

## Art with Literature: The Graphic Novel as an Expression of Society

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### INTRODUCTION

I teach reading to students in high school who are behind in their reading. Most of them do not like to read which means they do not read; this reinforces poor reading skills. Many of them can decode but their comprehension is lacking. One aspect of my student's non-reading behavior is that their world is smaller than it could be. I am constantly amazed by how much they do not know about the world around them. Text can take them places that they would otherwise not be able to go. As poor readers, my students rely more on visual images and clues to navigate their way through life. Like all people, they make assumptions and generalizations based on visual images; however, their perspective is narrow. This unit will serve to broaden students' perspective of visual images, history and cultures.

### The Material

In this unit I would like to help my students get more out of visual images as well as text. The visual images I will use include paintings and graphics as well as the images created from the written word. This will meet my students' perceived need for visual images as well as expand their need to use higher order thinking skills. To accomplish this goal, students will first look at an image of *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer, and then I will have them respond to it. I will instruct them to consider what this girl was doing with her life before the painting, what was she thinking while her portrait was being made, and what did she do after she had sat for the painting? Who was this girl and what was her relation to the painter, if any? Next, students will look at *Crying Girl* by Roy Lichtenstein. We will discuss why they think the girl is crying. What would make her feel better? What will she do next? The next image the students will look at is *Shotgun, Third Ward #1* by John Biggers. We will discuss what the people are looking at. What is going on in the neighborhood? What were the people doing before the picture and what will they do after? After students have looked at and considered all of these pictures, they will select one to write a two-page story placing them in the picture and answering the aforementioned questions. Once students have completed their stories, they can share and examine their creative perspectives. I will then introduce a criticism or explanation of the artworks to give my students an opportunity to read what professional art critics have to say about each particular artwork. This will open my students' minds to look at artwork from a different perspective. From there we will talk about the different ways from which art can be perceived. According to Cynthia Freeland, "Gender and sexual preference- together with nationality, ethnicity, politics, and religion all seem to have some impact on the meaning of art" (148). She goes on to describe the interpretation of art as "explanations of how a work functions to communicate thoughts, emotions and ideas" (150). I will present these ideas to my students to give them a broader foundation from which they can interpret, discuss and explain art. From here students will move on to graphic texts.

These texts will be multicultural in that they will include works rooted in Japanese, Jewish, and Iranian culture. The book titles will include *Maus I* and *Maus II* (both by Art Spiegelman), *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (both by Satrapi )

and *Mars* by Fuyumi Soryo. Comics are not generally viewed as an art form because they are so readily available to everyone. Often times when people think of great art they think of museums or the homes of the wealthy; but, actually great art can be found in comics or, as these books are referred to, graphic novels. In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, philosopher David Carrier writes, “The standards of comics include inventiveness, originality, and consistency. The best comics really are great artworks--great by the intrinsic standards of that art form” (95). The works of Art Spiegelman, Satrapi and Fuyumi Soryo have all of these characteristics. Soryo’s work is autobiographical which is in itself inventive and original. She gives insight into what it is like to grow up in Tehran, in a revolution, in a war, and as an immigrant living with no support network. Her artwork and dialogue are consistently strong from start to finish. Spiegelman’s work is historical, biographical and even autobiographical. There is a huge amount of material on the holocaust but none can compare with Spiegelman’s work. He makes history more accessible than other forms of communication. Soryo’s *Mars* is basically a teenage love story. It is so simple and yet that is what makes it so attractive. David Carrier writes, “The ideal comic should provide ... a contact between image and word, to the point that the two form an ideal unity” (67). *Mars* has such a unity that entices the reader to read more and more which is its consistency and strength. As students read these novels, they will be able to look at the artwork to determine what effect it has on the whole piece.

