

# Semiotically Deconstructing American Comics: A Century Old Visual Narrative

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## **Abstract**

This assignment (Semiotics of X Final Paper) is designed to take aspects of all the things that have been learned in the course and practice the application of them. Most of the class was spent understanding the abstract concepts found in semiotics rather than applying them to the real world. This assignment gives the student (me) the opportunity to explore the applications of the concepts learned in class in something that is unique and interesting.

### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to view American comics through the lens of semiotics [[47]]. The sections outside of the introduction and the conclusion will be used to analyze specific aspects of American comics and how they relate to the field. To follow up where the abstract left off; there are many aspects of semiotics [[47]] that were learned in and out of the classroom. This paper will be a way of applying some of these concepts to a particular field of interest, which in this case is American comics. The paper will be discussing things such as narrative [[30]] structure, connotation [[6]] vs denotation [[9]], Jakobson's functions of communication, mythology and more.

### **Narrative Structure in Comics**

**I want to write about** visual narratives [[30]] and their structures in comics. **I plan to focus on** the paradigmatic [[35]] and syntagmatic [[62]] elements as well as the structural economy, specifically, how the art styles and use of dialogue create a cohesive and captivating experience **I would like my reader to** understand how paradigmatic structure, syntagmatic [[62]] structure, and structural economy are used to create comic stories.

Paradigmatic [[35]] structure is the concept of examining the content of what a text [[63]] contains or does not contain. It is particularly important in the realm of comic book dialogue. Because so much of what a comic book is, illustrations, the text bubbles that are present are the one of the only things that give a look into the character's mind and in turn develop the plot. As well as dialogue from the actual characters there is narration bubbles that provide context [[7]] for the story. The content of these bubbles is extremely important in creating depth, "though characters cannot see speech balloons, they can hear the words in them, and presumably each

character is aware of the contents of his or her own thought balloons. When there are sound effects, characters can hear them, aware of the contents of his or her own thought balloons. When there are sound effects, characters can hear them.” ((9)) This is used to draw the reader in and create a sense that they are involved in this event with the characters. The author of the story could choose to have the character say anything they choose, have the narrator say anything they choose, display any onomatopoeic word to signify a sound. Most of the time, the content of these text bubbles is character dependent; there is a level of continuity that must be upheld. Paradigmatic [[35]] structure is the way that this is achieved.

Although dialogue and text bubbles are not the only thing that paradigmatic [[35]] structure is used with. Illustrations have a huge amount of freedom and every dot on the page was chosen to be there for a reason. Paradigmatic [[35]] structure in illustrations is self-explanatory. The author must decide what the character is doing in each frame; they must choose how the character is holding themselves, they must choose the facial expressions and body language. Each frame is a blank slate that must follow the preceding one. The illustrator must draw the setting and in turn the effect that the characters are having on it; the damage that is being done or lack thereof. As Danesi puts it “paradigmatic structure tells only part of the semiotic story of how we recognize signs.” ((3))

The other part of this equation is syntagmatic [[62]] structure. Syntagmatic [[62]] structure is the concept of how the information is arranged or which order it is being presented in. This concept is especially important narratives [[30]] of all kinds; comics are not special in this regard as all stories use parallel events to build tension. When it comes to the text bubbles and dialogue in a comic, the order in which it is presented allow for an intricate story to be created. More importantly, this allows for the illusion of the passage of time in comics. As Henry Pratt puts it “when words are added, however, the passage of time within the part of the narrative [[30]] encapsulated by a panel is regulated, guiding the reader's attention.” ((9)) The structure in which these words are presented, where and when on the page, decide “the pace at which we can read comics and the efficiency with which this is possible.” ((9))

The other side of this coin is how syntagmatic [[62]] structure is used in illustrations. Similar to many of the points made in the previous paragraph, the order in which things are shown is extremely important to creating a cohesive text [[63]]. When examining illustrations alone, the order in which the pictures are shown, what the author decides to end the page on, and the size of the frames is wildly important. All of these aspects and many more create the pace at which something that can be viewed and subsequently understood. For example, a character may be punched and hurt badly. The author can choose to include that pain the moment of the impact, or wait to show the full effect in the next frame, or even pages later. Each of these have their own respective meaning that play a part in crafting the story the way they intend for it to be understood.

