

The Victorian Roots of the Graphic Novel

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Received 16 April 2021; accepted 20 July 2021

Abstract

Regardless of what we think of them, graphic novels have become an essential part of literature. They line bookstore shelves, reside on nightstands, and are taught in college courses. Graphic Novels have increasingly become a part of American culture. Graphic novels have a mixed heritage. On the surface, they are a recent offshoot of the comic book. This parentage can cause some people to assume that graphic novels are juvenile and therefore not worthy of the same consideration as “real” novels – novels primarily made up of words. However, upon further examination, it can be argued that graphic novels are actually part of a long literary tradition of both written and visual narrative going back at least as far as the Victorian era.

The Victorian era in English literature was known for its serialized novels. Authors would publish their works in (often bi-weekly) periodicals, sometimes literally writing each new section right before publishing it. Later on, many of these novels were published in book form. Similarly, early graphic novels were serialized in comic books – each consecutive section would be published in the next edition of the comic publication. Beside this most obvious parallel, graphic novels and Victorian novels have similarities in their timeline and visual structure, as well as their treatment of outsider characters. The purpose of this study is to answer this research question: how do the uses of timeline gaps and visual gaps, along with treatment of outsider characters, create continuing parallels between the Victorian serialized novel and the modern graphic novel?

Background Section / Literature Review

The graphic novel as a form of visual narrative art has very deep roots. Visual narrative goes back millennia. Even as far back as the Roman era there were advanced forms of visual narrative. Roger Ulrich (2020) documented a form of graphic narrative – Trajan’s Column in Rome. This column is a monument to one of the most successful of the late Roman emperors. The primary feature of this column is a 200-meter-long visual narrative carved into its surface that starts at the bottom and continuously winds around the column (23 times) until it reaches the top (Ulrich, “Overview”). This column narrates the wars Rome fought with Dacia, starting with preparation for the campaign (Ulrich, “Overview”). Trajan’s Column demonstrates the continual timeline of visual narrative that is an important feature of the graphic novel.

H. Stewart Jones’s article “The Historical Interpretation of the Reliefs of Trajan’s Column” provided an overview and interpretation of the column’s artwork. According to Jones, the paper seeks “to treat the sculptures as embodying an historical narrative in stone” (Jones 435). Jones says that there are three main styles that the artist (or artists) who created the Trajan Column’s artwork used for their historical narrative: episodic, continuous, and panoramic (Jones 436-437). These styles are seen even in later visual narrative, including the graphic novel.

Although we know that visual narrative had already reached advanced stages more than 1,500 years ago, there were still more developments made that would eventually contribute to the graphic novel form. The Bayeux Tapestry, made during the middle ages to commemorate English history, made another important contribution to visual narrative. Beige (2017) pointed out that this tapestry has an important feature – it uses trees as visual breaks in the narrative, which is perhaps one of the earliest versions of framing, a feature that is prominent in

cartoons, and, later, graphic novels. Wilson (1985) provided a complete color reprinting of the Bayeux Tapestry, along with historical and artistic analysis of the artifact.

While we see in the Anglo-American graphic novel elements developed during both the late Roman era and the middle ages, it wasn’t until the twentieth century that the graphic novel itself emerged. Camus (2015) recorded the first time that the term “graphic novel” was used – in 1964 (p. 308). It was not until the 1980s that the graphic novel started emerging as a genre of its own (Camus 308). Camus pointed out that there is an acknowledged difference between comics and graphic novels; Neil Gaiman, author of the famed Sandman graphic novels, once recounted the huge increase in respect he received from an editor when the editor realized that he was not just a comic writer, but that he wrote graphic novels (309). However, although this difference is acknowledged, it is often not understood because it has not been standardized.

One of the primary differences between a comic and a graphic novel is that “structural unity seems to be the staple feature” of the graphic novel (310). Beyond this, there are several features that distinguish the two genres. One of these is the presence of time. In comics, time is either non-existent or open-ended; in the graphic novel, there is a clear beginning, middle, and ending (311).