### **The Students**

My students are provocative and inspiring. Their ages range from 14 to 18, but most of them fall in the 14 to 15 range. They can be rash, silly, and hedonistic as well as insightful and astute. They like to complain when they are expected to work and yet once they are settled into a task, it becomes apparent how much they enjoy learning. The majority of my students are considered at risk for failure for various reasons. Many have failed one or more classes, failed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test, come from single-parent homes due to divorce, death or incarceration of a parent. A few of my students are either parents or become parents during the year they are in my class. Some students live in foster care while others have lived in a juvenile lock-up facility and must report to a probation officer. Many qualify for free or reduced lunch. Some fall into the category of special education, some are English-as-second-language learners, while others are just behind in their reading because reading has never been supported in the home. They bring all the baggage associated with these circumstances every day that they walk into the classroom. When I think about it, they are very brave people because in spite of everything, they still want to learn, grow and become more than what they are. Sometimes it seems they forget that learning and growing is their goal but, when you talk to them about it, most of them will agree that this is so. Every year I consider it my personal challenge to select material and create a learning environment that will stimulate my student’s innate need to learn, grow and become “more.” They see and hear information through mass media and music which they do not fully understand; they know they need to develop their understanding of the world around them otherwise they will be left behind. This unit will go by leaps and bounds to help my students make sense of the world. By understanding the thoughts, ideas, and feelings being communicated to them through art and text they will be more able to communicate their own thoughts, ideas and feelings. Everybody needs to be heard and recognized in some form or fashion. It must be very frustrating to lack the tools you need to express yourself. Another benefit of this unit will be that it is multicultural. The graphic novels I have chosen illustrate thoughts, feelings and ideas associated with the Holocaust, Iranian culture and Japanese culture. Often times the more we can understand others, the more we can understand ourselves. My students live in a multicultural society; they see people from different parts of the globe everyday. I have had students from different parts of Africa, Russia, Mexico, different countries in Central and South America and most likely a few other places that I may not be aware of. The school setting serves as a sampling of the many cultures my students may encounter as they grow into

adults. In my opinion, all Americans should foster their sense of tolerance as much as they can through education and experience. We are a nation of immigrants (forced or otherwise) and as such we must do our best to understand one another. Every year I hear “where are the pictures” and every year I tell my students that the pictures are in their minds when they read the texts. They are so insecure about their ability to understand print that they still look for visual aids to guide them through a piece of text. This unit will allow them to have that visual security and yet will provide them with text that is relevant to their age and grade.

### *Maus I*

*Maus* contains not one but two stories. First, there is Vladek Spiegelman’s story of being a Polish Jew who survives the Holocaust, and second there is the background story of Art Spiegelman as he interviews his father. By the time Vladek tells his son, Art, his story, he has not only survived the concentration camps but also the suicide of his wife, who was a survivor, as well as two heart attacks. He has remarried another camp survivor named Mala, but they do not have a loving relationship. As a matter of fact, Vladek and Art do not have a very warm relationship. Vladek is a miserly curmudgeon who throws nothing away except Anja’s (his deceased wife) memoirs and his son’s trench coat. The memoirs are too painful as they remind him of the Holocaust; perhaps the trench coat reminds him of the Germans. Each time Art goes to his father’s house to interview him, there is always tension between the two. On a couple of occasions, Vladek asks for his son’s help with something around the house but Art is loath to help his father. Art expresses this when he tells his wife “even as a kid I hated helping him around the house” (Spiegelman 97). Art’s listening and recording of Vladek’s story seems to be the one place where father and son can come together and appreciate each other.

Vladek’s story begins before the war and before his marriage. Vladek is a successful businessman who makes his living in the textile business. Anja, his wife is from an extremely wealthy family in Sosnowisc Poland. They are married on Feb. 14, 1937. The couple’s first encounter with government authorities occurs shortly after their marriage. Anja had been friends with communist conspirators and was holding important communist papers. After being warned, she takes the papers to a seamstress who lives down the hall. When the police come to their apartment looking for the papers, they do not find them, but the seamstress is arrested and held for three months. Vladek warns his wife that she cannot continue to talk to communists. This event seems to foreshadow what is to come. After the birth of their first son, Richieu, in 1937, Anja suffers from profound depression. Anja and Vladek go to Czechoslovakia to a sanitarium so she can recover. It is on this trip that they first see the swastika flying from a building. In August 1939, Vladek has to serve his time in the Polish army fighting the Germans. As a prisoner of war, he and the rest of the Jewish soldiers are kept separately from the other soldiers. They must stay in tents with no heat while the non-Jewish prisoners stay in cabins. They are given relief from their situation by being allowed to go work. This lasts only a short time before they are transferred again. They have been told they are going home, but then they find themselves in a new town where only the lucky ones who know someone as family are allowed to leave. Those who are not so lucky are taken to the woods and shot.

Vladek finally makes his way back home by disguising himself as a non-Jewish Polish soldier. Back home life has deteriorated and continues to do so. Businesses have been taken away, furniture is confiscated, food is limited, homes are taken and finally communities and lives are taken from the Jews in Poland. As things are going from bad to worse, Vladek and Anja decide to let their son Richieu go to live with Anja’s sister to keep him safe. Unfortunately, life in her area is no better and to avoid the gas in Auschwitz she kills herself, Richieu and her own two children. Because Vladek is extremely careful, resourceful and lucky, Vladek and Anja repeatedly avoid the round ups which would take them to the concentration camps until the end of

the story. Eventually they are tricked as they try to smuggle their way into Hungary and wind up being turned over to the Nazis.

