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Lens 5

Reader Response

Persepolis and Creative Writing

This semester I am in a creative writing class where we focus mostly on writing prose and verse and have spent little to no time discussing graphic novels or comics. However, while reading *Persepolis*, I couldn’t help trying to compare Satrapi’s techniques with some of the creative writing techniques in the textbook we use *The Practice of Creative Writing* by Heather Sellers. Even though Satrapi uses mostly pictures with minimal language, she still undoubtedly uses many of the techniques I am learning about in my creative writing class.

The first topic in Sellers’s book is images and obviously Satrapi makes use of images. Moreover, in many of her images she puts the advice of Sellers to work. For instance, Sellers suggests showing action rather than just telling. That is exactly what Satrapi does throughout the entire novel; she shows us the action in her images. One of my favorite image sequences that she uses actually involves no language at all on pages 307-309. Here, she chronicles the police chasing after her friend and him dying during the pursuit. Without language, Satrapi avoids all thoughts and simply shows the reader action. This inherently intense moment, for me, with just the graphics, becomes all the more intense and powerful. It allows me not only to see the writing in my mind’s eye, accomplishing one of Sellers’s most stressed goals of creative writing, but it also allows me to hear the deafening explosion of fear and sadness that comes with watching something this grave, the inability to hear language, the inability to hear anything, just watching and waiting for something bad to happen. Satrapi captures all that with pure images – I think Sellers would be pretty impressed.

The second section of Sellers’s book concerns the energy of a piece. One of Sellers’s first pieces of advice deals with giving stories that you, as a writer, know about, have some sort of experience with, some sort of authority on. *Persepolis* being a memoir immediately allows Satrapi to strike a good note when it comes to energy. Pace, an energy-creating method that Sellers describes, is another Satrapi employs masterfully. Sellers suggests varying pace, never keeping it moving too slow or too fast for too long. This is something Satrapi does beautifully in her pictures. In one picture, she might be depicting a moment by moment action movement of a character and in the next time might be far more spread out. She often does this by having a series of small graphics depicting small time frames followed by a larger summary image. For example in the chapter called *The Key,* Satrapi chronicles Marjane and her mother blow drying their hair and reading the newspaper in eight different pictures detailing the real-time movements of the characters. On the adjacent page, there is one big image that summarizes the practice of what Marjane is forced to do every day at school, mourn the dead and beat their breasts (94-95). This contrasts a specific discussion between mother and daughter about current events with an image that encapsulates what happens to Marjane every day at school. Satrapi contrasts the real time with a summary image thus showing her capabilities to speed up and slow down time in the matter of one page, filling her piece with energy. This keeps the piece from being boring and monotonous and keeps the readers on their toes, as Sellers explains. Also, Sellers discussion of sentence variation could be compared to the size variations of Satrapi’s graphics, some are very small, some take up a whole page, others a half etc. If all of the pictures were to be the same length, it would be boring and dry just as if a prose writer were to write all of his or her sentences with the same structure or length.

Tension is another aspect of Sellers’s discussion of creative writing. This aspect is certainly not a problem for Satrapi. Perhaps it is because her life story truly is filled with tension, but the way she journeys through her life keeps readers constantly on their toes. Danger and desire are two elements of tension with which Satrapi is a pro. Marjane’s character is definitely full of desire, and her desire constantly conflicts with the expectations of her government, surrounding society, and/or her peers. Whether she wants to be a prophet -- doubted by her parents -- wants to be able to have sex with whoever she wants -- criticized by her friends -- or wants to drink alcohol and walk around Iran without veil -- forbidden by the government. Not only does she often have desires that are at odds with her situation, her desires also tend to possibly lead to very dangerous outcomes as exemplified by people like her uncle who died for his cause. Sellers stresses that the character’s desire should be at odds with her situation but the desire and the anti-desire should have an equal likelihood of being successful. Satrapi gives the readers many successes for Marjane (her having sex with multiple partners out of wedlock), but she contrasts this with some failures (her feeling pressured to get married young). These combinations of desire and danger pack Satrapi’s piece with tension even though her use of words is minimal. I think Satrapi masterfully uses images to forcibly assert the amount of danger the character’s in the memoir face. For example, the picture with the flaming ghosts on page 15 and the picture showing the family friend Ahmadi’s assassination on page 52. Both of these pictures scream danger with only a few words but undoubtedly increase Sellers’s element of tension.

These are just some examples of Satrapi incorporating many of the elements of creative writing that I am learning about from Heather Sellers. Initially, being skeptical of graphic novels, analyzing her book compared to suggestions for what I might call “real” creative writing helps me appreciate this art form more. Will I continue to read a plethora of graphic novels? No probably not; I love words and it seems graphic novels using words sparsely. However, my respect and appreciation for graphic novels has certainly improved looking at the book in this way. It also shows me that I have a lot to learn and understand about the strategies of writing in this genre, and the more I learn about it, hopefully the more I will appreciate it.

**Work Cited:**

Sellers, Heather. *The Practice of Creative Writing*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008. Print.