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Imagination and Representation in Graphic Novels

Cover Page Footnote

Louann Reid—keynote speaker at AEPL's June 2010 conference—is Professor of English, specializing in English Education, at Colorado State University. She is past editor of *English Journal* and co-author of eight imaginative textbooks for secondary school students, including the *Daybooks of Critical Reading and Writing* series, which also incorporate lessons on teaching visual texts. She has published several articles and chapters, co-edited two collections for teachers, and given more than 150 presentations in the US and internationally. She is currently working on a book on teaching graphic novels.

Imagination and Representation in Graphic Novels

Louann Reid*

Author's note: Converting my AEPL presentation to an article required a few changes in structure. In addition, I incorporated material from the handouts and answers to questions that audience members raised. During the presentation, participants examined excerpts from graphic narratives, which are not included here. However, the activities are described for those who would like to find the images to adapt the activities for a class.

A 2004 *New Yorker* cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan shows a couple walking past a bookstore window. Noticing the books on display, one person says to the other, "Now I have to start pretending I like graphic novels, too?"

I don't know how many of you feel this way, but if you do you are not alone. Although graphic novels are increasingly popular in and out of school and more school and public libraries stock them, many teachers, parents, and students are still skeptical about their value.

As a firm believer in the power of visual thinking and the force of narrative, I am intrigued by both the form and the content of graphic narratives. As an English educator, I am curious about the pedagogical potential of graphic narratives. And as an avid reader, I am captivated by the stories that, according to their authors, can be told only in this form.

For the past five years or so, I have been interested in two major questions: What are the affordances of these multimodal texts? What are the pedagogical possibilities or, what can we as teachers do with graphic novels that we can't do without them? First, I would like to discuss how graphic narratives call on the reader's imagination through various means of representation. This is only one aspect of how graphic narratives "work," but I think it is an essential aspect for understanding the pedagogical potential of such texts.

Defining the Terms

Graphic Narrative

When I initially heard people recommending graphic novels, I was appalled. We already have too much graphic violence, graphic sex, and graphic language in our popular culture; did we need any more? Of course, you all know I was mistaken. Graphic novels may include graphic violence, sex, and language, but they are not defined by those elements. In fact, some are not at all graphic in those ways.

What, then, is a graphic novel? A graphic novel is a book-length story told in the medium of comics. It can be a collection of comic strips, a serialized story, or a continuous story. *Graphic novel* applies to all genres—fiction, nonfiction, memoir, mystery, fantasy,

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science, and so forth. Because “novel” implies fiction, some people—and I am one of them—prefer the term *graphic narrative* as a broader, more accurate label (Chute; Chute and DeKoven). Scott McCloud suggests that these works are created for a variety of purposes when he defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9).

When discussing book-length works with teachers and colleagues, I sometimes use the term “graphic novel” because it is familiar. Comics scholar Paul Gravett acknowledges that the term has caught on, but he says *graphic novel* is a misnomer, invented “in an effort to overcome the stigmas of humor and childishness of the word ‘comics’” (8).

Nonetheless, I am uncomfortable calling a work a novel when it clearly is not. For example, both volumes of *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, both volumes of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel are terrific book-length narratives told in the medium of comics, but they are not novels. They are autobiographical texts. Satrapi and Bechdel recount traumatic events from their childhood and young adult years. Spiegelman tells the story of his relationship with his father, a Holocaust survivor who lived in Poland during WWII. How can a self-respecting English teacher call these *novels* when they are nonfiction, based on the people and events of the authors’ remembered lives? Various terms have been proposed, such as *autobiographics* (Gilmore), *autographics* (Whitlock), and *graphic memoirs* (Versaci). I tend to like *graphic memoir* for works such as these because *graphic* is familiar and *memoir* is accurate.

Whatever we call these texts, they are worthy of our attention as readers and teachers. Martin Pedersen noted: “In 1990, Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus*, signaling to the publishing mainstream what aficionados of the graphic novel had long known: comics are a medium capable of exploring themes every bit as serious as those studied by any prose novel” (32). To fully explore their pedagogical potential, we need to know how they explore serious themes and how they “convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud); in short, how they work.