Reading *Maus I* will be beneficial for my students in several ways. It will give them a first hand account of a major historical event. When I have asked students in the past what they know about the Holocaust, they always tell me something like, “Well, it was a long time ago when a bunch of Jews were killed.” *Maus I* explores how the Germans were able to slowly and systematically control so many people. Art Spiegelman makes the story so much more accessible through his artwork. Students will be able to not only read the story but also see it. One might argue that a film would provide the same affect, but a film does not give the viewer any time to linger over the images. This time can be used to infer, reflect and wonder. Some of my students do not like to read because in their opinion it takes too long. *Maus I* will provide my students with a space between slow moving text and fast moving visual medium. Spiegelman illustrates some parts of the story without providing text. The fact that he uses animals instead of people will help my students to understand the concept of a metaphor. Vladek’s concentration camp number appears during the first interview (Spiegelman 12). The placement of Vladek’s arm showing his number will cause my students to question its purpose that will lead to a discussion on the Nazi’s practice of giving concentration camp prisoners a number. We can talk about what that would do to a person. When Vladek becomes a soldier, Art provides the reader with a map to better understand where Poland stood at that point in the war (Spiegelman 60). When Anja and Vladek are trying to make their way through Srodula without being recognized as Jews, Vladek tells Art that Anja looks more Jewish than himself. To illustrate this point Art draws her with a longer tail sticking out from under her coat. When Tosha decides to kill herself and the children, Art shows the determination and anxiety in her face by drawing her eyebrows angled down and sweat dripping from her forehead (Spiegelman 109). This illustrates not Vladek’s account but rather Art’s interpretation of how she must have felt to do such a thing. In the concentration camp scenes, most of the prisoners are mice but some are pigs (Polish), cats (Germans), and there is even a frog (France). This shows that there were more than just Jews in the camps. Americans are signified as dogs.

Because *Maus I* is written as two stories in one, the reader has the opportunity to leave one narrative to go to another without disrupting their train of thought. My students, though, may have trouble with this aspect of the story. To help them with their comprehension, I will have students annotate as they read. They will generalize, infer, reflect, note new vocabulary words, question and summarize. By practicing this activity throughout the entire story students will learn to read actively instead of passively. I will point out to students that if they follow this practice in all of their classes, they will improve their comprehension across the spectrum of disciplines. Since we will only have a class set of the book, students will have to annotate on paper. They will write their annotations of the parts where Art and Vladek are together on the left side of the page and the rest will go on the right side of the page. This will give them yet another way to organize their collected annotations.

## ***Maus II***

*Maus II* continues where *Maus I* left off with Art trying to deal with his difficult father. As Art is on his way to see his father, he tells his wife how difficult it was to live with the memories and lost hope for a brother he never knew. This part of the story will open the door for a discussion on sibling rivalry. Most families experience some form of it but in the instance of Art Spiegelman, his rival’s potential could reach extraordinary heights through the imaginings of his parents.

The next portion of the story finds Anja and Vladek inside Auschwitz. Anja and Vladek are separated and do not see each other for a long time. The Jews are stripped of everything and

tattooed with a number. Vladek is resourceful and lucky in the camps. The first “job” he gets is teaching English to his barracks guard who is also a prisoner but not a Jew. This man feeds him and protects him at crucial times. The next job he gets is working as a tin man. He does not really know the trade but he knows enough to fake it. From there he works as a shoe repairperson. Again, he wings it at first but then begins to really learn how to repair shoes. Through this time he is able to keep in touch with Anja through a fellow female prisoner who is the girlfriend of an SS officer. Vladek is able to send her notes and food. Eventually Anja is almost caught so they discontinue the practice. Vladek’s next job is what he calls black work that involves moving heavy stones from one place to the next. Toward the end of his time at Auschwitz he is once again a tinsmith. He is needed to dismantle the gas chambers. At this time he sees and hears exactly how people are first gassed to death and then their bodies are burned in the ovens. He tells Art that from the outside this place looks like a bakery. It is between these narrations that Art brings home the point of how Jews were treated like vermin to be exterminated. Art and his wife are sitting out on the front porch at night when the mosquitoes begin to bother them. Art picks up an aerosol can of bug spray and kills the insect (Spiegelman 74). As the Americans and Russians get closer, Auschwitz is evacuated. All the prisoners are again put into cattle cars with no room to even move. They are left on the trains for a days where the only times the doors are opened is to throw out the dead. Eventually the remaining prisoners are taken to Dachau. In Dachau, Vladek contracts Typhus, which he survives. He is eventually allowed to leave as a prisoner to be exchanged for POWs in Switzerland. They are taken by a regular train to the country side in Switzerland but there are no Americans around. They wander off only to be rounded up by Germans two more times before they are finally freed. Vladek eventually finds Anja in Sosnowiec. They moved to the U.S. to be close to Anja’s brother and only surviving family member. The last thing Vladek tells Art, at the close of the book, is “I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now...” (Spiegelman 136). This statement by Vladek seems to be a reminder to the reader that even though “A Survivor’s Tale” is about Vladek, it is also about Art as he is in a way a survivor, too. He forever lives in the shadow of his long dead brother.

