

jelige: Craig

Sexuality and the Church in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*

A szexualitás és az Egyház Craig Thompson *Blankets* című
képregényében

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1. Introduction

It is a general assumption that comic books are for children because they contain both text and image. It is also claimed that due to this partly visual nature of these works, readers of comic books have to use their imagination less, since much of the story is already shown to the reader. It is, however, interesting to note that a “comic book” is not always “comic(al)” nor does it necessarily reach the size of a proper “book”.

Marshall McLuhan claims that comics are “a highly participational form of expression” (*Understanding Media* 165). He differentiates between hot and cool media. He states that “hot media are low in participation and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience” (ibid 23). Supposedly, this makes comics ideal for a younger audience. But does the medium of a work determine what kind of an audience may enjoy it? It might be possible, but basing our judgement simply on that is not enough. Even a “simpler” medium can talk about serious topics.

Starting with the medium and the genre, the first actual comic book appeared in 1933 or 1994 (sources differ regarding the exact date) and it reprinted comic strips that appeared in newspapers published before it. Strips are “sequence[s] of small drawings telling a comic or serial story in a newspaper” (*OED* 1e), and they were mostly satirical in their nature; hence the term *comic*, which is more of a tradition than a by all means satisfactory characterisation as regards to what a comic book may contain. The term “comic book” was – to the best of my knowledge – first defined by Will Eisner, who is a prominent figure in the field. He called comics “[s]equential art”¹, “a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (*Theory* 5). Although this seems like a sound definition, there is a bit of ambiguity in it, since it can also be applied to other genres and media, for example to films. Scott McCloud, who is also an expert on comics, defines it in his *Understanding Comics* as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). This is a more refined definition and it seems it cannot be applied to anything else other than to comic books. Even

¹ Though this definition does not apply only to comics, he mostly uses these two term as synonymous.

though this is considered “the” definition in the field of comics, it is also subject to criticism. Dylan Horrocks criticises McCloud for using this definition for his own purposes:

The reason Scott bases his definition on Eisner’s is that he likes it. The reason he likes it is that it is useful: it highlights the things he values most about comics. [...]From now on, if Scott’s tactic works, whenever we talk about ‘comics’ we will really be talking about ‘sequential art.’ This is the trick at the heart of Scott’s manifesto. It is polemic at its finest - making ‘the way I want things to be’ appear as ‘the way things are.’ This is how an ideology colonizes our vocabulary, until its agenda is invisible and we unwittingly see the world according to its terms. (Horrocks, n. pag.)

McCloud traces the history of comics going back deeper in time than usual: he traces the origin of comic books to 1519 when Cortés found a pre-Columbian manuscript describing the story of “the great military and political hero 8-Deer Tiger’s Claw” (*Understanding* 10). However, according to this definition, one might even consider William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* a “comic book”, since the story is told through both textual and visual representations, although in the ears of several people this might sound as downright blasphemy.

I would also like to introduce the term “graphic novel”. According to the *OED*, the term was first used by Will Eisner in the title of his work, “*A Contract with God: and other tenement stories... A graphic novel*” (7) in 1978. However, an article titled *The Graphic Novel Silver Anniversary* claims that the term itself existed before the release of Eisner’s graphic novel (Arnold). The reason why he claimed that his work was a graphic novel rather than a comic book was that the former implies more prestige than the latter². But what exactly is the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel? Distinguishing between the two is quite a challenging task; I present a few attempts:

² ‘When [Will Eisner] first proposed the book to a New York publisher, Eisner recalls, “A little voice inside me said, “Hey stupid, don’t tell him it’s a comic or he’ll hang up on you.” So I said, “It’s a graphic novel”” (Ness 5).

Acclaimed as a new art form, damned as ‘comic books for adults’, graphic novels are easier to recognize than they are to define. (Solomon, n. pag.)