Another extremely important kind of structure that comic books often use is structural economy. Most of the space in comic books is dedicated to the illustrations. The space used for text takes up precious room on the page and the idea is that things are written in the most efficient way possible to ensure that there isn't a novel imposed on top of the illustrations that tell the story. Characters are given nicknames and acronyms are constantly used; this practice falls in line with the principle of least effort or PLE for short, a perfect example of the concept within itself. Comics constantly use the PLE "to reduce the physical structure of signs and sign systems so as to minimize effort in their use and to maximize the rapidity of communication;" ((3)) which is mainly due to the restrictive nature of comic book dialogue.

### **Comics: Modern Day Pantheons**

**I want to write about** how comic book characters, specifically superheroes, parallel mythological figures. Mythological figures were often symbols [[58]] for desirable or admirable traits. **I plan to focus on** how ancient myths [[29]] follow a similar narrative [[30]] structure to comics. I also want to explain how the characters go beyond their stories and represent things symbolically. **I would like my reader to** recognize and appreciate the similarities between the two.

Mythologies had their heroes that were given feats far beyond human capabilities. Mythological heroes were the personified versions of admirable traits in human society. Often times these heroes had fundamental flaws, things that their antagonist would try to use against them to best them. As Danesi puts it "Heroes often came from another (heavenly) world, and they possessed superhuman strength, although they might be constrained by a 'flaw' that rendered them vulnerable" ((3)) that is what made them unique and admirable. It was not just the superhuman aspect of them that made them things for people to worship and admire; at its core, the vulnerability, the human aspect of the figure is what made them so incredible.

The incredible heroes in comic books are what they are from the same principle. Looking specifically at Superman for a moment; he was an alien that landed on earth as a baby. Superman or Kal-El was from a dead planet, raised on earth as a human, and had unimaginable power. The thing that makes Superman interesting is the fact that at heart he is Clark Kent. The character is a moral compass for all intended purposes. Restraint is what the character is known best for, he has infinite power that is used for good, and most importantly, is never taken too far. His fatal flaw is that he is rendered powerless when he comes in contact with kryptonite. This is not unique to Superman though, it can be seen in a multitude of characters like Spiderman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Thor, and so many others. These characters are superpowered individuals, but what makes them interesting is the fact that they ultimately boil down to unique and flawed human beings like the rest of us.

There are very clear comparisons between ancient myths [[29]] and modern-day comic book characters. These figures often "help weaker humans and defeat villains" ((3)) all while being uniquely human at heart. Just as Achilles had his heel that was vulnerable, Spiderman has

his friends and family that are constantly targeted to hurt him. Superman has kryptonite and his undying restraint; Hercules has his temper and lack of foresight. Although people do not believe that comic book characters are real in today's age, they hold the same spot in society's view. It is clear that "they're no longer what the Greek myths were to the Greeks – they're what they were to western civilization centuries later," ((2)) something not to be taken literally, but figuratively. These figures are role models for excellence, ones that overcome great adversity in spite of their flaws. They are hope that people, even the most flawed, are, at the end of the day, capable of good. Superheroes and mythological heroes are one in the same, they are a symbol [[58]] for the good that humanity is capable of, despite all of its flaws.

As mentioned before, these heroes exemplify a trait that is admirable in humans. Superheroes as well as heroes from ancient myth [[29]] are symbolic of everything that society deems good in a person. A symbol [[58]] is something that arbitrarily stands for something else. You can pick Hercules to symbolize strength just as you can pick Superman for that exact same quality. It does not matter what the thing started out to mean, it has adapted its own meaning over time. This is exactly what a symbol is. Just as the United States did not necessarily mean freedom when it was created. The United States could have been a symbol for rebellion or terrorism when it first declared its independence from Great Britain; over time it has become a symbol for freedom and resilience. It is an arbitrary connection between the two things, one that was formed over time and through public perception.