If my students are going to read *Maus I*, they have to read *Maus II* as well, otherwise how would they know the rest of the story? How would they know about living and dying in the Nazi concentration camps? These are important things to know to have a better appreciation for what you have, to understand what happened so it is not repeated and to have a better understanding of Israel and its people. They can also see how the Holocaust has effected the next generation or the children of survivors. According to David Carrier, “Contemporary comics tell us about ourselves...a detailed book relating a long running comic ... could be very revealing” (84). The question is what does Art Spiegelman’s books tell us, what do they reveal? These are questions that I will put to my students after they have finished reading. The obvious revelation is the destruction we are capable of if we are not careful, but what else? Spiegelman shows people betraying one another more than once. Why? Because they want to live. Everyone wants to live. There is one part of the story where Art, his wife and Vladek are in the car on the way home from the grocery store. The wife sees someone hitchhiking, so she picks him up. Vladek is appalled because the man is black and is convinced that this hitchhiker will try to steal his groceries. What does that tell us about Vladek? That he did not learn one of the biggest lessons of the holocaust; that just because he survived the holocaust does not make him a hero or any more uplifted than anyone else? Vladek is very suspicious in general of others. Perhaps trust is that part of Vladek that did not survive the concentration camps. These are issues that I will explore with my students as we read.

After students read this, I would like for them to interview a family member about some eventful time in that person’s life, and then I would like for my students to create their own cartoon using their interviews as a foundation. These will not have to be long, perhaps just two or

three pages. This will give them some understanding of the process Art Spiegelman used to create his work. It will also give them some ownership of their own learning. I will tell them before we begin reading that this will be expected of them so they will pay closer attention to the story. Hopefully none of my students will have a story that comes anywhere close to Vladek Spiegelman's story, but Hitler was not the only despot bent on genocide so you never know.

### ***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood***

In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, David Carrier discusses the interpretation of popular art. He writes, "What is far away must be brought close for us to see it properly. Interpretation brings close what originally was far away, explaining what appears mysterious, describing strange-seeming things in way that make them understandable by relating them to what we know personally" (88). Marjane Satrapi does this handedly. Most teenage westerners know very little about the Middle East; what life is like growing up there, what it means to be a young Iranian person. In reading *Persepolis*, my students will learn that this far away place can be quite familiar. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi tells about what life is like growing up in Iran during the Iranian revolution and then the Iran/Iraq war. Her story is enlightening and inspiring in that between the text and the graphics, there are many opportunities to interpret, question and imagine. Satrapi is an only child of educated, progressive and Marxist parents. As such, she imagines that when she grows up she wants to become a prophet. This will invite my students to ask: what is a prophet? This will give an opportunity for the class to discuss the differences between Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Satrapi shows herself having frequent talks with God. She portrays God and being white, older, heavy and having long white hair with a long white beard. He is wearing a white robe. After reading this part of the story, I will ask my students what they think God looks like. This should provoke an interesting conversation because many of my students are either African American or Hispanic. I will give students a choice of colored paper and have them use their choice to create a piece that they think most closely resembles God. This will give them an opportunity to create abstract art which they can then put pen to paper to describe how their piece is representative of God. Their descriptions will have to include an explanation of how they arrived at their conclusions. This will provide another avenue through which students can consider the concept of perspective. Satrapi, as the author/creator of the text they are reading, has her perspective and each student, as creator of their artwork has his or her perspective. We can make a list of the different variables that go into creating perspective, such as age, ethnicity or attitude, and then students can consider how their creations might have been different had their variables been slightly altered.

One enlightening aspect of Satrapi's story is what she writes about the veil and the chador. Before the Iranian revolution, women in Iran only wore the veil and chador by choice but once the Islamic fundamentalists had taken over, all women and young girls were forced to wear it. Satrapi is in elementary school when this happens and she shows how the girls use their veils as toys. They tie them together and make jump ropes and horse harnesses when they pretend to be horses. This will provide an opportunity for my students to see that kids in the Middle East are not so different from kids in the United States. From this, students will be asked to come up with a list of as many things they can think of that they make toys out of that they are not supposed to. I have seen them make toys out of pens, pencils, paper clips, rubber bands, and, of course, paper can always be transformed into an entertaining ball. What they use at home is what I do not know and would be interesting to share with the class. This will most likely lead to a sense of communality between students that will hopefully bring out some of the shyer students and make them feel more involved in the reading as well as in the class in general.

