

# Comics, Rhetorical Style, and Arrangement

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## ABSTRACT

In the last twenty years scholars have brought a wide range of theoretical perspectives to bear on the medium of comics, each of which has proposed different definitions and historical origins. Theorists have yielded new and diverse approaches to understanding comics and how they convey meaning, but they have not considered a rhetorical perspective – one that addresses the politics of language use as well as the formalized structures that identify the specific manner in which political means are implemented and viewed in language use. This study demonstrates how classical rhetorical theories of style and arrangement can be used to build a catalogue of schemes and tropes that function in comics and that can be used by scholars to more fully explore the manner in which meaning is negotiated in this medium.

## INTRODUCTION

In America, comics have been a staple of popular culture since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but only in a relatively recent context has this medium gained scholarly scrutiny. And scholars' critical views, though much more varied than a single definable term, have yielded new and diverse approaches to understanding comics and how they convey meaning.

Though the critical examination of comics may have emerged recently, the earliest point the medium has been traced to is the pre-hieroglyphic Egyptian system of picto-writing dating as early as 3000 BCE. This system includes images in sequence and betrays a comics-like appearance producing narratives that relate the manner in which humans interacted with the Egyptian gods and pharaohs. The Bayeux Tapestry has also been looked to as a development in comics. The first known reference to this work is a 1476 CE inventory of the Bayeux Cathedral, but it is estimated to have originated around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE. This wall hanging details the Norman invasion of England and measures around 1 ½ feet by 224 feet. It is one continuous story in sequence utilizing both words and images. The broadsheets of Europe, popular around the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, have been considered the next point in this history. Broadsheets are one sheet, one sided productions intended to communicate crimes, public announcements, and other messages to a largely illiterate public. These productions included few words accompanied by dominant images though only few included multiple interrelated images. A Swiss teacher, Rodolphe Topffer (1799 – 1846 CE) emerged in the history of comics as the beginning of the modern form. In his work, he included distinct panels that progressed in sequence from left to right. Topffer is also one of the first know to have written on the craft of creating comics though his term for the medium differed. Developing in much the same manner as the broadsheets, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* recognized the market in the largely illiterate lower classes in America. To connect with this demographic, Pulitzer began to include an extra section in his Sunday edition called the Sunday Supplement. This was a section of the paper in all color hosting, among other elements, comics in the form of the modern comic strip – short multi-paneled stories which had continuity both through the strip itself and sometimes between the strips of consecutive Sundays. Though comics have garnered critical attention in a relatively recent context, the development of the form of the medium can be seen through these past productions.

A process of development is apparent in the above history, but this exploration focuses on the modern form of comics which includes basic structural elements such as the panel, narration boxes, and motion lines. Rodolphe Topffer and those that came later established and nurtured the modern form though those that came before do have markings of comics. For this reason, the broadsheets and prior are considered a type of proto-comics that signal developments necessary to establish the modern form, yet proto-comics are not included in this exploration as they don't carry the focused attention to the medium that is seen in Topffer and the Sunday Supplement.

But the latter aspect, how comics convey meaning, has been the central focus of a conversation in the scholarly study of the medium. And as critical views are not singularly definable, many separate and often competing approaches have attempted to outline a specific framework by which comics convey meaning. These perspectives use a range of vocabulary to describe the many aspects of this medium, but comics studies seems to lack a system of identification for the schemes and tropes operating in comics. By looking at comics from the standpoint of rhetoric

and cataloguing accompanying schemes and tropes, the manner in which meaning is negotiated in this medium can be more fully explored.