A graphic novel is typically a trade paperback, 7” x 10” x 8 ½” x 11”, usually in full color, priced from \$6.95 to \$12.95 [...] a graphic novel is usually a minimum of 64 pages but can extend to over 100 pages. (Beahm 22)

That pompous phrase (graphic novel) was thought up by some idiot in the marketing department of DC. I prefer to call them Big Expensive Comics. (*Mindscape*)

[Neil Gaiman responded so to the comment that he does not write comic books, but graphic novels:] I felt like someone who’d been informed that she wasn’t actually a hooker; that in fact she was a lady of the evening. (Russel, n. pag.)

As we can see, there is no clear cut distinction between the two terms, and, indeed, they are often used synonymously. The only real difference between the two can be made in size: a graphic novel is rarely as thin as a comic book, although “self-contained” comic books (meaning that they are not serialized) can be called graphic novels. To make a long and comic story short, attempts to distinguish between the two terms have proved ultimately futile, and I shall consider these as two synonymous names in my paper.

However, according to the cover of *Blankets*, it is an “illustrated novel”. The usage of this term is important, otherwise the author would have simply written “graphic novel” at the bottom, though we may only speculate as to the real reason. One of them might be to achieve the effect of defamiliarization, which is, according to the *OED*, “the process or result of rendering unfamiliar; spec. of literature, in which formal devices are held to revitalize the perception of words and their sounds by differentiation from ordinary language or (subsequently) from other habituated formal techniques”. Since we do not see the words “illustrated novel” many times in a bookshop, it may be used to grab people’s attention. Another reason might be that the word “illustrated” implies that visuality as such is only secondary, and textuality is the primary aspect of the book, while “graphic novel” implies that information is given through two equal channels. Most readers believe that the textual nature in graphic novels is more important than visual aspect. Even this small detail shows that

Blankets is not an ordinary graphic novel and in the subsequent chapters I shall try to prove this by looking at different aspects of sexuality and religion in it while drawing a conclusion regarding the changes in Craig's character at the end.

2. *Blankets*

The topic of my paper is a graphic novel titled *Blankets*. It was written by the American author Craig Thompson and was published in 2003. After its initial release, it quickly garnered critical acclaim: in 2004 it won the Harvey award for Best Artist, Best Cartoonist and Best Graphic Album of Original Work (Harvey), the Eisner award for Best Graphic Album and Best Writer/Artist (Hahn Library), the Ignatz Award for Outstanding Artist and Outstanding Graphic Novel or Collection (Small Press Expo) and in 2005 it won the *Prix de la critique* (Actua BD).

Blankets is a 582-pages-long, semi-autobiographic novel about the childhood of the main character, Craig. The novel begins when he is just a child and depicts how he copes with the poverty and the religiousness of his family. As he slowly grows up, he finds himself more and more immersed in religion. He is forced to go to “Church Snow-Camps”, where he has to spend time with other Christians and praise God together with them. Although he thinks that God would reward him there, his being an outcast is even more evident while on holiday than during his schooldays: “At ‘secular’ school, I perceived myself as victim to the world’s cruelty. I suspected that God would reward me one day for enduring the daily hardships. But church camp was sacred ground, and it seemed the popular kids were being blessed by God with social and athletic graces, and that God, for some reason (I could think of many) looked disappointedly upon me” (*Blankets* 79). However, during one fateful holiday, he meets Raina. They keep in touch after the camp is over, and he even goes to visit her. Most of the graphic novel is centred around the time he spent at her house. There, their relationship develops and they begin to have feelings for each other, which is, however, very discomfoting for both of them. This has a very powerful effect on Craig, and soon after Raina explicitly tells him (over the phone) that she does not want a long distance relationship, he says goodbye to her forever. The reader receives most of the narrative up to this point. Afterwards, we mostly get snippets from Craig’s life: how he leaves his parents’ house, how he abandons the Church, and how this whole experience affects him.