Where my students wrap their heads in doo-rags, wear the latest tennis shoes, tie up their t-shirts in the back and carry cell phones to look cool, Satrapi and her friends dress up like revolutionaries. They sit around and try to talk the talk. One of her friends wants to be Che

Guevera, another Fidel Castro and yet another pretends to be Trotsky. Yassar Arafat is pictured but not named. Satrapi also illustrates a conversation between Marx and Descartes. These words and illustrations will create a reason for my students to read about these famous revolutionaries and philosophers. I will put the students in groups of three and assign a revolutionary/philosopher to each group. I will then take the whole class to the library to find information on their assigned person. Each group will have to discern basic biographical information, why are they considered historically important, and which group of people did their efforts impact the most. I will give them one class period to find the information and then one class period to present their information to the class. This will further serve to help my students to read actively and hopefully heighten their ownership of their own education. This will also help them to see how one text can raise questions that can be answered through other text. Once students present their information, we can go back to the book to see how Satrapi depicted these people and then each student can evaluate whether her depiction would match their own. How does their newfound knowledge effect their perceptions?

During the Shah's rule, prisons were filled with political prisoners. These prisoners were tortured and some were killed. A few political dissidents were fortunate because they were able to escape Iran for other countries. These were but some of the conditions under which the revolution took place. Satrapi illustrates the irony of the situation in showing us how the revolutionists released 3000 political prisoners (47) and how people returned to Iran in the expectation of hope for a new beginning for Iran. Unfortunately, the Islamic fundamentalists did not like the political beliefs of the prisoners any better than the Shah did. Satrapi's family knew three political prisoners, one of which was Satrapi's uncle. One of these friends was murdered in his home, one escaped Iran with his family, but his sister was murdered in his place, and Satrapi's uncle, Anoosh, was re-arrested and then executed. As each person is killed Anoosh continues to say, "Everything will be alright" (65). Anoosh believes his words less and less which is illustrated by the fact that each time he says it he is looking more and more toward the floor. As students read this part of the story, they will make predictions about what will come next based on the expressions of Anoosh. From this I will ask students how they know sadness, loss and dejection when they see it in someone else. We will make a list on the board and then we will discuss whether these expressions can be mistake for other emotions such as people crying for joy. I will then have them write down how they respond when they see these emotional cues in others such as in the media and on the faces of strangers, friends and family.

Around this time there are a lot of protests in Tehran. Satrapi had watched her parents go out and participate in protests and she wants to get involved too so she plans a day when she and the family's maid will go out and spend the day protesting without her parent's knowledge. When they return, Satrapi's mother slaps both of them on the face. Of this event Satrapi writes, "We demonstrated on ... 'black Friday' ... there were so many people kill... that a rumor spread that Israeli soldiers were responsible... but... it was really our own who had attacked us" (39). She illustrates her point by leaving a black hand mark on her and the maid's face after being slapped. Iranians had been attacked by Iranians and she had been attacked by her own mother. Students will be able to see the scars left behind by violence and fear. From this, students will be asked to sight examples of times that they were left marked or scared by a family member. They will consider the question whether violence is worse for the attacked when it is perpetrated by someone we know or a stranger. From here students will generalize this concept to a broader social perspective. What kinds of scars are left when a society attacks itself? Has this happened in this country and what were the consequences? To answer these questions, students will have to activate their critical thinking skills.

Growing up in a revolution, Satrapi says goodbye to friends and family who leave Iran to escape the new government. As the Iran/Iraq war breaks out, Satrapi and her family are forced to

hide in the basement of their building along with all the other residents as bombs fall on the city. One day Satrapi comes home to find that the apartment building across the street has been leveled by a bomb. One of the dead is a little girl that Satrapi had played with. My students think their lives are hard and that they live in tough neighborhoods and some of them actually do, but *Persepolis* reveals that the idea of a tough neighborhood can be relative. Many of my students live in gang infested neighborhoods but as hard as that is, it does not compare to trying to grow up in a war torn city. This aspect of the story will be especially relevant because of the war in Iraq. We hear about it on the news and sometimes see news clips but we do not know what it is like to try to go about your daily life in times of war. This will give my students perspective not only on the war but on their own lives as well. All too often students will whine and complain saying a school/classroom rule or grade even is unfair. Perhaps when they see through the graphic artwork of Satrapi how unfair life can be for a child growing up in a war, they may be able to see how the simple rules they have to live by are not so bad after all.