Imagination

When I introduced graphic narratives in a graduate class for pre-service teachers, most students were intrigued by the novelty of taking comics seriously. One, however, was adamant that comics were a debased form of literature that should never be used in an educational setting. His major objection was that reading graphic narratives was too easy because students would not need to use their imaginations. Everything they needed to understand the story was there in front of them in the words and pictures. I was amazed by this reaction and doubt that I provided a persuasive—or thoughtful—response on the spot.

With the benefit of time and research, I know what I would say now. If we define *imagination* narrowly as *visualization* then perhaps he had a point. However, imagination is not merely visualization. Webster’s definition suggests that it is the “act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (online). Maxine Greene, in a lecture on aesthetic education, emphasizes the importance of the arts—music, dance, theater, visual arts, and so forth—in helping us

How do words and images work together to create meaning?

1. Without telling students the title or source of the text, I first distribute just the words. I ask students two questions: Who are the speakers? What is the subject of the story this comes from? In discussion, I urge students to explain their thinking, giving reasons for their inferences.
2. Next, I distribute a photocopy of the page with the speech boxes empty and ask students to make inferences about the characters and their relationships. I also ask them to attempt to place the words in their original places.
3. Finally I give students a copy of the original page. Depending on how much time we have and how much I think the students already know, I might ask about:
 - a. What was easy and what was hard in matching words and images
 - b. How much the images helped them understand the subject
 - c. What they still had to imagine and what roles, if any, the gutters played

experience “illusioned worlds, created worlds brought into being by movement, sound, dialogue, color and line” (69). In another lecture, she associates imagination with perception and stresses the inventive and transformative powers of imagination:

The more we can actively and interestedly perceive, you see, the wider becomes the field on which our imaginations can work. It is imagination that enables us to reach beyond, to open up those possibilities. Imagination invents, you realize; it discloses alternative realities. . . . If it were not for imagination, we could not form . . . mental images of what-is-not where actual existence is concerned. Our minds would lack the power to mold experience into something new. (74)

Graphic narratives require our full engagement—perceiving, imagining, interpreting—to make sense of the experience of the text and to move into the world the author creates.

One obvious site for the exercise of imagination is the space between panels, the gutter. In reading among the panels, readers must mentally provide the transitions that would complete the action from one image or set of images to the next. Look at any page of a graphic narrative or even any comic strip to see what I mean.

Another site for engagement is the image itself. How the author or artist (and sometimes the author is the artist) has decided to represent ideas both inspires our imaginative constructions and constrains them. We can demonstrate this idea to students with a close reading activity. I like to use “The Bicycle” from *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Satrapi 10). The sequence I use is in the shaded sidebar, above.

Representation

The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* explains that *representation* is,

Generally speaking, the use of one thing to stand for another through some signifying medium. A representation of an event is not the event itself but rather a statement about or rendition of that event. An artistic representation is an image or likeness of something achieved through a medium such as language, paint, stone, film, etc. (Murfyn and Ray 338).

In graphic narratives, the images do not merely signify, they also suggest, and those suggestions are at the heart of our reading. Rocco Versaci echoes Maxine Greene: in reading graphic narratives “we enter into an authored representation of the world” (5).

You can see this concept vividly realized in images from the wordless graphic narrative, *The Arrival*, by Australian author Shaun Tan (see Figure 1, below). *The Arrival* tells the story of a man who leaves his wife and child, hoping to make a life for them in a new place. Alone and unable to speak the language, the immigrant arrives in a spectacular yet bewildering place.

“Harbour,” a two-page spread near the beginning of the book, gives the reader a sense of the mystery such a place might present. On his website, Tan explains the thinking behind the art of *The Arrival*:

I am often searching in each image for things that are odd enough to invite a high degree of personal interpretation, and still maintain a ring of truth. The experience of many immigrants actually draws an interesting parallel with the creative and critical way of looking I try to follow as an artist. There is a similar kind of search for meaning, sense and identity in an environment that can be alternately transparent and opaque, sensible and confounding, but always open to re-assessment. (par.18)



Figure 1: “Harbour,” from www.shauntan.net

Not only is this image an example of Versaci’s “authored representation of the world,” it is also an example of how graphic narratives engage and estrange through their ideas and their artifice. We are aware of the construction of the story at the same time that we are immersed in it. Versaci emphasizes that “one can never completely ‘escape’ into a comic book because its form—impressionistic illustrations of people, places, and things—reminds us at every turn (or panel) that what we are experiencing is a representation” (6).