### Figures and Tables

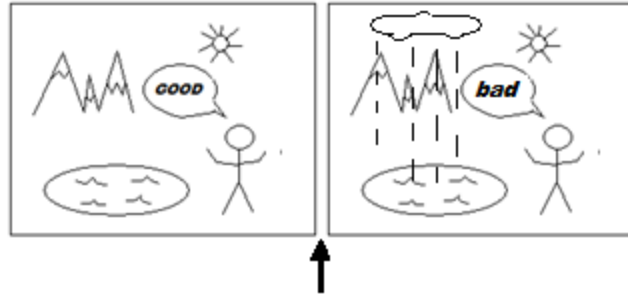


Figure 1. The Gutter

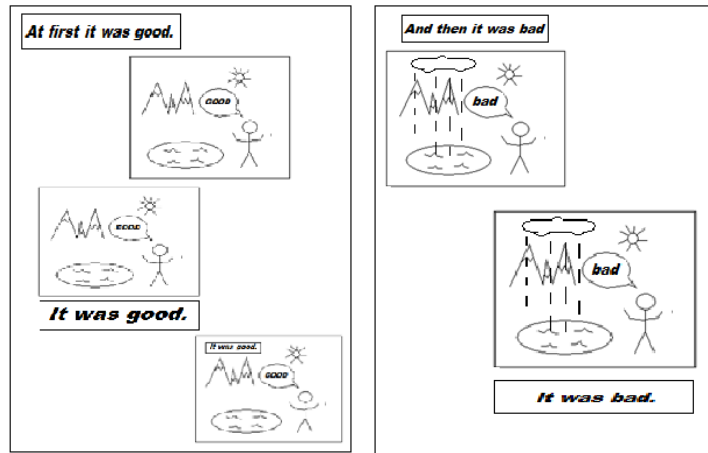


Figure 2. The Page as Macro-Panel

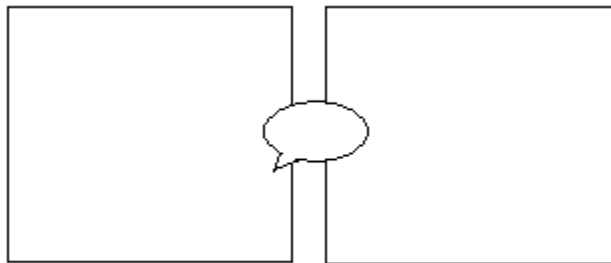


Figure 3. Dialogue as Gutter



Figure 4. Examples of Dialogue as Gutter (from *The Complete Crumb Comics Volume 8* by R.Crumb and *Maus Volume 1* by Art Spiegelman)

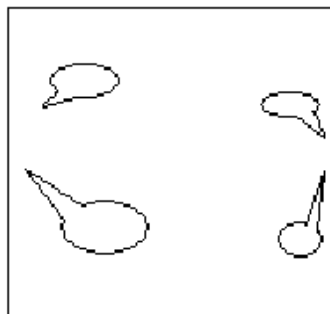


Figure 5. The Absent Speaker

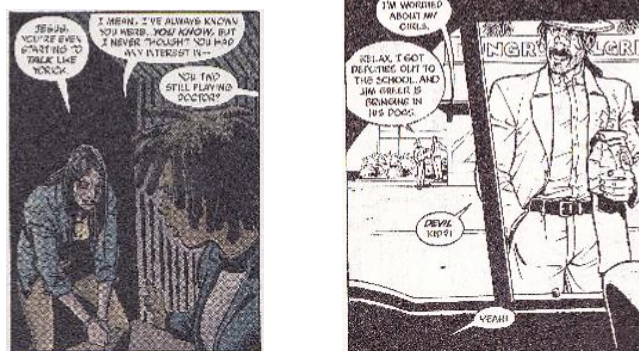


Figure 6. Examples of The Absent Speaker (from *Y: the Last Man Vol. 4* Brian K. Vaughan and *Outlaw Nation* by Jamie Delano)



Figure 7. Stalled Narration



Figure 8. Examples of Stalled Narration (from *A Small Killing* by Alan Moore and Oscar Zarate and *The Punisher: Born Hardcover* by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson)

Table 1. The Basic Elements of Comics

The Basic Elements of the Language of Comics

Element	Description
Panel	The representation of a subject-and-verb akin to a clause.
Panel Border	That which makes the panel distinct similar to punctuation.
Gutter	The space between panels an open and active space to which some have the conveyance of meaning.
Page	Operating as a macro panel – different than the page of the written word but similar to paragraphing.
Word Balloon	The representation of dialogue parallel to quotation marks.
Thought Balloon	The representation of introspection and inner-dialogue related to the occasional employ of italics in prose.
Narration Boxes	The positioning of narration in relation to the narrative though different than the narrative functioning of devices such as 'third person omniscient narration.'
Speed Lines	The representation of motion akin to a subsection of verbs and verb phrases that signify action.