### ***Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return***

In *Persepolis 2* Satrapi tells her story of growing from young adolescent to young adult in a foreign land with no parental support only to find herself returning to the dangers she has left as well as the love and support of her family. When Satrapi is sent to Austria to live with her aunt, uncle and cousin, she finds a home that is filled with conflict and she is eventually sent off to a Catholic boarding school. Satrapi can speak Farsi and French, but her roommate only speaks German. Satrapi is basically alone with no one who is truly concerned for her welfare. I believe students will identify with Satrapi because often teenagers feel alone even though they may be surrounded by people they know quite well and even by people who love them. Teenagers sometimes feel misunderstood because perhaps they do not understand themselves. In the last two years I have had students lose parents; one of these students became an orphan just this year. Students like these really are alone more than others. Satrapi's graphic story will grab students' attention from the beginning giving them a reason to want to continue to read. I have had students read many stories and memoirs of people from other cultures and all too often they fail to connect with the character because as poor readers with limited experiences, they are unable to see a connection between themselves and the characters. The cartoon format of Satrapi's story literally enables students to see a connection. Satrapi illustrates insecurity, awkwardness, intense anger, laughter, pain as well as a host of other emotions known to most people. Before my students begin to read this story, I will provide them with a list of alternate words to describe someone's facial expressions. An example of this would be morose or gloomy instead of sad. As my students read, I will have them look over the page and see if they can accurately predict what they think is going to happen next based on the facial expressions of Satrapi. About half way through the story, with descriptive word list in hand, I will have students closely observe others for one day. I will ask them to look at people they see for their facial expressions and try to determine what that person might be feeling based on their facial expression. They will have to write down what about the persons face made them perceive what they did, what circumstances the person was in, and was the source of this person's perceived emotion obvious. This will benefit students in that it will give them an opportunity to use new vocabulary in a way that involves their whole person. For example, if a student is in the cafeteria at lunch when he sees someone who is laughing hysterically and jubilant is on their list of emotions to look for then they would get out their list to write down what they had seen. It will also benefit the student in that it will get them out of themselves. Teenagers can be very egocentric; by focusing on others for one day they may see themselves in others and feel a sense of humanity.

It is at this time that Satrapi is subjected to bigotry by the nuns who tell her "it's true what they say about Iranians. They have no education" (23). Satrapi is sent away from the boarding school for retorting "It's true what they say about you too. You were all prostitutes before

becoming nuns” (23). This part of the story can generate a discussion about prejudice and bigotry. To initiate this discussion, I will have students write down any specific times when they have been subjected to bigotry as well as times they have been blinded by their own prejudice. We will discuss what exactly bigotry is using the term generalization. Students will look at how everyone generalizes to some degree and how it can be detrimental when we make generalizations about people. We will discuss their attitudes toward people from the Middle East and why they feel the way they do. Students will consider how Middle Easterners have been portrayed in the media, and then they can consider what generalizations they have made based on this information. Hopefully from this they will generalize to think more carefully about what they are hearing and seeing in all forms of media.

Satrapi moves in with a fellow student named Julie and her mom. Julie is sexually active, throws parties when her mom is away and is generally very different from any person that Satrapi is accustomed to. Satrapi is scandalized by Julie’s behavior. She finds herself in an uncomfortable situation when Julie lets a man spend the night with her. This marks the beginning of Satrapi’s travels down a road of self-destruction. In her attempts to assimilate in the youth culture of Austria she denies all she has been taught and all that she knows to be right. She has no parents around to hold her back and reel her in from herself. She changes her hairstyle, make-up and begins to do drugs. Of this time Satrapi writes, “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules” (39). To illustrate this point Satrapi shows herself taking an unrealistically long step with her parents in silhouette off in the background. There is also a scene where she is sleeping but you can see from all of the pictures around her from her childhood that she is troubled by what she is doing. Eventually she writes, “I even managed to deny my nationality”; she claims to be French to some one she meets at a club (41). This culminates with Satrapi overhearing people talking badly about her which causes her to shout out, “I am Iranian and proud of it” (43). The reader knows she is yelling by the fact that the words are written in extra large letters and her mouth is open very wide. My students will be able to relate to Satrapi’s discovery of self on several levels. First, they will be able to see themselves in her. Just like she has tried different hair styles, make-up, and speech to make her self appear to be someone that she is not so too do many teenagers as they try to figure out who they are and how they fit into society. Boys wear big baggy pants, fancy tennis shoes and grills on their teeth to appear socially acceptable but you know that as they mature, grow up, get jobs and become more socially responsible they will leave these affectations behind. Satrapi responds to peer pressure to fit in. Many teenagers do things they are not comfortable with so they can fit in. It always amazes me how different students can be from how they act in the classroom from how they act when you have them in a room with their parents. Which is the true person? At this point in the story, I would like students to consider how teenagers change who they are to fit in? In groups of two or three I will have students go back a few pages in the story to make a notation of all the different ways that Satrapi changes herself to fit in. Then they will consider all the things that they do to fit in. After they have compared and contrasted their own experiences with Satrapi’s, they will create a four to eight panel cartoon strip showing some aspect of changing yourself to fit in and the consequences. They could also expand that to what would the consequences be if someone didn’t change themselves to fit in with the rest of the crowd.