Here I would also like to explain a certain aspect of my paper’s title. Why am I using a capital letter when I talk about “the Church”? Craig is an Evangelical Christian, so his parents send him to Sunday school. The reader is shown quite a few instances and I will also use some of them as quotes. The use of the word “Church” is important, because the narrator tells

the reader about how he started to look at (the translation of) the Bible and found that it had been altered during the course of time. He was always told that the Bible is “the word of God”, so the idea that it was a compilation of heterogeneous texts was a great disappointment and, at the same time, enlightening for him. This is also represented visually, especially the difference between the tones in the book of Ecclesiastes:



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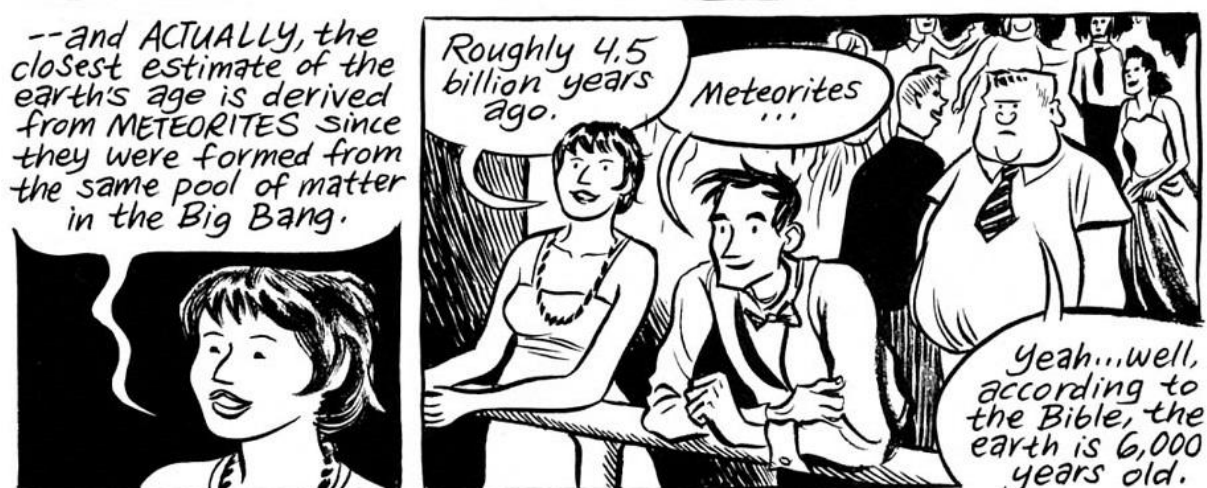
He decides to abandon the Church and the Bible, but keep his faith in God. As he tells his brother: “I still believe in God; the teachings of Jesus even, but the rest of Christianity...its Bible, its churches, its dogma – only sets up boundaries between people and cultures. It denies

the beauty of being human, and it ignores all these gaps that need to be filled in by the individual.” (ibid. 533). Looking at how he perceived his human body during his childhood (which I will talk about more in Chapter 5), it is clear that he has changed; we follow his growing up and his coming-of-age, so the genre of this graphic novel can also be given as *Bildungsroman*.

Even though this description might indicate that the novel is a crusade against the Church, this is not true. It is more about the protagonist fitting his own experiences to his own worldview and how religion should not be something that is forced upon people, but something that is chosen by the individual. This is best indicated by the satirisation of the extremes of the Church. A good example is a dialogue between two devout believers directed at Craig about the pastor’s brother who went to art school:

- [...] he had to draw people, but they...uh...didn’t have any clothes on. [...]
- Soon he couldn’t get enough naked people, so he got addicted to pornography...And then that wasn’t enough either [...] which led to the next logical step.
- K-k-killing people?
- HOMOSEXUALITY. (ibid. 515-516)

Another good example (which involves the same pastor) is shown on page 556 during the wedding of Craig’s brother:



The pastor is depicted in a clearly satirical way (with his brief response and his comically sullen face), so the novel does not want to say anything bad about the Church, only to present the flaws that the protagonist has encountered and considered as such.