The tension between imagination and representation, which readers may experience only subconsciously, is one of the features of visual thinking that we need to teach

if students are to effectively navigate the 21st century world. A set of photographs is available online that reinforces the point that representations can be manipulated and do not necessarily reproduce what we might call reality ([http://www.pps.k12.or.us/schoolsc/pages/binnsmead/student/Hoax/hoax_test/Hoax %20Photo%20Test.htm](http://www.pps.k12.or.us/schoolsc/pages/binnsmead/student/Hoax/hoax_test/Hoax%20Photo%20Test.htm)).

The Value of Graphic Narratives in Schools

Although graphic novels are increasingly popular with readers, librarians, and teachers, the value of such texts in K-12 classrooms is still disputed. Major arguments are variations of the same complaint: they are too easy (“picture books are for kids”); the highest form of literary achievement is a print-only text. Critics claim that using graphic narratives dumbs down the curriculum, wastes valuable academic time, and does not make readers use their imaginations. I think the counterarguments are stronger, however, and I will spend more time on those.

Graphic Narratives Invite Readers into Literacy Habits

Literacy, as we know, is much more than just reading. James Paul Gee argues that even if we only consider print, there are multiple literacies:

in the sense that the legal literacy needed for reading law books is not the same as the literacy needed for reading physics texts or superhero comic books. And we should not be too quick to dismiss the latter form of literacy. Many a superhero comic is replete with post-Freudian irony of a sort that would make a modern literary critic’s heart beat fast and confuse any otherwise normal adult. (14)

Furthermore, literacy requires not only the ability to make meaning of a text but also the abilities to create and communicate meanings in whatever form is necessary for an audience. When we consider our need to read images and multimodal texts and the multiple forms for communicating meaning such as tweets, blogs, and podcasts, as well as print and visual texts, we can see the complexity of the concept of literacy.

The content and the form of comics can both challenge and engage readers. Gee refers specifically to superhero comics, but the topics available in critically acclaimed graphic narratives include traditional literary themes of identity, family relationships, overcoming adversity, and so on. Contemporary graphic narratives also address some of the most serious issues of our time such as genocide and war, in addition to offering stories in favorite genres of fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and horror. There truly is something to attract every reader.

Comics can motivate some students to read or to read more. From a study of middle school boys in two settings, one a middle class school and the other a school receiving Title I funding, Ujiie and Krashen concluded: “For both groups, those who read more comic books did more pleasure reading, liked to read more, and tended to read more books” (53-54). While Ujiie and Krashen found that economics played little role in the beneficial effects of reading comics, they also found that gender mattered. Boys were far more likely than girls to express a preference for comics. More research needs to be done

regarding gender preferences if we want to understand the motivational and educational power of comics. The increased popularity of *manga*, films made from graphic novels, and a wider variety of topics that interest girls as well as boys since 1996 suggest that more girls may be reading graphic narratives than before.

Reading more is associated with vocabulary development. Cunningham and Stanovich argue that the amount and kinds of texts one reads affect vocabulary and knowledge acquisition. It may seem like common sense that more reading is better than less but few people would assume that reading comics would develop vocabulary. Yet comics do appear to be a beneficial kind of text because of the number of linguistically rare words they contain, the kind of words necessary to help readers enlarge and deepen word acquisition and knowledge. In a 1988 study, Hayes and Ahrens found that a sample of comics actually contained more rare words than a sample of adult books, children's books, and preschool books—and far more than are found in conversation (401). They conclude that “the time a child spends reading books, including comic books, is time lexically well-spent” (408). Contrary to what some critics assume, the vocabulary of some comics can be quite advanced. You can confirm this for yourself. If you skim the first five pages of *Persepolis*, for example, you will find the following words, many of which might be unfamiliar to the secondary school students who read this memoir: *obligatory, decadence, avant-garde, prophet, predecessors, Zarathustra, Norouz, and disciple*.