When looking at mythological gods specifically, all of them came to stand for something beyond itself. Zeus was a symbol [[58]] for power; the controller of the weather and lightning. Odin was symbol for knowledge; as close to omnipotence as possible. Hercules symbolized strength and power. Athena was a symbol of wisdom and intelligence. All of these figures were symbolic of something and this list only scrapes the very top of the surface when it comes to symbolism in mythology.

As stated previously, Superman is a symbol [[58]] for peace, hope, and strength. Spiderman is symbol for responsibility. Batman is a symbol for vengeance. All of these comic book characters symbolize something broader than themselves. In our culture, there is an unbreakable connection between who these characters are and what they stand for. It is the same vein of thought as the symbolism that is found in myths [[29]].

There is no real difference between mythological figures and comic book characters when it comes to the things that they symbolize. In fact, many mythological figures actually appear in comics. Wonder Woman is the daughter of Zeus, Thor is the god of thunder and son of Odin. Ares, Hercules, Zeus, Odin, and many other mythological figures have their own comic book renditions. There is a clear overlap between the two categories which leads to the conclusion that "the Superman figure is a modern-day mythic hero." ((3))

### **The Unique Blend Between Discursive and Presentational Symbols in Comics**

**I want to write about** how comic use a unique blend between discursive [[12]] and presentational [[41]] symbols [[58]] to achieve a cohesive narrative [[30]]. **I plan to focus on** how most forms of art (paintings, musical compositions, sculptures, etc.) are presentational symbols. Comic panels are presentational too, when being looked at alone they tend to make sense; although the context [[7]] of the story is not obvious when separated from the whole. The whole plot can only be understood when all the constituent panels are viewed together. **I would like my reader to** consider how the blend of discursive and presentational is unique.

There are two distinct ways of interpreting and absorbing information from a text. This can be done holistically, sometimes called a presentational [[41]] process. It can also be done in a linear fashion, sometimes called discursive [[12]]. When someone looks at a piece of art work like a painting, they will absorb the whole thing at once, maybe taking time to look at the smaller pieces of it, but for the most part the whole context [[7]] is included in what can be seen. This is an example of a presentational process as “their very functioning as symbols [[58]] depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous integral presentation.” ((12)) When looking at a book or even this paper, it must be read, word by word, sentence by sentence, section by section. All written texts [[63]] are discursive as “it ties together several symbols with at least a fragmentary connotation [[6]] of its own, to make one complex term, whose meaning is a special constellation of all the connotations involved.” ((12)) These concepts are extremely important in examining how comics are structured and meaning can be derived from them.

Comic books are mainly comprised of the illustrations inside of them. Children often flip through the comic books to see the cool pictures in them. The interesting thing about comic books is that one does not necessarily have to read the text in them to have an understanding of what is happening. Comics can be looked at in a presentational [[41]] process to derive meaning. The text will provide the reader with context [[7]] in the situation, but the illustrations in these books is often times enough to have an understanding of what is going on. The comic book itself “can be almost completely inferred without having to rely on any kind of linguistic disambiguation;” ((1)) although the linguistics of it are quite important.

The linguistics and the different pages of a comic book are quite important when it comes to understanding them in their entirety. It is, in principle, a book; a book that has words and panels that are connecting it into a greater whole. To truly understand a comic, it must be discursively [[12]] examined. The constituent parts of it are important because they “can be considered separately... without impairing the overall understanding of the text.” ((3)) There is a sense of linear progression that can only be had through the discursive process. Without viewing it linearly, there is no passage of time, there is no context [[7]]. On the other hand, without viewing it holistically there is also a loss in meaning. What makes comics unique is their ability to force the reader to examine the text through both discursive and presentational [[41]] processes.

Comics are one of the unique forms of media that “require both entities existing and said entities participating” ((1)) in the reader’s comprehension. While it is likely that the discursive [[12]] process is more important to the actual comprehension of the text, it is also true that there can be no understanding without the presentational [[41]] process. This is why, in essence, the blend between the two processes is so unique and remarkable. This gives some insight on why comics became and stayed popular for the past century. Comics are highly engaging because they allow the viewer to understand things in more than one dimension.