## METHODS

The approach used in this essay to attempt to understand the meaning that comics convey is a cross section between differing theories inside the comics studies community and an approach to rhetoric. The manner in which theorists have treated comics gives not only a perspective on ideas in the community but also insight into specifics of comics and how they operate. And the concept of rhetoric allows for a thorough examination from a perspective not often heard in conversations on comics.

The historic situation above is deeply involved in the practice of comics criticism, or comics studies as academia has termed it. Critique is the vehicle by which differing attempts at the manner in which comics convey meaning travels, and criticism numbers its constituents among academics, creators, and independent scholars. Though this criticism boasts a spotted history dating back to the 1830s, broad critical exploration emerged with the introduction of the modern comic book which has led to the condition of a varying field of theories being brought to bear on the medium in a short period of time. From naratology to existentialism, the 2011 National Conference of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association betrays this diversity in perspectives through presentations in the *Comics and Comics Art* area ranging from “Boob on the Page: The Trans Male Narrative in *American Virgin*” to “The Vernacular Language and Humor of *Beaux-Doux* Comic Strips” (Rauscher).

Despite the implementation of a wide range of theoretical frameworks, the predominant conversation in the critical realm of comics deals with the conveyance of meaning and hinges on common features that point to a set of basic elements. Will Eisner shows these features by pointing to an interpretation of the act of reading from a semiotic approach and states, “in its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols” pointing to both series and symbolic imagery as the defining factors (Eisner 2). Scott McCloud demonstrates influence from Eisner’s definition as McCloud emphasizes the notion of series in his proposition “com`ics (kom`iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce and aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). McCloud also emphasizes the idea of “iconic imagery” which produces reader “identification,” and he notes that it is the reader who makes the conceptual leap in the “gutter,” the space between panels, to generate the meaning conveyed by comics (McCloud 50 – 66). Hillary Chute explains the idea of a “dual narrative track” in which both the pictures and the words send a message independently, and they both – together – send a message as well (Chute 452). Thierry Groenstien, on the other hand, views comics as “an original combination of a (or two, with writing) subject(s) of expression, and of a collection of codes” which he relates only in terms of a “system,” and he points to “iconic solidarity” or “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated” (Groenstien 6 – 18). Even still, Charles Hatfield hints at a definition in saying that comics “are heterogeneous in form, involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes” (Hatfield 132).

All of these outlets include distinctive assertions. They boast the separation between a ‘system,’ ‘interaction,’ and ‘sequence.’ They differentiate between ‘juxtaposition,’ ‘repetitive,’ and ‘interdependent.’ And they all involve ‘codes’ or an allusion to language. But these competing ideas stem from a base of commonalities. Images and words are both accounted for though the emphasis placed on each varies in scale. The inclusion of terms like juxtaposition, interaction, dual, and sequence indicates separate elements that interact. Throughout all these distinct ideas surrounding comics, theorist are working on a set of underlying assumptions while all attempting to describe these in the most economic and clear manner. But missing in this conversation is a system of identification for the negotiation of meaning viewed through schemes and tropes – a hole that can be filled by the concept of rhetoric.

But this term, ‘rhetoric,’ has been used in many areas for many different purposes. To some it means technical jargon; others see it as personal or political ideology. All of these uses are appropriate for their time and place, but here rhetoric is used to refer to both the negotiation of meaning and a system for the identification of schemes and tropes.