Including graphic narratives in school curricula has the potential to help students develop complex, multiple literacies. Shirley Brice Heath and Vikram Bhagat conclude a survey of research on comics with a strong recommendation:

In an era when literary texts and age-old literary themes enter new forms every year—from films to adventure games in arcades to hypertext—the visual and verbal powers of comics may be one of the most powerful and productive forms of preparation and motivation available to invite new readers into literacy habits. (591)

Graphic Narratives Enhance Visual Thinking

Since this essay was presented at a conference on visual thinking and learning, I probably do not need to make the case that visual thinking is important. But I do want to stress that we urgently need to teach skills and approaches for thinking visually and thinking about visual images. Not only is it now more economical and feasible for texts to include illustrations or other images, but it is also expected. Students who have grown up viewing a multitude of screens (television, video, computer, pocket games, and so forth) see print-only texts as dense, difficult, and downright boring. Students need to develop their print literacy, surely, but we educators have a responsibility to help them develop multiple literacies. In writing about how to teach and reach the millennial generation, Considine, Horton, and Moorman stress that “By privileging print, schools are failing to prepare students for tomorrow” (474).

Using graphic narratives can help students prepare for tomorrow. Texts are increasingly multimodal, so students need to be able to construct and comprehend messages that are presented in multiple modes. Modes are ways of making meaning and are usually identified as visual, gestural, spatial, linguistic, and audio. Graphic narratives employ several of these modes in combination.

What are the meaning-making modes in a multimodal text?

Visual—"use of line and white space, shading, perspective, distance, depth of field, and composition"

Gestural—"facial expression and body posture"

Spatial—"meanings of environmental and architectural space . . . layout of panels on the page and the relation between these panels through use of gutter space"

Linguistic—words

Audio—sounds

(taken from Jacobs 22)

When discussing multimodality, I ask readers to examine pages 11 and 12 of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman). Artie visits his father and requests that he tell the story of his life in Poland during WWII so that he can draw a book about him. Reluctantly, his father agrees and begins his story. These two pages are rich in details to discuss—the number tattooed on the father's arm, the placement of characters in relation to each other, the size and shape of the panels, the use of texture and white space. As they read the pages two or three times, I ask students to select one or more modes and explain how they convey the story of the artist-narrator and his father. I give them a list of modes and explanations and encourage them to work in pairs or small groups. The handout looks like the shaded sidebar to the left.

Teaching with comics helps us show students how to identify the interplay of modes and understand ways they can employ multimodality in their own creation.

Teaching through and about Graphic Narratives

From reading graphic narratives, students can learn to comprehend, analyze, critique, and create multimodal texts that emphasize the visual. But the conventions of visual texts must be taught if we are to discuss and manipulate them. I like to begin with a series of activities that focus on the "larger picture," as it were, and reveal what readers already know about graphic texts. Then we move on to examine the craft or artifice of these works (please note the activities in the shaded boxes on these two pages).

Seeing "The Metamorphosis" from Multiple Perspectives

1. **Visualize from print.** I distribute the first three paragraphs of "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka and ask readers to create mental images of Gregor Samsa and the setting of the story. After reading and re-reading the paragraphs, I ask readers to draw their mental images.
2. **Compare and contrast visualizations.** This has two parts. First, I ask readers to form pairs or small groups and share their visualizations if they feel comfortable doing so. Then, I distribute excerpts from three versions of this story that have been adapted as graphic narratives and ask that readers compare two of the four versions—three from artists and their drawing. It may be helpful for them to create a graphic organizer with

three columns: same, different, possible reason. See the Works Cited for bibliographic details of the versions I use (Kafka, adapted by Kuper 2003; Crumb and Mairowitz 1993; Sikoryak 2006).

3. **Evaluate representations.** In larger groups or a whole-class discussion, explore the questions: Which version best represents Kafka's story? Which requires the most imagination from the reader? Why?

Examining Craft: Visual Storytelling in the Wordless Graphic Narrative *The Arrival*

The pages of *The Arrival* are not numbered. For easier reference, I will indicate the page by its title, which is available on Tan's website: www.shauntan.net. The questions assume that readers are reading the story and not just viewing selected images. Of course, these questions can be adapted for any graphic narrative or for other pages in this one.

Pacing ("Ticket" and "Dinner")

- The basic layout in this book is twelve panels to a page, as in "Ticket." What story is told on this page? Describe the pace or speed of the story.
- "Dinner" is a full-page panel between two pages that use 12 panels. The page before "Dinner" shows preparations for the meal, and the page after shows the diners laughing, playing music, and enjoying themselves. How does "Dinner's" placement between these two pages affect the pace of the story? Why do you think Tan chose to use a full-page panel here?
- How does the writer's pacing (through the use of panels in this way) operate in concert or in counterpoint to the whole story?