During the course of the novel, Craig has to deal with very serious topics, for example humanity, sexuality, acceptance and also disability. Knowing the current state of affairs regarding the concepts mentioned in the title is necessary, so the next chapter will explore sexuality and religion in comic books nowadays.

3. The Relationship between Sexuality and Religion in Graphic Novels

Even though taboos are slowly disappearing, people still remain very sensitive to two topics: sexuality and religion. Examining how the notion of these changed through the centuries would be a very exciting and long topic, especially if one looked at other media as well, but I will concentrate on how these are viewed nowadays in graphic novels³. Since *Blankets* is a fairly popular graphic novel, I will focus mainly on mainstream and popular comics (so I will not talk about underground comics or web comics).

Sexuality in comics is a very sensitive topic, mostly because of their graphic nature. Creating pictorial pornography is, due to the lack of better words, more explicit and revealing than textual pornography: written sexual content is more accepted than when it is drawn or recorded. This is clearly shown in how people wanted to remove *Blankets* from the Public Library in Marshall city. As a conscientious citizen explained, her “concern does not lie with the content of the novels, rather [her] concern is with the illustrations and their availability to children and the community” (Marshall Democrat-News). Another prominent example is *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (also mentioned in the article above), which addresses problems the protagonist faces during her childhood and teenage years, like sexual orientation and gender roles. Even though these works do not use sexuality for the sake of sexuality, they are still hunted down and considered “unorthodox”, since, as the citizen above phrases it, they “may as well purchase the porn shop down at the junction and move it to Eastwood”.

Unfortunately, the problem in “mainstream” comic books is also present, though from a different perspective. Sexuality does not always appear as “explicitly” as it does in *Blankets* or *Fun Home* (thus, as a general rule, nobody is shown naked; the target audience of mainstream comics are still teenagers), yet by only implying nudity through shadows and other suggestive devices, as much is shown as possible. The aim of this, of course, is to please the audience⁴. In other words, they are simply used for exploitative purposes, so that the

³ Of course, I will exclude explicitly sexual material created for the purpose of pornography.

⁴ A critic wrote about the first issue of the new Catwoman series published in 2011: “This is a comic where the first page has four panels, and in them we see Catwoman's barely-covered breasts, more breasts, slightly less breasts, and then just bra and a hand”. (McElhatton)

comic is bought by more male fans (the term *fanservice* comes from this: “any unnecessary visuals included simply because the fans, presumably, want to see them” (urbandictionary 1)).

The latest, explicitly sexual graphic novel is *Lost Girls* by Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie⁵. It depicts the stories of Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz* and Wendy Darling from *Peter Pan*. They meet by chance in a resort called Hotel Himmelgarten in Austria in 1913, just before World War I and start “shar[ing] each other’s stories of sexual awakening, thus recollecting their childhood selves” (Liddo 134). The novel ends when the German soldiers storm the resort and break Alice’s mirror. Due to Alan Moore’s being a critically acclaimed writer, creating such works as *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell*, the graphic novel was heavily featured in the media and stirred up a lot of controversy (ibid. 135). According to the authors, their intent was to “highlight how sex can be a powerful, imaginative, healing experience, and to break the cultural taboo that makes the idea of childhood as an already sexualized age unacceptable to most societies” (ibid.). Although the book was banned for its outrageous content in several stores, the reviews were mostly negative due to its narrative and formal flaws (ibid.), meaning that the audience might feel a little bit less sensitive towards the topic of sexuality than it did in 2003 when *Blankets* was published.

Bruce David Forbes, a Professor of Religious Studies, talks about the other sensitive topic in his essay titled *Batman Crucified: Religion and Modern Superhero Comic Books*. He points out that religious iconography is regularly used in mainstream superhero comics, whenever we talk about crucifixion poses, the “ascendance” of superheroes or simply the battle between good and evil.