In this framework, rhetoric is the negotiation of meaning in language use observable through rhetorical devices. But to leave the definition at this point would be to depart at a premature stage. As a central part of this definition, negotiation points to competition or conflict. Negotiation carries in itself the idea of conflicting perspectives. And as that which has conflict is that which is political, rhetoric then deals with a political aspect of language, or rhetoric is, rather, “the study and practice of speech, not only in politics but also and above all as politics, as the politics of language use” (Hayden White). Rhetoric is the study of how individuals negotiate the politics of language use means in any realm.

The system of identification of the schemes and tropes in this operation outlines very specific nuances of language. In the institutionalized version of the English language, this system appears in the form of structures like

anadiplosis, anaphora, simile, and a broad host of others. This long list, though, operates under a set of overriding assumptions, and “balance, emphasis, transition, clarity, figurative language, syntax, restatement, sound, drama, and word play” have been suggested as main driving forces (Harris).

Rhetoric, for the purposes of this study, refers to both the politics of language use as well as the formalized schemes and tropes that identify the specific manner in which political means are implemented and viewed in language use.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a tentative cataloguing of rhetorical schemes and tropes that operate in comics. Each device is discussed in detail while space allowed for a small number of visual examples. A few of the rhetorical structures in comics, though, are outlined in full detail. And of those, individual names will serve as introductions. An explanation of the operation of the structure will follow leading into a diagram of the skeletal form of the structure. Two examples illustrate commonality in a diverse body of works. The number of examples allows for an economy of space while still showing significant occurrence with apparent operation. Two does demonstrate repeated occurrence, but further quantifying this commonality is arbitrary and ultimately would be of convenient use only – the employ of an equation such as  $x$  number of a structure’s appearance in  $y$  number of works would yield inapplicable results as comics creators use such a wide range of stylistic variations.

Establishing a historical situation, working within rhetorical style and arrangement, and setting a frame of reference for the concept of rhetoric all culminate in the method of analyzing and identifying rhetorical schemes and tropes operating in comics. This exploration and analysis will use, as a template, the driving forces behind those structures identified in formalized English. Balance, emphasis, transition, clarity, figurative language, syntax, restatement, sound, drama, and word play will aid in identifying structures that work in commonality throughout a body of works established through dating though this sub-sectioning will not be strictly applied to the exploration of comics as rhetoric in the English language and rhetoric in comics are distinctly separate.

### *The Basic Structural Elements of Comics*

To start this exploration, the following are descriptions of the basic elements of comics introduced earlier. Two of these are diagrammed in the Figures and Tables section for clarity.

**The Panel.** The panel is similar to the subject-verb construction of a clause; it includes the panel border and everything that it encloses (the panel border and the words and the image).

**The Panel Border.** The panel border is that which frames the contents of the panel. It is similar to punctuation in that it gives framing to the content of the clause.

**The Gutter (see Figure 1.).** The gutter is the space in between successive panels. The gutter has been called the space where the reader makes the conceptual leap from one panel to the next. In the example provided, the reader would connect the idea of ‘rain clouds moving in’ in the gutter between the first panel (in which the sun is shining and no rain is present) to the second panel (in which rain clouds have already moved in and it has begun raining).

**The Word Balloon.** The word balloon is that which signals dialogue (though distinctly separate from that which signals narration). In this sense, internal dialogue is included in the word balloon as it is a form of dialogue. Differing nuances of style are employed to denote spoken dialogue from internal dialogue though both utilize the same basic element – the word balloon.

**The Narration Box.** Similar to – but different from – the word balloon, the narration box is that which indicates narration and demonstrates its relation to the narrative. Though at times stylistic variations (such as the absence of a defined border for the narration box or the inclusion of dialogue in narration) obscure the identification of the narration box, a comic that has narration has a narration box. This may be abstract especially in the case of the absent narration box, yet the absence or obscuring of a material defining line, such as a border, still carries the implication of a specific space for narration thus confining it to a hypothetical ‘box.’