Once Satrapi hits rock bottom in Europe, she returns to Iran to find that life in Tehran deteriorated. The war claimed the lives of several of her childhood friends. All of the political prisoners of the Iranian government either renounced their ideas or had been executed. This is illustrated by having a picture of many people with blindfolds on--the ones in the back are standing while the ones in the closer to the front are falling while the ones at the very front are already lying on the ground dead. When Satrapi tries to reacquaint herself with her childhood girlfriends, she realizes that she no longer fits in like she once did because of her time spent in

Austria. She again feels alone. She is unable to move forward with her life until an unsuccessful attempt at suicide leads her to realize that her life is meant for living. Eventually Satrapi is accepted into the university to study art, marries and finally divorces. She once again leaves Iran, but this time it is her choice. She leaves to continue her art studies in Paris.

This part of the story will be interesting for my students in that they will be able to see how an oppressive government affects the daily lives of people. This is illustrated in Satrapi's art class when the class is trying to draw bodies, but because they are women, they can only draw other women. This is difficult because the woman had to wear a chador. Satrapi describes this class when she writes, "We nevertheless learned to draw drapes." (145). To assess my student's comprehension of the selection, I will copy four to six key pages and white out the dialogue. I will then have students write in their own dialogue with the requirement that they stay as true to the novel as possible. Afterward, they will be asked to write a one to two page letter to Satrapi telling her how they were effected by her work. They will have to include a summary of what they learned about people in Iran, teenagers in Austria, and two questions for her. I will then send these letters in the hope that Ms. Satrapi will receive them and perhaps respond in some way.

### ***Mars 1***

*Mars* by Fuyumi Soryo is a simple teenage romance graphic novel or manga novel. According to Fredrick L Schodt, author of *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, manga is "a synthesis: a long Japanese tradition of art that entertains has taken on a physical form imported from the West" (21). The two main characters, Kira and Rei, are high school students. Kira is a quiet and shy artist while Rei is outgoing, athletic, very popular, but aloof and somewhat cold. Kira and Rei meet accidentally. Kira is sitting in the park drawing when Rei walks up looking for directions to the hospital. She draws him a map on the back of a drawing she has completed of a mother and child. Rei does not give her another thought until he notices the drawing on the back of his map and then lo and behold he realizes that Kira is in one of his classes at school. We learn later that Rei does not have a mother and that is why he is so enamored with Kira's drawing. At some point Rei saves Kira from being molested by the English teacher and, of course, they fall in love. What a sweet story. There are fifteen volumes, but for this unit my students will only read volume one. This is due to budget constraints. Manga is very popular among young people, but I do not think many of my students are that familiar with it simply because most of them are not readers. I think this graphic novel may be the book that gets them hooked on more manga. If they get hooked, they will seek out their own books and hopefully, with time, they will feel the need to expand their reading choices thereby creating life long readers. This would, in my opinion, be one of the greatest achievements that a reading teacher can have.

The artwork in *Mars* is simple and light yet action packed and emotionally appealing. Manga style is to read the book right to left instead of left to right. If you open the book from the back, there are directions on the proper way to read it. Most graphic novels have a sequence of panels that are easy to follow, but with manga it takes some practice to get used to the way the panels are presented. In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, David Carrier writes, "Some comics display three or four panels of the same size in a horizontal array; others, . . . move the eye downward in what Hogarth called the line of beauty, pleasing us by varying the size of individual panels" (55). Perhaps this has something to do with why manga in general and *Mars* specifically is so appealing to so many young people. Often on one page the panels can go from close up faces to showing a whole room or a whole landscape. This seems to affect the pace at which the work is understood. If you're a novice to manga, it takes a little longer to find the right sequence but if you read this genre often the panel placement seems to help move the whole work along faster. When one of the characters

is embarrassed, they are drawn with lines across their face. All of the characters have extra large eyes that somehow make them all very appealing.

This book will be a quick read for my students, so when they are finished, I place them in pairs to write what they think will happen next. They will have to do this in the form of a cartoon, but instead of setting the story in some imagined school in Japan, they will have to use their school as a backdrop. They will be able to add characters and take them away. They will be instructed to change the appearance of the main characters to fit what they think most reflects the students at their school. This will allow them to be creative through words and images. Since my students often times can not get a mental picture from words alone this will perhaps give them a venue through which they can do this.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan One: What Came Before; What Came After**

#### ***Objective***

Students will use critical thinking skills to consider the sequence of a story.