On the other hand, there are scholars who say that there are no appreciable differences between graphic novels and comics. Gordon (2010) argued that attempts to separate the graphic novel from the comic book are only an attempt to give it “some respectability” (Gordon 185). He argued that the graphic novel genre is a farce, and he used two angles of reasoning. It is a “marketing tool to help book producers sell their wares in bookshops rather than on newsstands,” (185) and also the term “graphic novel” is used with comic versions of biographies and histories,

which clearly don't fall under the traditional definition of a "novel." However, even in the cases of histories and biographies, these "comic books" are still following a sustained narrative arc and have a plot (even if it is a historical one), which seems to be something altogether different than a simple comic book.

Another thing that differentiates the graphic novel from the comic genre it apparently emerged from is the subject matter covered; graphic novels often include more mature themes than cartoon books (316). For example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* deals with the Nazi holocaust. In fact, the existence of more mature themes is one of the more prominent features of the graphic novels. Halsall (2015) gave Alan Moore's works as an example of the broader scope of the graphic novel over the comic book. In both of Moore's graphic novels, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Lost Girls*, he explores the themes of "sexuality, heroism, identity, and Empire" (Halsell 253). One of the most prominent aspects of the Victorian era was the idea of empire – the British Empire literally encircled the globe. These graphic novels reinterpret the glorified nationalism and industrial might of the Victorian era. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* instead creates a backdrop of crumbling industrial dreams and pollution – even cruelty (253). Closely tied to this idea of empire is the idea of heroism. Great Britain's empire was built on the backs of slaves, forged through chaos. Its heroes were its military, who committed the crimes of its rulers. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* explores a convoluted idea of what makes a hero. The characters in this league are all allied with the British government to protect the commonwealth – even when it is oppressive to other nations and "outsider" groups. (255). Ironically, the gentlemen in this league are all sorts of outsiders themselves, "marginalized for one reason or another by society" (253).

As Halsell pointed out, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* also deals with the theme of identity. It does so on multiple levels. The characters, as social outcasts and sometimes villains, (255-256) show the dual nature of the British empire – its heroes are villainous, and even more villainous is the empire that would use its outcasts to protect itself from its enemies. Further, its characters all have borrowed identities. The league is made up of characters from famous Victorian-era books, such as Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson's book of the same name. (256-257). As Vandermeersche and Soetart (2015) pointed out, this keeps with a well-established trend that both adopts and adapts characters from "higher" literary sources to fit into new narratives (4). This work both continues and critiques the Victorian era. During this era, writers such as Charles Dickens wrote books to point out the hypocrisies and abuses of then-current-day British society. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* continues this trend by critiquing the Victorian era (and by extension the modern one) by pointing out its abuses of the outsiders and the marginalized. It also modifies the critique by adapting Victorian characters and sometimes stripping them of their perceived Victorian veneer of innocence.

From a historical perspective, it seems that graphic novels are generally designed for a more mature readership. Alverson (2016), however, pointed out that there has been an increasing share of the graphic novel market going to children's graphic novels. She gave the example of Papercutz, a publishing house that was founded on exclusively publishing graphic novels for children. Because of Papercutz's pioneering, "almost every publisher now has either bulked up their kids' line or is offering stuff that 10 years ago they would never have considered being part of their comics mix" (Alverson 1). So, although the graphic novel has traditionally been the "grown-up" version of comics, the trend may be changing. However, these graphic novels still would have narrative structure, and many of them are based on older, already-published classic books, which still fits the overall structural argument for graphic novels.

From the start, there is already a strong parallel between Victorian serialized novels and Anglo-American graphic novels – both genres are built on narrative gaps. O'Sullivan first argued that serialized narrative is more like poetry than traditional narrative because of the "creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap" ("O'Sullivan 50). According to the author, the six elements of standard serialized narratology are: iteration, multiplicity, momentum, world-building, personnel, and design" (50). Serial elements "cut across" traditional elements of narrative (51). Iteration is a recognizably repeatable element within the narrative ("iterative thresholds") (52). Multiplicity is an element of serialized novels that intentionally moves the narrative to a different location or has multiple narrative threads. This makes the serialized narrative interesting, but also difficult to resolve in the end (54-55). Momentum is the element that keeps the reader/viewer wanting to watch the next installment (often using cliffhangers) (55). World-building has to do with creating an imaginary physical environment for the narrative (the concept of time is also closely interwoven) (57) "Personnel" is usually considered "characters," but the interaction / point of view / introduction / subtraction of "personnel" makes this category more complex (58-59). "Design" has to do with a general awareness of how an author creates and follows a standardized pacing in his or her work (59).