**The Page, The Macro-Panel (see Figure 2.).** Just as the panel is akin to a clause, often the page is utilized (within the context of the whole comic) as a grand scale panel. The page can and will contain more than a single clause, but by positioning specific sequences of panels on one page and juxtaposing the sequence of panels on the next page, the creator is able to give a panel like quality of sequence to the pages (more than just successive pages in a narrative where a story simply continues on the next page – the macro-panel includes the element of positioning against and in relation to).

**Motion Lines.** Motion lines are a visual cue for action and direction. Depending on the style of the creator, motion lines can also convey the intensity with which a motion occurred. Motion lines are similar to a subsection of

verbs that indicate action – the action verbs (though only limitedly, the motion lines would convey the direction and intensity of the action while the image itself would convey the nature of the action).

### *Emphasis*

**Still Frame Continuing Dialogue.** By keeping an image static and varying the dialogue, still frame continuing dialogue emphasizes the changing written word over the unchanging image.

**Panel Internalized Dialogue.** By including many focal points of a dialogue inside of one image, the panel internalized dialogue emphasizes the image over the dialogue.

### *Panel Transition*

**Dialogue as Gutter (see Figure 3. and Figure 4.).** By placing dialogue in the gutter, or the place where the reader makes the conceptual leap between panels, the reader is forced to read dialogue as opposed to make connections between panels. Dialogue as gutter removes the task of transitioning from the reader and replaces this responsibility with a premade transition – the balloon.

**The Introductory Overlaid Panel.** The Introductory Overlaid Panel subordinates one panel to an independent encasing panel. The subordinate panel works as a transition or introduction to the independent panel working similar to the Narration as Panel Introduction.

**Overlaid Panel as End-Panel Transition.** By subordinating (in terms of size and location) an interior panel, this structure transitions from the independent enclosing panel to the next panel by means of the subordinate panel.

**Narration as Panel Introduction.** By operating as segue between the preceding story line and that which follows in the panel, narration here becomes a device of transition. That inside the narration box guides the reader into the image that follows.

### *Abstraction*

**The Absent Panel Border.** The Absent Panel Border obscures the separation between the content of each panel adding a stream of conscious feeling. Though the panel border is not explicitly present, the grouping of images, dialogue, and narration separates absent-border panels from each other – though the panel border is absent, the panel is retained (the border is present through the absence of a border).

**Free Text Narration.** Text is situated inside the panel but is restricted by no material border lending a blending of narration with the image.

**The Absent Speaker (see Figure 5. and Figure 6.).** Dialogue is overlaid on an image that does not contain the speaker or speakers. This allows for the suggestion of the speaker but adds a conceptual separation of the words and images as the source of dialogue is abstracted. Word balloon directionals often point to the location of the speaker and sometimes bleed out of the panel (i.e. off-panel, in a building in the image, behind an obstruction).

**The Represented Speaker.** Similar to the absent speaker, the represented speaker includes in the panel an abstraction of the person speaking. This could appear in the form of a body part or an image associated with the speaker. Differing uses of the Represented Speaker use differing representations. In an image of a hand and telephone from *The Killer*, the abstraction of the speaker is represented in the hand. Another example, from *Magnus: Robot Hunter 4000 A.D.*, illustrates the image associated with the speaker; though the speaker is not shown in the panel, a water vessel in which the speaker is traveling serves as an abstraction (Jacamon 23, Manning 115).

### *Figuration*

**The Electronic Voice or Sound.** A variation on the word balloon, the static or monotone sound often associated with electronics is expressed by varying the line used to define the word balloon.

**Emotion Lines.** Unlike emotion expressed in the written word or through nuances of lettering, emotion lines (often emanating from a character's head) can convey any number of feelings or emotions depending on stylistic variation in the image. As can be seen in an example from *Scott Pilgrim* where columns of hearts serve this function, emotion lines don't always come in the form of a line. Yet they do stem from a point of origin and emanate in a specific direction (O'Malley).

**The Present Narrator.** By including the narrator as an image, the narration itself becomes dialogue closing the gap between narration and narrative. Though the Present Narrator is sometimes pictured inside the narration box, the narrator may appear anywhere throughout the comic. Two examples illustrate differing appearances of the Present Narrator. Stan Mack uses a narrator that is free floating between panels while the Old Witch from EC's *The Haunt of Fear* is often enclosed in a panel (Mack 18, Ingels 205).