#### ***Materials Needed***

A print of *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer

A print of *Crying Girl* by Roy Lichtenstein

A print of *Shotgun, Third Ward #1* by John Biggers

Paper

Pen/Pencil

#### ***Activity***

Students will look at each picture in turn. With each picture students must write down what they think the subject/artist was doing before the work was done, what the subject/artist was thinking while the work was being done and what they think the subject/artist did after the picture was completed. They will have to consider what preparations were made, what possible dialogue occurred and what actions were taken. When everyone is finished, students can share their work with the rest of the class. The pictures will be hung up with some of the commentary along side of it for students to read and consider.

### **Lesson Plan Two: An Introduction to the Unit**

#### ***Objective***

Students will develop a reason for reading and become acquainted with the format of text for the unit.

#### ***Materials Needed***

Comic strips from newspaper collected over time

White out

Copy paper

Copy machine

Poster making machine

Pen/pencil

Thumb tacks and or tape

### ***Activity***

Students will be given a collection of comic strips that have been slightly enlarged (to allow for larger hand writing) and the balloons will be blank. They will be asked to choose their favorite cartoon and then they will be instructed to fill in the balloons with text. They will be instructed that their text can be funny or not, but profanity will not be allowed. I will take their finished work to the poster making machine and enlarge them as much as possible. These cartoon strips will be hung about the room for the remainder of the school year for students, or whoever happens to walk into the room, to have something worthwhile to read, look at and inspire.

## **Lesson Plan Three: Telling Other People's Stories**

### ***Objective***

Students will develop an understanding of biographies, mixed medium and perspective.

### ***Materials Needed***

Notebook paper  
Pen/pencil  
Drawing paper  
Colored pencils

### ***Activity***

Students will pair up and interview each other about a particular event that happened in middle school. The event will be up to the person being interviewed as to what they are willing to share. The interviewer will take notes being careful to note the setting of the event, the people involved, the emotions involved, how the event started, what happened, and how did it conclude. Then the students will reverse roles giving the other person an opportunity to be interviewed. When each person has the interview completed, he or she will take the information and make a comic strip out of it. Students will have to use their imagination to fill in the balloons because the student being interviewed will not remember exactly what was said. This is where each student's perspective will come into play. When each is finished, students can share their work with the person they have depicted. That person can then determine how accurate the balloons are. We will come back as a whole group and discuss how accurate each person was and how perspective made a difference. We will discuss how background and gender can make a difference.

## **Lesson Plan Four: A Family Story**

### ***Objective***

Students will use critical thinking skills to understand the concept of author's point of view.

### ***Materials Needed***

Notebook paper  
Pen/pencil  
Drawing paper  
Colored pencils

### ***Activity***

Students will basically repeat what they did in lesson plan three except this will be an assignment which they will complete half at home and half in the classroom. Students will interview a family member, preferably mother or father, about some significant life event that made a difference to either that individual or the family. They will then bring these interviews back to class to again create a comic strip. Once they are finished, we will discuss how this assignment is different from the first one. We will answer the questions how did reading *Maus I* and *II* change your

perspective on the value of your parents stories, what did you do this time that you did not do before, and finally what was the benefit of this assignment to yourself and to your family member? Through authorship and doing basically the same assignment twice, students will truly understand what is meant by point of view and how that can make a profound difference in the way something is created as well how something is perceived.

### **Lesson Plan Five: The Consequences of Social Violence**

#### ***Objective***

Students will use critical thinking skills to reflect and compare/contrast two different types of text that that comment on the same theme.

#### ***Materials Needed***

Two weeks worth of newspapers  
Notebook paper  
Constructions paper  
Pen/pencil

#### ***Activity***

When students get to the part of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* where Satrapi is slapped by her mother, students will consider what happens when society attacks itself. Students will be given newspaper and instructed to select one article that tells of an instance where people in the community have attacked other people in the community. Students will summarize the article and explain how this serves as an example. They will then conclude what kind of scars this type of conflict or behavior leaves on society as a whole. Finally, students will compare what they have found with what they have read in the story. When everyone is finished students will share their work with the class.

### **Lesson Plan Six: Self-Awareness**

#### ***Objective***

Students will show an understanding of text through visual representation.

#### ***Materials Needed***

Construction paper  
Pencil  
Colored pencil

#### ***Activity***

In *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* Satrapi draws herself as she grows. At this point students will draw three pictures along with commentary. These will be first, a picture of themselves as a child; second, themselves now; and third, what they think they will look like twenty years from now. Students will also have to add commentary about their drawing where they will explain why they drew what they drew. These will not be shared as some students may feel sensitive about their creations.

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