Using these sources, I analyzed *Maus*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Hard Times* to answer these questions: how do the uses of timeline and visual gaps, along with treatment of outsider characters, create continuing parallels between the Victorian serialized novel and the modern graphic novel?

Method

Materials or Apparatus

Both primary and secondary sources were used to conduct research. Research databases (such as CSU OneSearch, MLA International Bibliography Database, JSTOR, Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory, and Worldcat) were used to gather background information on the roots of graphic narrative, establishing both the content and the structure of the narratives depicted in each piece of work. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*

were used as the two examples of Victorian serialized novels. Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*, *Maus II: And Here my Troubles Began* and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* were used as primary sources for the graphic novels.

Procedure

Research focused on two specific frames of analysis. First, the research focused on the presence of gaps within the narratives. Serialized novels generally had specific time gaps between when each installment came out to the reading public. By using source materials, the narratives were broken down into their originally published pieces (often by chapters or groups of chapters) so that the representation and the significance of the time gap could be analyzed. For each gap, a few key elements were analyzed and taken into consideration: 1) how much time took place between when each piece of the story was actually published, 2) whether there was a corresponding time narrative gap within the story (and how much time passed), 3) if there was not a time gap in the story, what changed to signify a breaking off point, and 4) what visual elements helped signal each distinct part of the serialized novel. Additionally, this study picked one keystone character from each novel to analyze their outsider status within the story. For *Oliver Twist*, the chosen character was, of course, Oliver. For *Hard Times*, the character was Sissy Jupe. For *Maus*, the character was Vladek Spiegelman. For *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the character was Miss Murray. Each character was assessed based upon how they were separated from general society, how they were separated from their peers, and whether they were considered a hero in the overall narrative.

Design

This study was non-experimental. It was a qualitative design, constructing a framework for defining a graphic novel and establishing parallels in structure, content, and purpose among all of the literary and artistic cultural artifacts to be examined.

Results

From a publication standpoint, the Anglo-American graphic novels and Victorian novels being discussed are obviously parallel. Each of them was printed in separate installments. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* was printed in one-month intervals (with a few notable exceptions). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was also printed in monthly installments. *Hard Times* had the shortest publication schedule – installments came out every week. Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* and *Maus II* had the biggest publication gap – each section was published on average every one-to-three years, based on the copyright information in each book. Additionally, each novel was originally printed in some other form. *Oliver Twist* was first published in the magazine Bentley's *Miscellany*, according to the intro to the book; *Hard Times* was first published in *Household Words*, also according to the intro; *Maus* was originally published in *Raw*; and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was originally published in individual magazines, according to the copyright page. All

of these were later published as complete novels, as the sources page attests, and as the use of these complete novels as primary sources also attests. So, from the publication perspective, there are clearly strong parallels between Victorian novels and graphic novels.

There are also structural parallels. Each genre used some form of visual marker to break up the narrative. In *Oliver Twist*, each installment had a single illustration within it (see Appendix A). In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, each installment generally ended with a full-page frame, and each installment also generally began with a full-page frame. In *Maus*, each chapter title was given its own page, with one frame of artwork illustrating the title. In general, then, each structural break was marked by a visual break. There were, however, some variations to this rule. *Hard Times* did not have any illustrations, so the only visual breaks that it contained were the chapter headings and the book headings (it was divided into three "books," or sections).

