

The graphic novel and the age of transition: A survey and analysis.

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The Graphic Novel and the Age of Transition: A Survey and Analysis

Stephen E. Tabachnick

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Graphic Novel and the Age of Transition A Survey and Analysis

Stephen E. Tabachnick

Owing to a large number of excellent adaptations, it is now possible to read and to teach a good deal of the Transition period literature with the aid of graphic, or comic book, novels. The graphic novel is an extended comic book, written by adults for adults, which treats important content in a serious artistic way and makes use of high-quality paper and production techniques not available to the creators of the Sunday comics and traditional comic books. This flourishing new genre can be traced to Belgian artist Frans Masereel's wordless woodcut novel, *Passionate Journey* (1919), but the form really took off in the 1960s and 1970s when creators in a number of countries began to employ both words and pictures. Despite the fictional implication of graphic "novel," the genre does not limit itself to fiction and includes numerous works of autobiography, biography, travel, history, reportage and even poetry, including a brilliant parody of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* by Martin Rowson (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) which perfectly captures the spirit of the original. However, most of the adaptations of 1880–1920 British literature that have been published to date (and of which I am aware) have been limited to fiction, and because of space considerations, only some of them can be examined here. In addition to works now in print, I will include a few out-of-print graphic novel adaptations of 1880–1920 literature because they are particularly interesting and hopefully may return to print one day, since graphic novels, like traditional comics, go in and out of print with alarming frequency. Outside of these adaptations, there are completely original graphic novels that utilize literary and historical characters and events from the period. Again, I do not have the space to treat them here. Two of the most famous are Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999), in which Sherlock Holmes, Allan Quatermain and Captain Nemo, among [End Page 3] other Victorian heroes, appear together, and *From Hell* (1991), a heavily footnoted but still fictional treatment of the Jack the Ripper case. Those who may be interested should read Christine Ferguson's "Steam Punk and the Visualization of the Victorian: Teaching Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *From Hell*" in my edited collection, *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: MLA, 2009).

One basic difference between graphic novels and films, another visual medium into which literary works are often adapted, is that graphic novels offer a reading experience in which, as in traditional reading, the reader controls the speed of perception and can linger or look backward at will. And a basic difference between graphic novels and drama, another visual experience, is that the graphic novel can accommodate reasonably long passages of narration, while drama usually includes only dialogue. Another basic difference between graphic novels and film and drama adaptations is that the graphic novel illustrator can draw characters as he or she desires them to look, while film and drama directors are limited to the appearances of living actors available for the necessary roles. Moreover, unlike film or drama, the graphic novel can be seen as the attempt of the physical book to survive in an electronic age by combining the advantages of the traditional reading experience with those of the computer screen, which often provides visual objects alongside text. This opens up the possibility of discussions (in the scholarship and in the classroom) about the different visual media and the history of the physical book, including William Morris's emphasis on "the book beautiful" as a physical object, as well as about the very nature of reading. And improved text readers have moved the conversation about book history and the nature of reading to yet another dimension, since graphic novels no less than prose novels can be read on electronic readers, such as Amazon's Kindle 2.

Regardless of the format in which it is read, what makes a good adaptation from pure text to graphic novel format? I think that two qualities are essential: first, a good adaptation should be faithful to...

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STEPHEN E. TABACHNICK
University of Memphis

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