Perspectives—angles and shots ("Inspection" and "The Market")

The images in comics panels can be discussed in the same way we discuss film shots and angles. For the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to know that film shots are described as long shot, medium shot, close-up and extreme close-up, and some of the angles are high, low, and eye level. If you are interested in finding connections between film and graphic narratives, you will want to know more. But you probably know enough to discuss how placement of items in the panel offers perspectives on the story.

"Inspection" uses several kinds of shots but no long shots. "The Market" employs a long shot viewed through the eyes of the main character. Discuss how these different kinds of shots convey mood and information.

Tone and Mood ("Flock")

- What effects are created by the type of panel borders used?
- What roles does lighting play in the effects of the images?
- What roles do color and contrast play?

Encouraging Experimentation: Creating Graphic Narratives

As readers construct visual texts, they not only develop their ability to communicate through images but they also increase their capacity to visualize from text, a strategy that proficient readers use effectively. This is a premise that Amy Vail, a pre-service teacher and graduate student at Colorado State University, wanted to try out as she considered using

film and graphic narratives to teach visual literacy. For part of her master's project, she adapted segments of *Twilight* (Meyer) as a graphic novel, using Comic Life software. (Less than a year later, *Twilight: The Graphic Novel, Volume 1* was published. No one consulted Amy on its preparation, but clearly she was not the only one who thought the book lent itself to graphic novel treatment.)

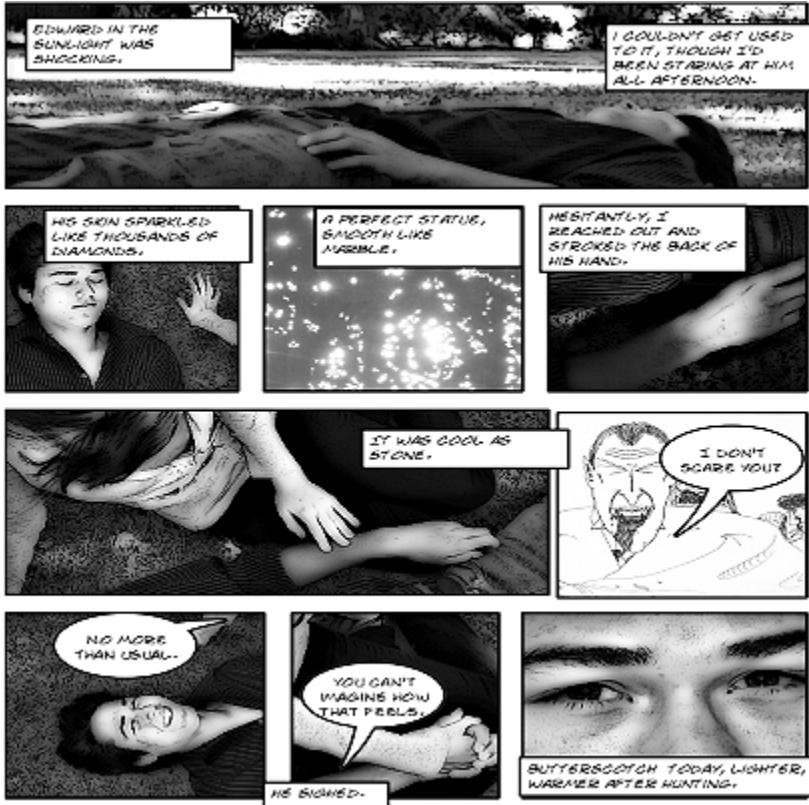


Figure 2: Amy's visual characterization

Amy's adaptation illustrates the points she wanted to teach about the literary, cinematic, and dramatic elements of a visual text, elements she took from *Reel Conversations* by Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder and from *Reading in the Dark* by John Golden. The following excerpts from her project are shared with her permission.

Literary Elements

Literary elements are those that we English teachers often discuss when analyzing print texts—characterization, setting, plot, and theme. Amy discusses her decisions regarding characterization:

This chapter includes a lot of inner monologue, which means I . . . had to pick . . . the essential words. I chose the first sentence . . . : 'Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I

couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon' (Meyer 260). The novel continues, 'His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface' (260). . . . I needed to condense the next sentence in order to convey the important information and yet leave room for the readers to create an understanding on their own. . . .

