About Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

Contact Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

Editorial Board: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

Comic Books: Origin, Evolution and Its Reach

S Manoj
Assistant Professor of English,
Agurchand Manmull Jain College (Shift II),
Affiliated to the University of Madras
Meenambakkam, Chennai 600114.

Abstract:

This research article traces the origin of comics and its growth as an art form. It categorizes the different phases of comics and explains the salient features of comics to differentiate it from the other mediums. It also touches on the comic books and its variants around the globe.

Keywords: Comics, Origin, Evolution, Popularity, Graphic Novels, Manga series.

Origin

The earliest known comic book is *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* which was originally published in several languages in Europe in 1837. It was designed by Switzerland's Rodolphe Töpffer, who has been considered in Europe as the creator of the picture story. *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* is 40 pages long and measured 8 ½" x 11".

Picture – 1: The first ever comic book, *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*.

The book was side stitched, and inside there were 6-12 panels per page. It didn't use the words inside balloons for the narrative part, but it had text under the panels to describe the story. A copy of it was recently discovered in 1998 in Oakland, California. It was a breakthrough of sorts as it was earlier believed that *The Yellow Kid* (The Yellow Kid was the name of a lead comic strip character that ran from 1895 to 1898 in Joseph Pulitzer's New York World, and later William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal. Created and drawn by Richard F. Outcault in the comic strip *Hogan's Alley*) was the first comic book reprint collection of comic strips.

Evolution of Comics

Comics have evolved a lot from its origin, and the major changes that it went through can be divided into four different ages starting with the Victorian or the Platinum Age, the Golden Age, the Silver Age, and the Bronze Age. These four ages help one to distinguish the characteristic features of that age and the types of comics that were prominent during those times.

The Platinum Age

The age starts with the famous comic book *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* coming out in 1897. It was a Black and White comic book which was 196 pages long. The word "comic book" came into usage with this book as the word was first used on its back cover. This comic book was the starting point which is now called The Platinum Age. In 1901 the first ever color comic book *The Blackberries* came out. Then *Buster Brown* was published in 1902 by Cupples & Leon. It was also a huge success as a product, many corporate bigwigs made huge profits by making the comic characters as an element to sell their products.

In 1922 the first monthly comic book came out. It was titled *Comics Monthly* which lasted for 12 issues. In 1929 the Dell publishing group came out with the tabloid-sized format comic book called *The Funnies*. The 1930s saw the famous Walt Disney entering the comic book industry with their *Mickey Mouse Book* by Bibo and Lang. It resembled a magazine in its structure which had a variety of songs, games, and stories in it. The first Mickey Mouse comic book *The Adventures of Mickey Mouse* came out in 1931. Not all comics sold in this era were for children as some adult comics were sold through indirect means which were thought to be done by members of organized crime.

The idea of free comics picked up in the 1930s which was the times of depression and running a printing press cost a whole lot of money, it was also a good way to popularize comic books. In1936, Chicago Tribune Syndicate teamed up with Max Gaines, his assistant Sheldon Mayer and George Delacorte and created Popular Comics featuring a huge amount of well-known characters. Dick Tracy, Terry & the Pirates, Skippy, Mutt and Jeff, Tailspin Tommy, were among them. In 1936 King Comics entered the arena with their famous comic characters being Flash Gordon, Mandrake the Magician, Little Lulu, and The Phantom. The Comics Magazine series saw the arrival of the first masked superhero named The Clock. 1937 saw the

Detective Comics #1 coming out which set the pace and style for a comic book superhero with the character of Superman.

The Golden Age

The age saw the emergence of comic characters (superheroes) which seemed larger than life. There was Superman, who is the very first comic character to have powers far beyond a normal human being and could fly in the air, leap over tall buildings, and escape from a bullet in a fraction of a second. Fact remains that superman is on the top of 10 most famous characters of all time.

In May 1939 the *Detective Comics #27* came out which saw the first appearance of Batman. While Superman was colorful, Batman was darkness filled. The character was created by Bob Kane. Batman didn't have super powers; he is assisted by his mind and gadgets which places him on par with the other omnipotent superheroes.

