Hersh, wondering what clause God violated, a question that echoes the fundamental slipperiness of language.
2. **Verbal Contradiction (The One-Sided Covenant):** The title itself contains a contradiction. A “contract” is a legally binding agreement between two parties. However, Hersh’s covenant is a one-sided act; God, the other party, is entirely absent and never explicitly agrees. Hersh’s despairing cry—“I ask you ... were the terms not clearly written?? Did I ignore even one tiny sentence – or perhaps a single comma?”—highlights the absurdity of a unilateral contract. The text deconstructs its own title, suggesting the foundational agreement was never a true contract at all but a projection of human desire onto the divine.
3. **Linguistic Instability (The Inconstant Self):** Hersh’s character embodies instability. After Rachele’s death, he dramatically breaks with God, shaves his beard, and becomes a wealthy, cynical landlord. Eisner’s visuals powerfully convey this transformation. The image of a hopeless, bearded man contrasts sharply with the clean-shaven, assertive figure whose black suit merges with the corporate building he dominates. This visual metamorphosis conveys a psychological shift that words alone could struggle to capture, illustrating the “unreliability” of a fixed, unified self. Just as meaning is not stable, neither is identity.

Through these deconstructive strategies, Eisner’s graphic novel achieves a complex literariness. The visuals are not a crutch for a lack of words; they are the very medium through which the text’s deepest ambiguities and contradictions are articulated.

Case Study 2: The Pleasure of the Hybrid Text in Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama*

Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama*, a verse novella retelling the Sundarbans legend of Bon Bibi, represents a different fusion of word and image. It exemplifies what Roland Barthes terms the “text of pleasure,” which “liquidates all metalanguage” and “attacks the canonical structures of the language.”

Ghosh’s work attacks the canonical by merging a traditional verse form with graphic novel visuals. It “liquidates metalanguage” because the images often convey meaning directly, reducing the need for descriptive language. This is particularly effective in representing abstract concepts like evil. The text warns of “predators of every kind... some you will never see, but they will enter your mind.” Accompanying this is an illustration of a black circle with piercing eyes, from which wave-like forms emanate, set against a grey, shadowy mangrove. This image gives a tangible, unsettling form to the abstract psychological fear the words describe, a feat difficult to achieve with language alone.

While *Jungle Nama* contains the “fine letters” of poetry, its deliberate and necessary use of visuals marks it as a hybrid that challenges generic purity. It fits Barthes’s definition by refusing to conform to a single “sociolinguistic reference” (genre) and by redistributing the language of literature itself.

The Readerly Text and the Death of Language

Barthes further divides literature into the *lisible* (readerly) and *scriptible* (writerly) text. Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, with its poetic language, is closer to the "text of pleasure," which can be spoken about and offers comfort to the logophile. In contrast, Eisner's *A Contract with God* is a "text of bliss" (*jouissance*), an "untenable text" that unsettles the reader, challenging their logocentric comfort zones.

Eisner's portrayal of Hersh's grief—for instance, the panel where he clutches a curtain, his fist clenched as if grasping God's garment, followed by a panel of slumped resignation—conveys a father's anguish with an immediacy that words might dilute. This is the "bliss" that discomforts the traditional reader, the "anti-hero" who, as Barthes says, must "abolish within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions."

The graphic novel, therefore, creates a language with "two edges." One edge is the canonical, obedient word. The other is the "mobile, blank" edge of the visual image, which is "never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed." In the graphic novel, we see this "death" not as an end, but as a transformation—a rebirth of literary expression where the image takes its rightful place alongside the word.

Conclusion

The resistance to graphic novels stems from a structuralist desire for a center—the "fine letter"—that guarantees meaning. However, as the works of Eisner and Ghosh demonstrate, the graphic novel actively deconstructs this center. Through strategic omissions, internal contradictions, and the essential integration of visual and textual signs, graphic novels exhibit a complex literariness. They demand a reader who embraces the "confusion of languages" and finds pleasure in a form that redistributes the very elements of narrative. By revolting against the established canon, graphic novels do not abandon literature; they renew it, proving that literariness resides not solely in words, but in the powerful, ambiguous, and profoundly human play of signs.

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