### **Jakobson’s Functions of Communication in Comics**

**I want to write about** how Jakobson’s six functions of communications are used in comics. **I plan to focus on** first, explaining what the functions are and how they are used in comics to great effect. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the different types of communication that the authors and illustrators use and why they do so

The emotive [[13]] function of communication is one that is focusing on the emotion or feelings of the sender or addresser of the message. ((6)) This is seen in comics all the time. There is a huge focus on the characters and how they are feeling; everything from dialogue to facial expression of the characters is indicative of this. Dialogue specifically is extremely important in conveying how a character feels in the moment, giving the reader insight into their mind.

The conative [[3]] function of communication is the flip side of this coin. Instead of focusing on the emotion or feelings of the addresser, it is instead focused on the emotions of the addressee. ((6)) It is a very prominent thing used in comics to elicit a certain response out of the reader. If a character gets badly hurt, the text is focusing on how the reader will receive it.

The function that may be the most important to comics is the poetic [[38]] function. Comic books are telling stories to the reader, stories that are meant to be captivating and interesting. A poetic function is one that focuses on the message that is being sent. ((7)) The content of these texts is wildly important in communicating a coherent story.

Another function of communication that is constantly used in comics is the referential [[43]] function. While it is self-explanatory, the referential function is one that allows the creator of the text to refer to something outside of it. ((7)) Comics are usually interconnected with each other. There is a shared universe between the characters that gives depth to the story through its world building. Comic stories are often referencing other comic stories. The events of Crisis on Infinite Earths restructured the entire DC comics roster and lead to the New 52 storyline. Most comics are not standalone in nature, but part of larger current and past runs.

While it is a bit tougher to pin down examples, it is important to mention the phatic [[37]] function of communication. The phatic function is something that is used to make sure that the reader is engaged in what is happening ((7)). Large pictures, while the other functions are being used in them, are, in essence, getting the reader to engage and pay attention. Onomatopoeic text bubbles are also used for this same purpose.

Metalingual [[27]] is another function of communication that is used in comics. Although far less prevalent than the other functions, it is still used to effectively create stories. Often times, high IQ characters use this function to explain new concepts to the reader. The function is one that allows for the description and defining of language using other language. ((7)) This can be very valuable as it allows the writers to bring new and interesting concepts into their stories without the reader having to have previous knowledge.

### **Image Schemas and Conceptual Metaphors in Comics**

**I want to write about** how image schemas [[4]] are formed and in turn used to create conceptual metaphors [[21]]. Comics have to convey complex meaning without motion or audio to go along with it. The work around for this is to have special art styles to, in essence, fill in the blanks that are left when only perceiving through still visuals. **I plan to focus on** the many art styles and tricks that are used to emulate the other senses through image schemas and conceptual metaphors. Icons [[20]] are also a large part of how the image schemas are formed. **I would like my reader to** take a deeper look at the art and grow an appreciation for the ability to emulate and encapsulate the other senses through sight alone.

Conceptual metaphors [[21]] do not require a massive breakdown to be understood; the main idea is that something is understood (target domain) through another thing (source domain) and that allows us to have a deeper and more universal understanding of the world around us. ((3)) The groundwork behind a conceptual metaphor is the image schemas [[4]] that they are based upon. An image schema is something that “allow[s] us to objectify our sensations and experiences with metaphorical structures” ((3)) in a versatile way. Icons [[20]] are also important to understand in this context [[7]] as they heavily tie into how image schemas and thus conceptual metaphors work. Icons are a type of sign [[51]] that are connected to what they mean through their resemblance.