Marvel Comics came out with their set of superheroes with the *Fantastic Four* which consisted of four comic characters, The Human Torch, Ka-Zar, The Angel, and The Masked Raider. In 1941, *Pep Comics #22* came out with the comic character of Archie Andrews which is a runaway success till date. The story is about a teenage boy who is entangled in a love triangle.

After the World War II the superhero comics started to lose its sheen. To add insult to wounds the whole comic book industry was shaken with the book *Seduction of the Innocent* being published in 1954 by Dr. Fredric Wertham, a well-known American psychologist. He came up with an argument that comics corrupts the minds of its readers, especially it influences the kids in a wrong way. This in turn led to the formation of Comics Code Authority 1954 by the publishers themselves.

The Silver Age

This era saw the resurgence of the superhero comics which were put on a standstill due to the outcome of Dr. Wertham's book. It started with *Showcase #4,* starring The Flash. Bringing back the comic character of The Flash brought superheroes back into play, and changed the comic industry to this day. This age certainly belongs to Marvel Comics as they kept on experimenting by coming up with new superheroes. The most popular superhero that Marvel produced is the Spiderman, who is a youth to whom the children can relate to. He was a geek at his school that accidentally gets bitten by a spider which turns him to a superhero who exhibits the power of a spider. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were the writers who played a main role in Marvel's unanimous success in this era. X-men created by Marvel Comics, is the best among superhero teams. Marvel also was the first comics to introduce a first black superhero named the Black Panther in *Fantastic Four*.

The Bronze Age

Comics took a turn in this age as they moved on from the conventional superhero sphere. The age was a gain for DC Comics as they acquired the services of Jack Kirby, who previously played a huge role in Marvel's success. In 1970, Marvel came out with a different type of hero called Conan the Barbarian. The comic character was made further famous with Arnold Schwarzenegger's portrayal of the titular character in the movie of the same name. Conan wasn't a marvel created hero as the character was taken from the series by Robert E Howard. The year 1970 saw the comic characters of Green Lantern and Green Arrow dealing and solving social issues. In 1971, Marvel Comics broke the rule of Comics Code Authority with their issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man #96-98* dealing with the issues relating to drug abuse. The CCA relaxed the stringent rules after the success of the comic book series which helped spread social messages.

This era saw the influx of comic characters which were more realistic. One of the prime examples is that of the comic character of Daredevil by Frank Miller. In 1984, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #1* come out. The book was in black and white, and hugely successful. It was created by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird. It is the silliest superhero team one could imagine. *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was so popular that a T.V. cartoon on them was produced. In 1986, Frank Miller came out with a realistic superhero of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. In 1986, DC created a comic book limited series called *The Watchmen*, which was about a group of vigilantes who were forced by the government to stop their actions. It was a creation of Alan Moore. In 1989, the movie *Batman* came out and it was hugely successful and helped boost the popularity of comics. The Comics Code Authority came up with a new set of rules in 1989 which is followed to this date. In 1992*, Superman #75* the titular character was killed by a super villain called Doomsday. This event created major media attention. In 1996, the DC and Marvel Comics got into an agreement to pit their comic characters against each other. The winners were decided by popular vote, while others were decided by the two companies. This is how comics have evolved from its origin, from a medium to a show business.

Cartoons

Picture – 2: A cartoon depicting the profound silence of the government.

The word "Cartoon" is derived from the Italian and Dutch words "cartone" and "karton" respectively, meaning strong, heavy paper or pasteboard. It is a humorous drawing which appears in newspapers, magazines, etc. It is often a drawing which paints the scenario of the times, ridicules and acts as a parody. The aim of the cartoons is to point out a serious issue in a humorous way. It acts as a vehicle which tries to make the public aware of the present scenario and to sharpen their view. The cartoon is a momentary take on the political and social trend, and it acts as a commentary.

In picture no., 2 three characters are present. The person who is lying down is the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, the one who is with an ash colored cap is Anna Hazare, and the one who holds the mike is Baba Ramdev. Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev are calling for the amendment of Lokpal Bill to end corruption. Anna Hazare has lost his hope as the Prime Minister has not responded to their calls. The warnings of Baba Ramdev sounds like music to the ears of the Prime Minister which are denoted with the symbols of musical notes. The Prime Minister maintains his silence and rests under the tree of corruption.