**Image as Dialogue.** By supplanting the content of a thought balloon or word balloon with an image, Image as

Dialogue gives central importance to the contents of the balloon by making those contents other than what is expected, and it alludes to the inadequacy of words to express those contents.

### *Sequence*

**The Multi-Paneled Panel.** By utilizing the absent panel, twice or more, inside of a seemingly single panel, the Multi-Paneled Panel subordinates a number of panels inside of one panel border. This structure functions similarly to subordination in the written word and is often employed with the page as macro-panel.

**Cross-Panel Dialogue.** This is the most basic organization of the word balloon – it provides a balance between images and dialogue. An example of Cross-panel Dialogue would show a series of panels each including limited word balloons – the word balloons in each panel would cover very specific pieces of dialogue that assist in driving the narrative from preceding and to following panels.

**Epanalepsis of Image.** The epanalepsis of image repeats the first image in the series (of three or more panels) initially and finally. This gives primacy to the repeated image as it is both first and last in the series – both the most and the second most emphasized positions in a sequence or series.

### *Distance*

**External Narration Box.** Text is placed outside of the panel and is sectioned-off with its own border. This device allows a distancing of the narration from the story though the two are still connected by commonality in panel border use.

**Free Text External Narration.** Text is situated outside the panel and is not restricted by any material border. This allows the furthest separation of narration from story as the free-text is not confined to the panel by any border.

**Staled Narration (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).** By beginning narration in one panel and continuing it through consecutive panels (through the use of ellipses or dashes), staled narration allows for an insertion into the process of narration much like the paired dashes or paired commas in prose. This insertion is something that isn't necessary to the structure, or syntax, of the comic but may be necessary for the content.

## CONCLUSION

This rhetorical exploration into the medium of comics focuses on the negotiation of meaning and the cataloguing of schemes and tropes in comics. In looking at and identifying these rhetorical devices, this study also exposes schemes and tropes as the negotiation of the politics of language use in comics. Yet analyzing the rhetorics of comics has bred new and diverse areas of inquiry. Both the way comics convey meaning and the operation of the underlying assumptions behind the rhetorical devices in that process are integral to the cataloguing of rhetorical schemes and tropes in comics though these issues are treated briefly in the scope of this work.

The basic elements of comics offer a ground-floor entrance into the medium, and these elements have been called the constituent parts of a “language of comics” (McCloud Chpt. 2). The tenets of this language, however, have not been fully explored from any significant angle. Some have pointed to the basic elements as a grammar though this system has not been appropriately outlined in any significant manner. To more fully understand the manner in which comics convey meaning and the method by which that meaning is shaped or negotiated, inquiry into the medium of comics must address the question, ‘what is the language of comics, and how is this language outlined?’ With this framework, it will be possible to more fully understand the position of comics in a contemporary context.

Rhetoric has a significant place in this inquiry, yet a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying assumptions behind the rhetorical schemes and tropes in comics will bring a more clear understanding of the manner in which a creator or author negotiates meaning. Borrowing from rhetorical structures in the English language has provided this study with a grounding in device operation. But comics are necessarily different than English or any other verbal language and the manner in which that area of discourse is negotiated. By outlining the operation of these devices in comics, we can come closer to an understanding of the specific way and ways comics, as well as their creators and context, communicate with their audience.

By detailing a start point for comics, considering the current conversation in comics studies, and exploring rhetorical style and arrangement in comics, this study has initiated a conversation. Rhetoric is applicable to comics. Participation in this medium involves political moves and the employ of basic elements. Through these two avenues, creators negotiate meaning in the form of rhetorical devices. These devices show comics as political, and through a cataloguing of those devices inside of rhetorical style and arrangement, we can better understand the negotiation of



meaning in comics. Working from this established framework, we can begin to explore more fully the operation of the medium of comics and its position in relation to those who create and read in this very nuanced medium.

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