Comics are a still visual stimuli, meaning that at its core, it should only be able to stimulate our sight. Illustrators of comics often use artistic tricks to convey motion and in turn sound in their works. There are various kinds of lines that can be drawn on or near the characters that convey motion “so that the sound emerges in the reader’s mind rather than from sound waves impinging on the ear.” ((8)) This practice is a way of creating image schemas [[4]] in people’s minds. Another practice used by comic book authors is utilizing “the shape and scale of letters on the page represent[ing] the quality and magnitude of the sound as it would be perceived by the auditory system.” ((8))

Another system that is stimulated by comics is our emotions, furthermore, our understanding of others’ emotions through kinesics [[25]], oculusics [[15]], and haptics [[32]]. There is no motion in comics which makes this practice difficult, but not impossible. Through the art styles and tricks stated above, illustrators can create motion in the mind. This motion is particularly important in the case of kinesics and oculusics. We understand gestures and eye movement intrinsically, they are “ritualistic forms of semiotic behavior used in” ((3)) every kind

of situation. This motion that allows for the characters to be less rigid and more human like is one of the things that makes the characters human and easy to understand.

One of the conceptual metaphors [[21]] that is used more often than not in comics is the idea that big is important. The size of the text and the actual panels themselves are indicative of how important the author/illustrator wants it to be. Referencing earlier when talking about text bubbles using onomatopoeic words; the larger the bubble is, the louder the sound they intend for you to imagine will be. It is important to note that on the pages, “Within that space, artists can manipulate the size, shape, and juxtaposition of panels to affect the consideration a reader gives to each part of the page, guiding the reader’s selective attention to each depicted moment.” ((11))

### **Social Commentary in Comics**

**I want to write about how** comics themselves can be conceptual metaphors [[21]] that make social commentary. **I will focus on** how many extremely popular comics and comic book characters have blurred the lines between reality and fiction to make social commentaries. **I would like my reader to** see how it is very common for comics to be conceptual metaphors for real world problems.

Following the previous section, the idea of conceptual metaphors [[21]] is important to keep salient in the mind. While comics often include conceptual metaphors, they also can be one themselves. Many comics book runs and even entire characters/ teams can be a conceptual metaphor. A comic book run called Avengers: Civil War, is a metaphor for the ongoing division in America. The X-Men, a very prominent series over the years, was originally a metaphor for the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The X-Men, a story about genetic mutants with super powers living in society draws its inspiration for the injustice of the time period. The mutants are demonized by the media and met with very strong opposition in society. The mob mentality took over in this fictional world, leading to a dystopian world where harboring mutants or information about them was a crime. People were made to be terrified of the mutants and hated them in response. Not dissimilar to black people in America, “the X-Men are hated, feared, and despised collectively by humanity for no other reason than that they are mutants.” ((4)) The prominent leaders of the mutant resistance were Professor X and Magneto; one was peaceful and wanted a better world, the other was more ruthless and willing to create violence to prove a point. The general train of thought is that they are a metaphor [[21]] for MLK and Malcom X. As a metaphor, Professor X lines up with MLK, “for years, audiences have compared Charles Xavier to Martin Luther King Jr, in terms of their approaches to advocating for equality.” ((4)) Malcom X’s “was opposed to assimilation, in terms of Black people denying their identities in order to co-exist with white Americans” ((4)) and that is where the comparison between him and Magneto exists.

One important thing to note before continuing this section is the concept of hyperreality [[19]]. Hyperreality is the idea that media has become so ingrained into day-to-day life that the



line between fiction and reality can tend to blur. Comic book authors, like any other creator with influence, have a tendency to let their personal views shine through their work. In the case of the X-Men, Stan Lee was adamantly against the racist views of the 60's and created the characters as a metaphor [[21]]. As time has gone on, some creators have been less subtle with their views and more on the nose with how they feel about situations through their characters. This has led to a blurring between fiction and reality. When thinking critically, it is obvious that fictional characters meant to exemplify the best qualities in humanity taking a stance on real-world problems would, in fact, achieve this.

This is not new in any shape or form though; as far back as the 1940's, "Superman grabbed Hitler and Stalin by the scruff of the neck and dumped them at League of Nations headquarters for punishment." ((5)) This trend has continued to stay prevalent up through the modern times, nearly a hundred years later. In the 1970's when the rise of drugs was occurring, there was a Spiderman comic where "Peter's friend, Harry Osborn, admitted he was hooked on various pills;" ((5)) it caused a huge backlash from the publishers, but the creators wanted to incorporate just how destructive drugs can be. Comics book writers have rarely strayed away from touching on real-world injustice; their characters are quite literally designed to face down the injustices of the world.