[...] whether comic books tell yet another apocalyptic tale of cosmic battles between good and evil, or whether they focus on the heroes' personal crises and struggles for meaning, writers and artists regularly resort to religious language and imagery to frame the stories. In addition, the deep structure of the narratives, centred around redeemer figures, seems to touch upon yearnings for deliverance.
(Forbes)

⁵ I include *Lost Girls* here, because sexuality is used as a device to convey the three famous stories and is not used simply for the purpose of pornography.

At the beginning of his essay, he talks about how surprised he was to learn the amount of icons present in comics. However, these icons do not create the same controversy sexual images do. This might be because parents want to protect their children from sexuality, but far less from religion. Religion is usually considered more positive than sexuality.

On May, 23rd, 2012, a wedding took place between two characters: the superhero Northstar married Kyle Jinadu. This was almost unimaginable before, since it was the first gay marriage ever depicted in mainstream comics. Another important character is Katherine Kane, who is an openly lesbian superheroine. Both of these instances generated a huge backlash from the media and the audience, and it can be said that through these characters the situation of the gay population is, even if briefly, explored. However, contrary to this explicitness, religion only appears subtly in iconography, and no real questions are asked, significant issues are not tackled. An exception was published in 2011 and written also by Craig Thompson, his latest graphic novel *Habibi* (it means “my beloved” in Arabic), which, much like what *Blankets* does with Christianity, explores the Islamic religion and heavily utilizes appropriate iconography.

Even though these serious issues are very important in *Blankets*, the author is careful not to go overboard (hence the lack of nudity except for some scenes, which are, in a way, necessary). Before the analysis, however, there is one more thing that must be mentioned in regards to the peculiarity of the graphic novel: its dual nature.

4. “How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface.”⁶ – The Art of Blankets

Unlike novels, which have a set form and type, graphic novels offer a cornucopia of visual variety. The most visible difference can be found between the drawings of different artists: no two drawers create the same image even from the same script. Going down from the tip of the iceberg, we can look at how the pages are coloured (not only the style, but the colours used can also make a big difference), how the panels are set, and also the way the text is written. In this chapter, I will have a look at these aspects of *Blankets* and how this may affect the narrative.

This image is page 12 of the graphic novel:



⁶ Blankets 581

The story begins when Craig is just a little boy. Here, their devout Christian father is punishing them for behaving badly by locking Phil, the smaller brother, up in the so called “cubby hole”.

The most visible aspect of the graphic novel is that it does not use any colours except for black and white. The choice whether to create a comic book that uses many colours or one that is monochromatic is a conscious choice of the author. Why should *Blankets* be in black and white instead of full-colour? One possible reason might be given by Scott McCloud:

[...] colours objectify their subjects. We become more aware of the physical form of objects than in black and white. (*Understanding* 189)

In black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language. (ibid. 192)

McCloud is referring back to how drawing and writing used to be the same, but slowly, over time, they separated and created their own art forms⁷. A more important aspect (at least, for my paper) is in the first passage: if the reader does not become more aware of the physical form of objects (or, in this case, the characters) then it becomes easier for the audience to associate themselves with a character from the graphic novel.

Following this line of thought, the actual style of the drawings is another important aspect. Looking at Phil behind their father, the reader can see that the character is not drawn in great detail, but only the most important parts of the human face are shown, combined with the depiction of basic feelings or emotions. Again, I shall refer back to McCloud. He talks about a method called “amplification through simplification” and a concept called “universality”.

When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t. [...] Another is the universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to described. (ibid. 30-31)

⁷ Both having achieved great respect as separate forms of art, while the media and the genre combining the two is still “limp[ing] along as the ‘bastard child’ of words and pictures”. (*Understanding* 47)

So, if we use McCloud's concepts, then we might say that *Blankets* employs these devices to heighten the association of the reader with the protagonist, Craig. This might also be supported by the fact that the graphic novel is not a plot-driven story, but an emotional journey through the teenage years of the main character.