Cinematic Elements

Cinematic elements include pacing, shot types, angles, and so on. Amy explains the reasons for the images and layouts she used:



Figure 3: Amy's use of cinematic elements

When creating a comic, students could be given an opportunity to produce their text through cinematic shots. The 'exaggerated slowness,' for example, can be shown through clipped movements over multiple panels. McCloud explains how 'closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality' (67). Stretching out the movement over multiple panels will help the reader see the slow gesture Meyer describes in her novel.

On page 8 of my comic, Edward's gestures are shown through specific images in order to convey his speed and his frustration with Bella. The center panel is a close-up

of Edward's face as he speaks. One panel shows him reaching through a medium shot of his arm, another panel shows him running out of the panel with an establishing shot of the field, one shows him standing through a shot of just his legs, and the final shows him climbing through a close-up of his feet on the tree. His body is disjointed and fractured on this page and these visual images help to convey the impact Bella has on Edward.

Dramatic Elements

Dramatic elements are those generally found in theatrical productions—lights, setting, costumes, props, and so forth. Any comments on make-up choices and positioning of the characters in relationship to each other:

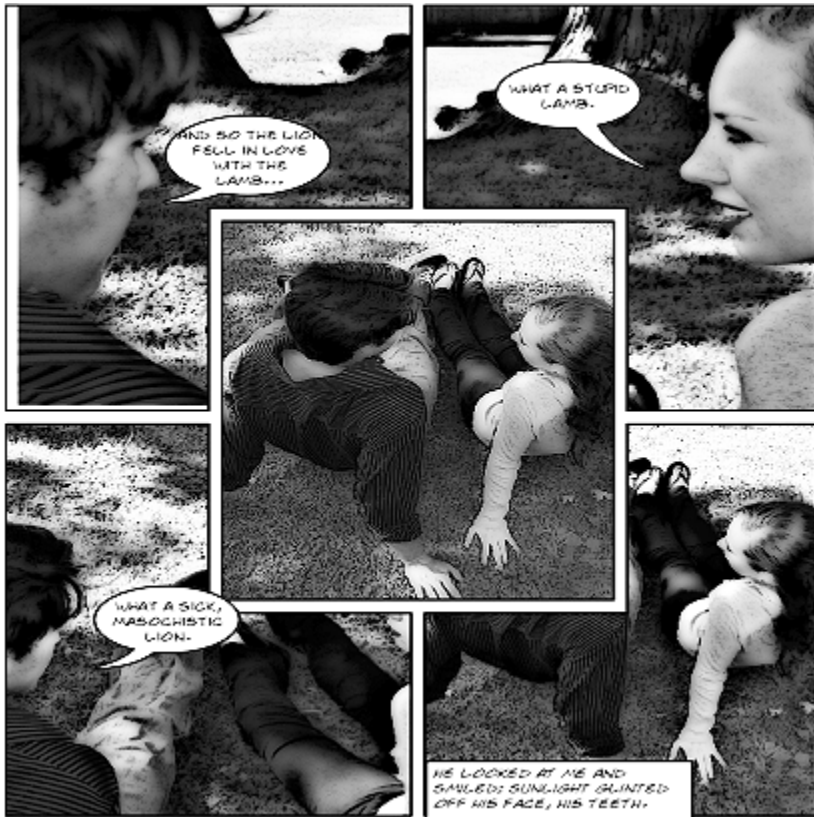


Figure 4: Amy's representation of dramatic elements

Bella's make-up in the right top panel and the clothing of the two characters, as can be seen through the center panel, help to develop this sense of drama. Bella's lips are bright red and her eyes are lined with dark make-up. Her face is also similar in color to Edward's face, as they are looking at each other.

The positioning of the two characters in the center shows their clothing. The contrast between dark- and light-colored jeans and shirts combined with the way in which

their bodies are positioned helps to convey how the two characters fit together, almost like a puzzle.

Looking Ahead

Graphic narratives offer enormous potential for teaching and learning, for developing visual literacy, and for encouraging people to read. Supplementing a curriculum with visual narratives allows teachers to extend a reader's imagination rather than constrain it. Making sense of the craft of the work by examining the concept of representation can hone a reader's critical skills. And creating graphic narratives can not only reinforce a reader's understanding of how such texts work but prepare him or her to construct and communicate meanings in an increasingly visual future.

Give graphic narratives a try in your classroom; see how students respond. Perhaps, unlike the person in the *New Yorker* cartoon, you will not have to pretend to like graphic novels next time you see a display in your local bookstore.



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