Because these characters are revered so high in regards to what they represent symbolically it has created a culture of its own. Taking a brief step away from actual comic books and looking at the characters themselves is key in understanding this. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has had tremendous success in creating a culture around these characters that builds on the preestablished ideas surrounding them. These characters have become household names, seen on screen, in pages of comic books, on the shelf of stores, and even in video games. Everything that they represent created a semiosphere [[48]] of meaning directly linking to how prominent they are in society. The feelings people have about these characters and what they represent constantly oscillates between all kinds of properties including them, not to mention, how said properties are publicly received. In their case, there is no unblurring the lines between reality and the fictional worlds they create.

## **Character Development in Comics**

**I want to write about** how character development is done so successfully through only the use of pictures and text bubbles. **I plan to focus on** connotation [[6]] as well as denotation [[9]] in the realm of comics. The context [[7]] of the situations and in turn, the connotation arises is where the character development comes from. Viewing things from a diachronic [[11]] perspective is also a key reason the character development is so successful. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the characters; where they came from, what they became, and what happened in the middle.

Before diving into the concept of how characters have developed over time the concepts of connotation [[6]] and denotation [[9]] must first be explained. The denotation of something is

the exact definition of it. For example, take the word square, the denotative meaning is “four equal straight lines meeting at right angles,” ((3)) this is the exact definition. Any other definition of that word would be connotative. “Connotation encompasses all kinds of senses, including emotional ones,” ((3)) it is to view something and define it on a more personal or cultural level. With respects to comics, the way I will be using these terms relates to how events in them can be perceived. One can isolate the event and absorb it for what it is (denotation [[9]]) or they can choose to consider the greater context [[7]] of not only the story, but the character as well (connotation [[6]]).

A character like Superman has come from a very humble beginning as compared to the situations that he is faced with in current runs. Looking specifically at Superman’s history, his first villain was Ultra-Humanite, a big ape like creature that was attacking taxi cab drivers. When looking at a character like Batman, one of his very first villains was the Joker. The Joker was originally a goofy man that robbed banks and caused some trouble for Batman. Spiderman’s first villain was the Chameleon, a man who could disguise himself as anyone.

When looking at these characters now there is hardly a comparison in their adversaries and the challenges they face. Superman went from protecting taxi cab drivers to fighting Gods, containing threats that could end not just the universe, but every universe in the multiverse. Batman went from chasing bank robbers to having his sidekick (Jason Todd), a child, brutally beat to death by the Joker. Spiderman went from chasing the Chameleon down for killing his uncle to fighting a titan with a golden glove equipped with stones that harness the power of the universe.

Diachronic [[11]] analysis is when something is viewed overtime, not just at a particular point in time. The broader context [[7]] is considered when doing this. In the case of comic book characters, there can be no growth or character development without a discursive [[12]] view. Plainly looking at an isolated event in the lifespan of a character gives the reader no sense of depth. If there is nothing to compare the character to then there can be no appreciation. The changing of character design as well as actions over time makes the characters far more human and dynamic. ((9))

When looking at a character over time, there is usually a sense of continuity that comes with this. Specifically, when characters break away from their rules and go outside of their normal behavior it allows the fans to have a far greater appreciation for the story. As previously mentioned, the connotation [[6]] behind the event is wildly more important in comparison to the denotation [[9]]. Take Green Lantern for example, “Jordan went on an absolute killing spree...and ended up offing far more heroes than villains” ((10)) in the 1993 Death of Superman story line. Fans were shocked that Hal Jordan was capable of killing his friends in the name of power, but without understanding the character, it just seemed like any old villain. In the Amazing Spiderman #542, A villain named Kingpin targets and puts Peter’s Aunt May in the hospital. In response, Peter tracks down Kingpin and mercilessly beats him with in an inch of his

life, all while wearing the symbiote suit. Someone who did not understand that Spiderman always holds back would most likely attribute the behavior to Aunt May being hospitalized ((10)). The connotation [[6]] behind this allows the reader to understand that the symbiote suit was affecting Peter's mind and making him impulsive and overly brutal. The history of the character, what is consistent for them, and the rules they set for themselves are of utmost importance in the comprehension of big moments in story lines. There cannot be a true appreciation of the struggle a hero faces if the reader does not have background knowledge.