Caricatures

The word "caricature" is derived from the Italian word *caricare* ("to load," "to surcharge" as with exaggerated detail) and seems to have been used first by Mosini in *Diverse Figure* (1646). It is a drawing in which someone is exaggerated in his/her appearance or behave in a humorous or critical way. It stresses the individual, rather than trying to educate the viewers.

Picture – 3: A caricature on Barack Obama's second term as US president.

Caricature is used as a means to ridicule a particular well known personality or their traits. It is attractive and grabs readers' attention as the persona shown in the caricature is exaggerated physically making it a thing of ridicule. Caricatures can be complimentary or a means of ridicule. It is also a medium which is used to serve a political purpose, but mostly it serves the sole purpose of entertaining.

Graphic Novels

There is a slight misunderstanding between a comic book and a graphic novel. Comic books are targeted at kids, whereas graphic novels don't have a particular target as their themes may seem inappropriate to young readers. A graphic novel takes the form of a comic strip but is presented as any other book. It comes with an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) number like novels, whereas a comic book comes with International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) which denotes its short shelf life. It is usually about 60-120 pages long. Graphic novels are not governed by the Comics Code Authority which allows them to come out with uncomfortable themes based on sex, violence and bloodshed.

The first ever graphic novel that most historians agree to be is Will Eisner's *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* published in 1978. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* completed in 1991, was a huge success and became the first ever graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. It talked in detail about the holocaust experience. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986), Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1990), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* (1994), and Avi's *City of Light, City of Dark: A Comic Book Novel* (1993) are other famous graphic novels.

Comic books around the World

Comics as a medium is not restricted to a particular shore, it has spread like a wildfire throughout the planet. From its origin in Europe, the medium has travelled and spread its wings all over the world. One of the major contributions for the popularity of comics is that the presentation and their form, as the comic books were relatively simple and easy to grasp. The form of pictorial narration in which the content was presented was the USP of comics. This was well understood by the marketing minds of the European nations, who made comic books to transpierce into other countries to capitalize on the popularity of comics.

United Kingdom

U.K is home to comics such as *The Beano, The Dandy, Comic Cuts, War Library*, *The DFC* and many others. Among them the famous is the comic characters of *The Beano* and *The Bandy*. *The Beano* first appeared on 30 July 1938, published by D. C. Thomson & Co. Its iconic characters such as Dennis the Menace, Minnie the Minx, The Bash Street Kids, Roger the Dodger, Billy Whizz and Ball Boy, have become known to generations of British children. *The Beano* is a comic book aimed at children which is known for its humor and jokes. British comics are the longest running comics although these days they are suppressed by the likes of Manga and American comics.

United States

The U.S is home to superheroes like Batman, Superman, Captain America**,** Spider-Man**,** Flash, Thor, and many others. They set out to save the country free of crimes with their strength. American comics originated in the year 1933 and gained much popularity when *Action Comics* was published in 1938. This superhero mania lasted till the end of the World War II and after that slowly other genres of comics crept in. With the release of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 the comics industry had a tough time, as the book professed that the comic books had a bad effect in children's behavior and it affected them psychologically. In 1960s there was a superhero revival of sorts and the genre continues to be a dominant force even today. The comic characters which the DC and Marvel Comics created have become part of the lives of its readers, who even go to the extent of mourning the death of comic character in the comic books.

India

India's comic industry began in the mid-1960s when the leading newspaper The Times of India launched Indrajal Comics. The main reason is that most of the outsourced comics were not of affordable rates and there was a growing need for Indian publishers to come up with new ideas and also make it cost effective. Indian comic industry has gone through many phases, where in 1950s there was an influx of American made comic characters translated into Indian languages. The success of these comic books brought a refreshing change in the 1960s with the

advent of the Amar Chitra Katha (immortal picture stories), these comics were Indian made. There was a huge craze for the superhero comics in the early 1980s and many comic publishers tried to cash in on their popularity. With the advent of telecommunication and the other medium in the 1990s the craze has died down gradually. Now, the situation is that many of the comic book publishers merely try to survive in the business. Some of the famous comic characters are Super Commando Dhruv, Hawaldar Bahadur ,Chacha Chaudhary and Detective Moochwala.

