

Classification of Comics

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The concept of comics includes three types of comics: comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. These categories are inextricably linked to the way, in which they historically evolved, and thus, they have been listed in chronological order; that is to say, the first to appear was the comic strip, and the last one, the graphic novel.

Comic strips are associated with the typical mass medium where they first appeared —the newspaper. There are basically two types of comic strips: the Sunday or weekly strips, and the daily strips. Sunday strips usually appear in supplements on the whole newspaper page surface, or most of the page with a top strip or topper (ancillary strip at the top of the page), in order to achieve graphic unity. In contrast, the daily strip has a horizontal layout, which only covers a newspaper page fragment, and the whole page where it appears generally has a heterogeneous content.



Daily strips, including Superman.



Sunday or weekly strips.

From the point of view of their narrative structure, both the daily and weekly strips can be a stand-alone or a serial; in general according to their genre, the former is typical of humor, and the latter, of adventure. Serial newspaper comics in installments usually have, all in all, a long extension in time, since the narration develops as an interminable saga, where events take place and situations resolve while others evolve from them almost without definite conclusion. This narrative format can create the suspense necessary to any story, but they face the problem

that much repetition is needed to recapitulate the events of previous days. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the mode of comic book from that of newspaper comics, since with the comic book, comics became independent from the press medium restrictions not only in panel size and number but also in their serial stories format.

Thus, newspaper strips have less graphic and narrative potential than comic books, and only Sunday strips with their whole page format can have a similar freedom to that of comic books. Still, having many more pages than Sunday strips and being organized between covers as a unit, comic books have many more possibilities to realize the full capacity of the comics medium. Since comic books can tell their stories all at once with no repetition manipulating time at will to create mood, they have greater dramatic impact, and visually, they can use different panel sizes and shapes to embellish stories with special effects, and in full color, although this last characteristic is usually shared by Sunday strips. As regards their readership, the target audience of comic books has been typically younger than that of newspaper strips, which were addressed to adults as part of their circulation-building mechanism. This different type of audience usually leads to associate comic books with the immaturity of youth.

Concerning format, the comic book consists in a monthly magazine often with a 19-by-26-centimeter page size, and usually containing three or four complete color episodes; that is to say, with the comic book, short story comics appear. Nowadays, though, comic books tend to develop only one story in a single issue, many times seamlessly connected with other titles of the same character, and even crossing over to others in order to encompass all comics in a whole universe. But traditionally, as mentioned above, unlike the comic strip that bases its narration on suspense to prompt the reader to buy the next installment, the comic book bases its narration on action that becomes spectacular. That is why superheroes with their stories full of movement and excitement are typical characters of comic books. Tension in the intricate plot is not as important as in comic strips; rather the spectacle that the plot intricacy is able to display.

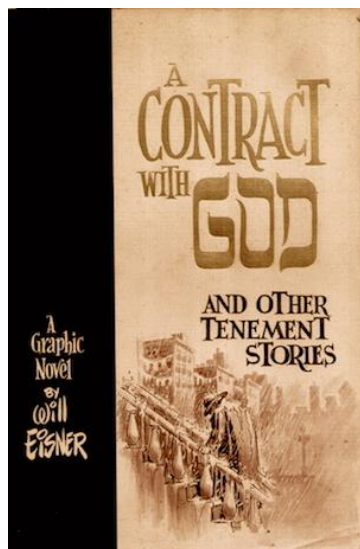
The working definition of graphic novel among many comics scholars is a series of comic books, usually sharing a storyline, bound together in a compilation, or a unique stand-alone comics work. There are other definitions of graphic novel that appeal to its formal aspects, and they take into account, for instance, the number of

pages. Thus, whereas the term “one-shot” has been coined for a comic book containing less than 64 pages, a graphic novel is a comic book of more than 96 pages, and the ones between 64 and 96 pages can be called either. Merely counting pages results in a rather awkward definition with no clear-cut distinction in content, and it is regrettable that a narrative, which is simply longer than the usual comic-book short story in the magazine package and which is bound between hardback covers, can be called “graphic novel”. Comics scholar Robert Harvey has attempted at a formal and functional separation between graphic novels and comic books with the example of comics creator Gil Kane’s 1960s experimental work *His Name Is... Savage*. But there were no other graphic novels following in Kane’s footsteps, and eventually comics publishers subverted the notion of a distinction between comic books and graphic novels by abusing the label in the marketing hype. Apparently, they use the adjective



Page of Gil Kane's *His Name Is... Savage*.

“graphic” to refer to the visual character of the issues, while the noun “novel” seems to be the pretentious appropriation of a long-standing respected term in literature.



Cover of first paperback edition of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*.

Taking all this into account, the first definition of graphic novel mentioned above, which is shared by many comics scholars, seems quite appropriate. It is more comprehensive, and it acknowledges the history of the present-day graphic novel, considered to be an outgrowth of comic books. The graphic novel, then, has been a late newcomer to the history of comics, and comics theorists still debate which the first graphic novel was. The most widely agreed candidate is comics creator Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (first published in 1978), since

Eisner was one of the first cartoonists to describe his own work as graphic novel. Thus, Eisner's *Contract* can be considered as the first or certainly among the first author-acknowledged graphic novels, and undoubtedly as the most popularly recognized stand-alone sequential art narrative to originate from comics.

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