### **How Comics Derived Their Meaning and Became Popular**

**I want to write about** how firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] in comics come together in a way that makes the comics meaningful and enjoyable. **I will focus on** how the art exemplifies firstness, the individual characters exemplify secondness, and the larger story arcs exemplify thirdness. Through pairing all of these aspects together semiosis occurs. **I would like my reader to** have an appreciation of the semiosphere [[48]] that is created in comics. The elements of firstness, secondness, and thirdness coming together to make a cohesive whole that millions of people enjoy every day.

Firstness [[14]], secondness, and thirdness are concepts of how things can be viewed and interpreted. Firstness is more of an isolated perception, something that does not require reference to anything else to be understood. Secondness is something that requires an understanding of a reference to be understood correctly. For something to exemplify thirdness it must connect to multiple learned things for proper comprehension.

Saussure, the creator of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] defined “the act of sign creation or initial sign interpretation a ‘firstness’ event.” ((3)) In comics, the stunning art work, the close attention to detail in every frame, can be described as a firstness event. The art is the initial part of a comic that can be understood without having to understand anything else. The illustrations are just pictures that can be looked at and meaning can be derived. As mention in the section about discursive [[12]] and presentational [[41]] symbolism, the presentational manner of the comic through its illustration's aids in understanding it.

Secondness in comics can be connected to the characters themselves. There is a reference to the past that the character has had. The relationship to secondness [[46]] lies in “relating the sign's objects and sign-users to each other in some way,” there is a diachronic [[11]] view that refers to the character's past. The author is either purposefully or inadvertently referring to past renditions of the character every time they choose to use that character. There is an unbreakable connection between the character's past and where/what they are currently.

The overarching story lines and world immersion is what gives a sense of thirdness [[64]] in the realm of comics. Stories that have effects on each other, character friendships and rivalries, consequences of previous arcs, and so much more are all learned intricate details. Storylines that impact each other also impact how they are “interpreted historically and conventionally.” ((3))

This interconnectedness that is common in comic book realms is in part what makes them so special and unique.

When examining all of these elements holistically, or in a presentational sense, allows the fans and readers to achieve great satisfaction from them. Having beautiful panels, long standing characters, and world building that only continues to expand is what keeps people coming back issue after issue. The many ways in which comics can be interpreted is what makes them so special to millions of people.

## **Conclusion**

The overall goal was to take a comprehensive look at comics and everything that makes them what they are. There is without a doubt hundreds of different ideas and lenses to view comics through. This paper's goal was to comprehensively look into just a handful of semiotic [[47]] based lenses. The paper was structured in such a way that the reader could learn and compound their knowledge as they continued through the paper. The first section was about how comics are structured, specifically paradigmatic [[35]] and syntagmatic [[62]] structure. The hope was that those concepts would bleed into how myths [[29]] were structured. The similarities between myths and comics were discussed after this. The way that people absorb knowledge, through discursive [[12]] and presentational [[41]] processes were discussed in great detail. Jakobson's functions of communications were analyzed in the realm of comics and the intended effects were pointed out. Concepts like conceptual metaphors [[21]], image schemas [[4]], icons [[20]], and hyperreality [[19]] followed in the section after. Lastly, the importance of diachronic [[11]] viewings was delved into. This was done in an effort to explain how comics derive meaning and have stayed as prominent as they have over the past century.

Hopefully anyone who reads this will have at least a partial understanding of some semiotic [[47]] terms and more importantly how they relate to comics. An annotated bibliography, glossary of terms, and skeletal draft will also be included with this paper in order to give those who read it the best possible chance of learning something useful.