France and Belgium

Both countries are well known for their comic books, Tintin (Belgian) and Asterix (French) are the best known comic characters among these countries. Tintin is a fictional character in *The Adventures of Tintin*, the series of comic albums written and illustrated by Belgian artist Hergé. Tintin debuted in *Le Petit Vingtième* on 10 January 1929. A comic character largely based on an earlier character created by Hergé, a chubby boy-scout named Totor. Tintin is the protagonist, a reporter and an adventurer who travels around the world with his dog Snowy. *Asterix* or *The Adventures ofAsterix* is a series of French comic books written by René Goscinny and illustrated by Albert Uderzo. The comic book sketches the adventures of the titular character Asterix and his friend Obelix. The series first appeared in French in the magazine *Pilote* on 29 October 1959.

Japan

The word Manga in Japanese can be translated as "whimsical drawings". It came into usage in the late 18th and the early 19th century with the publication of books such as SantōKyōden's picture book *Shiji no yukikai* (1798), AikawaMinwa's*Manga hyakujo* (1814) and the celebrated *Hokusai Manga* books (1814–1834) containing assorted drawings. Rakuten Kitazawa (1876–1955) first used the word "manga" in the modern sense.

Manga Comics are popular with both adults and the children. They deal with themes like school romance and literary classics, innocent stories and even pornography. The traditional comic strip format of Manga Comics is an arrangement of four panels of equal size ordered from top to bottom. The first panel sets the scene and forms the basis of the story which is developed further in the second panel, and in the third panel the story reaches its climax. In the fourth panel the after effects of the third panel are to be seen where it reaches a conclusion.
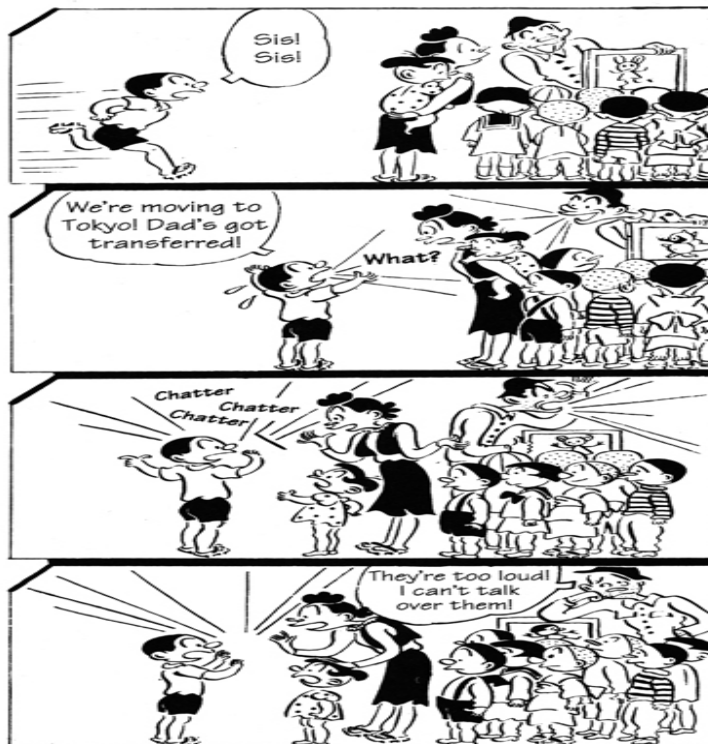
Picture – 4: A Manga comic strip.

Works Cited:

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* USA: Harper Perennial, 1994.

  Print.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life.* USA:

  Sage Publications, 1997. Print.

Coville, James. "The History of Comic Books."*The comic books.com/old/Platinum.html,*

16th Feb. 2001. Web. 1st Nov. 2012.

S. Manoj. "COMICS, IN ALL ITS GLORY."*Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)* 6.1 (2018): 78-82. Web.