Probably the most unexpected result of this study came when the narrative gaps between installments were analyzed. While O'Sullivan gave the opinion that serialized novels would naturally gravitate toward "cliffhangers," I did not find this to be the case. Additionally, I had originally expected to see time gaps in the narrative for every time there was a time gap in the writing. I also did not find this to be true. While I did find there were some striking time gaps, especially in the Victorian novels, I found that many of the time gaps were either too ambiguous to quantify, or that there was a continuous narrative flowing over the gap. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* novels were the most interesting. They had a combination of stop-and-go time (within the meta-narrative of the author interviewing Vladek where he would arrive, interview, and leave), along with a continuously flowing narrative of Vladek's wartime experiences. Overall, it seems that there was actually more continuous action in both the Victorian novels and the graphic novels than narrative leaps. However, since there were more leaps in the Victorian novels, this parallel is not quite as strong as the publication one.

Lastly, there were definite parallels between each novel's focus on the treatment of outsiders. In each of these novels, the main characters are, fact, outsiders. (See Appendix B) They are outsiders from their peers and their societies. As can be seen, the factors that keep them apart are, often, their race, or their sex, or their economic status. They all suffered abuse at the hands of their surrounding societies; this shows a clear critique of social ills, something that the examples from both genres share. Additionally, each character is considered a hero within their respective narratives. Miss Murray, the main character in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, is portrayed as the narrative's hero – it starts with her, she brings everyone together, and it ends with her. Sissy Jupe, in *Hard Times*, is also a hero. She is the one who resists the forces of pragmatism and brings hope to everyone in the end. *Oliver Twist*, likewise, is the hero for overcoming his difficult childhood circumstances. Vladek Spiegelman in *Maus* is a hero for overcoming the holocaust. However, the genres (or at least these examples of the genres)

diverge in their depictions of the hero's character. In *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, each character seems to possess a native goodness that cannot be tainted by any circumstance – their overcoming almost seems inevitable. In *Maus* and *Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the characters are less angelic. Vladek is stuck in the past and a bit abusive to his second wife. Miss Murray commits fornication with one of the members of the league. So, although each novel has an outsider for a main character, the depiction of their character is quite different.

These small differences, however, between the genres, do not seem to be enough to make a counterclaim that the two genres are wholly unconnected. Although the primary means of communication have changed from the written word to the picture, and although the characterization of heroes has changed as well, it is still notable that there are several strong parallels between the two novels. Based on the parallels of publication and structure, this study concludes that the Anglo-American graphic novel is a literary successor of the Victorian serialized novel.

Discussion

Grubb (1941) and Paroissien (2008), along with internet archived copies of original serial publications, helps frame the timeline of the gap analysis. Each of the examined texts has a balance of words and graphics. The Victorian serialized novel had a text-heavy balance, which for some time has been the traditional approach in literature. Per Lefevre, the predominance of text over illustration seems to have started with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (Lefevre 43). The unadorned page of text has come to symbolize what is "adult," and what is serious and worth considering (even though many texts before this period were illustrated with woodcuts, etc.) (40-43). "Even today . . . neutral, unmarked typography is still characteristic for the bulk of both digital and printing work that aims to look serious, while the marked text has become typical for advertising and illustrated magazines" (43). Including visual elements can actually provide a more stimulating reading/absorption experience and introduce new ways for authors and illustrators to connect with their readers. The rise of graphic novels seems to signal a swing back toward a more visually- instead of textually-oriented literary culture. This research project adds value to my field in several areas. One of the most important things it does is foster cross-pollination between several fields of study. Trajan's Column and the Bayeux Tapestry bring history, architecture, and art history into the discussion, which both shows the interconnected web of culture, and provides another framework to examine both the Victorian novel, and the graphic novel.

Additionally, this project could help to bridge a perceived divide between different genres. Because of their apparent relatively recent emergence from the comic book genre, graphic novels are sometimes denigrated as second-rate reading material because some may view graphic novels as either too juvenile or too obscene. By establishing the strong parallels between the Victorian novel and Anglo-American graphic novels, it is possible to

see that there is a logical continuity of subject matter, artistic method, and narrative structure. This may perhaps help intrigue those who would otherwise not have experienced the genre.