If readers look at Craig, they mostly see a tall, thin boy with long hair, while looking at Raina, they mostly see a girl, both of them in their teenage years and nothing more can be guessed from the drawings themselves; i.e. they can be considered generic, *universal* characters. McCloud also talks about the "distraction" of seeing a detailed character. If a character is drawn too realistically, the reader would be "far too aware of the messenger to fully receive the message" (ibid. 36). And with this, the definitions create a full circle: if the reader cannot fully receive the message, then the ideas that are communicated are lost; thus a "simpler" style is required, in which meaning transcends form, in order to communicate the emotions of the protagonist without the reader getting lost in details.

Although pictures are important in a graphic novel, we should not forget about the text. The main difference between a novel and a comic book is the type of lettering employed: while the latter has a strict form that must be followed at all times, the former can use different techniques ranging from the arrangement of caption-boxes⁸ and word-balloons⁹ to the type of letters used for the actual text. *Blankets* uses hand-lettering both for narration and speech-bubbles. As Eisner says in his *Theory of Comics and Sequential Art*, "a hand-lettered balloon conveys personality that is quite different from that of a typeset letter" and "it is more often symptomatic of the artist's own personality (style), as well as that of the character speaking"¹⁰ (27). One of the reasons this technique is employed might be to convey emotions and feelings to the reader, in accordance with the art style. Something that might suggest this is the only time when Craig Thompson uses typeset letters (*Blankets* 346-347).

⁸ Captions are used for either narration or the expression of inner thoughts. These are prominently rectangular-shaped, while the colour may vary from character to character.

⁹ "The balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound." (*Theory* 26)

¹⁰ It is also important to note that both the implied author and the protagonist have the same name, so the hand-lettering might also give the reader a picture of what the character is like.



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While watching Raina transcribe her poems by a typewriter, Craig laments why she has to do this, since “it saddened [him] to see her penmanship (with those alluring ‘I’s)¹¹ replaced by cold type (ALL CAPS, NO LESS)” (ibid. 344). “Typesetting [...] has a ‘mechanical’ effect that intrudes on the personality of free-hand art. Its use must be carefully considered because of its effect on the ‘message’ as well”, says Eisner (*Theory* 27). And indeed, the words “I love you, Raina” are written in, so to say, amplified hand-writing, which makes it very clear that they are filled with emotions, but she answers in cold, mechanical typeset, immediately telling the reader that it is an unrequited love.

After having touched upon how the words are written and how the pictures are drawn, one more thing must be asked: what do they exactly depict on page 12? What they depict, in fact, is Craig and Phil’s father setting up a portable bed so that Phil may sleep on it, although this would be hard to guess. The father, who looks huge and threatening¹² is pulling the jaws of a

¹¹ Which he admired while they were sending letters to each other. (*Blankets* 146)

¹² Partially due to the so-called “worm’s eye view”: this view “from below evokes a sense of threat. The reader feels confined and dominated” (*Theory* 90).

crocodile-like creature open, while in a grotesque manner, skeleton-like humans move around in the small, cobweb-filled hole. This is, of course, shown from a child's perspective, and as the narrative progresses the reader is shown how Craig's view changes about different – either physical or spiritual things – and this is clearly reflected in how the reader perceives the world through his eyes.



Later, while listening to a teacher in Sunday School, he realizes that he, in fact, inadvertently confined his little brother to Hell. Soon after this lesson, he starts viewing not only the cubby hole, but also the whole physical world as some sort of temporal Hell.