For those who already read graphic novels but mostly stay away from longer, older, more sparsely illustrated books, this project may have a similar affect. Many of the narrative conventions, many of the visual conventions, and some of the characters of Anglo-American graphic novels are borrowed from Victorian-era literature. By showing these readers the deep roots of this genre, this project could perhaps spark an interest to dig further into previously untouched material.

As with every research project, this is only a jumping-off point for more research. This research has had several limitations. Firstly, the sample size of novels could have been greater. Charles Dickens, although certainly representative of his time, was not the only Victorian novelist (nor were *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* his only books). Alan Moore and Art Spiegelman, although certainly some of the earlier and more famous Anglo-American graphic novelists, are not completely representative of the genre either.

Additionally, it was difficult given the scope of the study to integrate all of the secondary source material into the study once it actually got under way. Because of this, there is somewhat of a disconnect between my literature review / background section and the actual meat of the study than I would wish. Further research may be able to bring together some of the looser strands into a more coherent (and lengthier) whole.

Despite these drawbacks, I think that it is safe to conclude that there are definite parallels between the Anglo-American graphic novel genre and the Victorian serialized novel, and that there is more room for study in this area.

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Appendix A: Narrative Gaps

Narrative Gaps Analysis Criteria and Summary				
Novels and Average Length of Time Between Installments	Number of Installments	Average Number of Chapters Between Gaps	Presence of Extra Visual Means of Marking Serialization Gaps	Narrative Gap: Obvious Time/Location Break
<i>Hard Times</i> 1 Week	20	3	No	<i>Hard Times</i> : ½ of the time narrative break at serialization break is uncertain. Approx. 1/3 of the time, continuous action. Approximately 6/10 of the time location change
<i>Oliver Twist</i> 1 Month	23	2	Yes	Approximately 1/5 of the time narrative break at serialization break is uncertain. Approximately ¼ of the time continuous action. Approximately ½ of the time location change.
<i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> Unknown	6	1	Yes	Continuous action at all gaps except between Book I and Book II.
<i>Maus I and Maus II</i> 2 Years	6 and 5, respectively	1	Yes	Frame Story always has location and time changes (general gap is a few months). Narrative has continuous narrative throughout.

Appendix B: Outsider Characters

Outsider Characters			
Character Name	What Made Them Outsider from General Society	What Made Them Outsider from Peers	Hero or Villain?
Miss Murray (from <i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i>)	She was divorced (Part 1, Book 1) She was a rape survivor (Part 1, Book 1) She had scars on her neck, so she wore a scarf (Part 2, Book 4)	She was a woman (all the rest were “gentlemen”) She was the one who brought them all together. She was the least violent / showed the most compassion (see part 2, Book 6, where she says she wouldn’t want “any creature suffering unnecessarily” She doesn’t kill anyone	Hero. Was the most compassionate, saved lives on occasion. Not a Victorian hero (fornicator in Part 2, Book 4) Story starts and ends with her (she survives)
Vladek Spiegelman (from <i>Maus I and Maus II</i>)	At first, not an outsider. Hard-working member of society, ended up owning a factory, fighting in the war. After Germans took over: outsider because of race.	Past: he was more resourceful than many of his friends, able to survive better, sometimes had special privileges with camp guards. Present: he had lived through the Holocaust, so he had a different perspective than most people.	Past: hero. Survived the holocaust. Present: mixed bag. Hard to deal with, slightly abusive to his present wife.

<p>Sissy Jupe (from <i>Hard Times</i>)</p>	<p>Father was a circus actor – not “normal” She’s an idealist in a society completely dominated by pragmatism</p>	<p>She can’t seem to conform to the strictly utilitarian teaching methods. She becomes essentially orphaned</p>	<p>Hero. Victorian ideal. Wins everyone over, helps change people’s minds, make things better in the end.</p>
<p>Oliver Twist (From, surprisingly enough, <i>Oliver Twist</i>)</p>	<p>He was an orphan, raised in a workhouse. He was poor</p>	<p>With Fagin’s robber band, his incorruptible nature made him an outsider. With Brownlow and the “good” people, his young age and the danger posed by his former associates makes him an outsider.</p>	<p>Hero. Overcomes his situation. Seems incorruptible by nature (Victorian ideal).</p>