It is at this point to be noted that without its narrative-graphic peculiarities, the novel might not have worked at all. Unlike plot-centred books, emotional stories require the participation of the reader. The drawings are important, yet looking at the textual side is also necessary. Wayne C. Booth talks about different types of narration. An important aspect of this graphic novel is its first-person narration. Booth says that there is not much of a difference between a first- and a third-person narration (*Rhetoric* 150), and reiterates this by saying “the moral and intellectual qualities are more important to our judgement than whether he is referred to as ‘I’ or ‘he’” (ibid. 158), but the effect would in fact be very different if the implied author referred to Craig as a “he”. This would create such a distance between the audience and the protagonist that full identification with him would become much harder and the experience of reading *Blankets* would considerably change. Two other aspects that seem to intermingle here are the knowledge and the trustworthiness of the narrator. An omniscient, all-knowing narrator would also distance himself from the audience (ibid. 40-41) while lessening the effect of universality and realism of the graphic novel. Also, Craig can be considered a reliable narrator, since he “speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work” (ibid. 158), since the norms of the work are shown to be his own norms. Booth goes on saying “which is to say, the implied author’s norms” and it is unavoidable to talk about how the protagonist’s name is the same as the implied author’s. Trying to avoid the infamous “intentional fallacy”, I only mention how this affects the experience of reading. Because of the coinciding names, the reader might associate the protagonist with the implied author. Since believing that *Blankets* is an account of someone real, the emotional investment is heightened to a point that could not be reached without any of these narrative devices. This is the reason why Craig’s exploration of sexuality and religion becomes so much intertwined: the reader is fully invested in the fate of the protagonist.

5. Desire and Inhibition – Sexuality and the Church

One of the most important aspects of *Blankets* is the personal conflict that Craig has to face: his Christian morals clash with his feelings for Raina, and his being torn between these forces (one might also say that his two “sides”) takes up most of the graphic novel. Since he was raised as a devout Christian, having feelings in itself would not be bad, but feeling sexual attraction for a girl before marriage is considered sinful. However, that is inevitable in the teen years; thus a moral conflict is born out of natural desire. In this chapter I shall look at how sexuality and the Church is represented in *Blankets* and draw a conclusion at the end regarding Craig’s character and the moral judgement passed upon him.

One of the most important traits of the protagonist is his resentfulness. The graphic novel starts with Craig’s childhood, but the caption boxes and the use of the past time on pages 18-19 show the audience that it is only a flashback.

“I should have been the one who was locked in the cubby hole that night, because I was a pathetic brother. I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations. At other times, when Phil needed a play-companion, I demanded to be left alone.” (*Blankets* 18-19)

The horrible experiences he goes through as a child lead to his escapism: first, he simply wants to get away from home (without his brother, no less), but then he realises that this kind of thinking is futile, that “the real world could only deliver new threats” (ibid. 40). So he finds a better way of escape: he runs into his dreams. It is during this time that he starts going to Church School¹³ and the teacher’s preaching (as seen in chapter 4 of this paper) convinces him that there is an even better way of “escape”: religion. For a time, the belief that his temporary physical misery would be washed away in Heaven gives him solace. However, he cannot understand why his torment persists even on “sacred ground”, so he simply accepts it. His real change only begins after he meets Raina, and even something as basic as his views on Heaven and Hell are turned upside down.

¹³ At least that is what the reader is shown through the narration. It is possible that he has already been going to Church School for a long time.

5.1 “Who touched me?”¹⁴ – Jesus Christ in *Blankets*

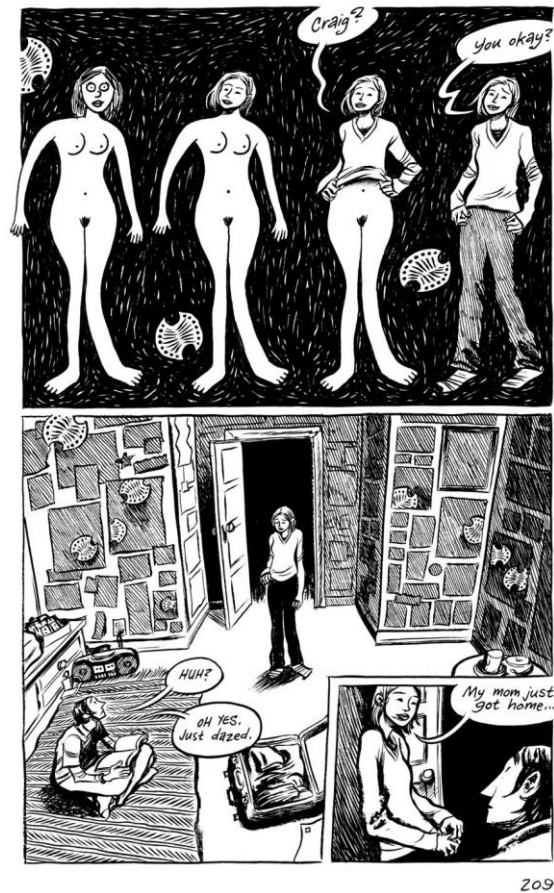
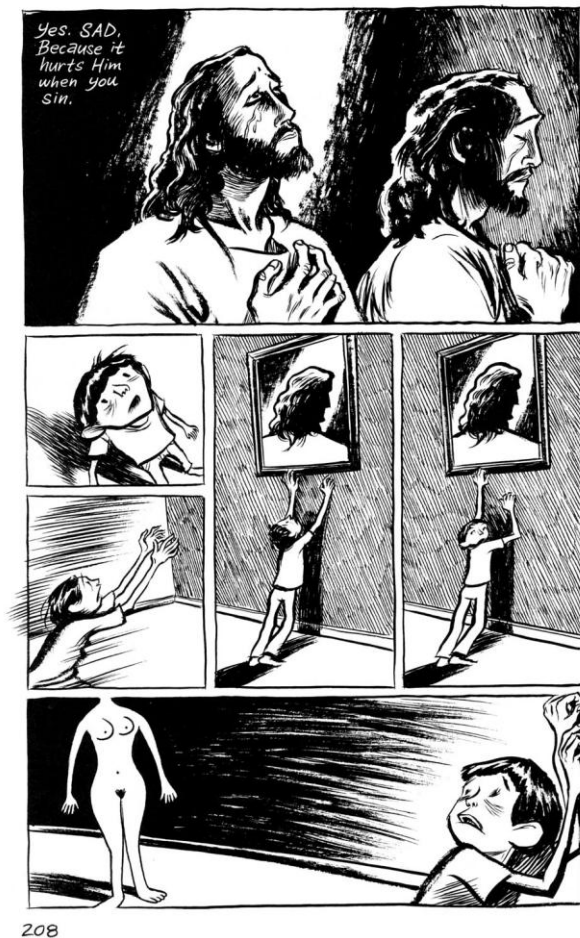


The first indication of sexuality as such is shown on page 205. After Craig’s parents find out that he drew a “lady without any clothes on”, they scold him very badly. They use, one might say, spiritual blackmail: Jesus is “sad. Because it hurts him when you sin” (ibid. 208).

In *Making Comics*, McCloud says the following: “Readers crave dramatic changes, but to highlight change requires an unchanging point of reference” (50). This unchanging point of reference is the point of view through which Craig’s drawing in his mother’s hands is presented to the reader. Instead of simply showing the audience what is on the other side, the

¹⁴ *Blankets* 199

implied author shows the motions of how the mother turns the page over, creating tension in the reader, since they only know that Craig did something very bad, but they are unaware of its exact nature. The white paper is contrasted to the blackness of the page, emphasizing the drawing itself, while Craig is shown in the background, crouching and curled up in a clearly defensive position: he is frightened of his parents, especially of his father. Craig is resentful and he does not even understand why he did what he did. During this flashback, the reader is shown Jesus, who is weeping for Craig's sin.



This portrait, Warner Sallman's *The Head of Christ* (Stevens), is the reason for this flashback: he notices that Raina has the same painting that his parents had in their bedroom. The portrait comes alive and is shown to be crying and turning away from the young Craig, while opposite the painting stands the “naked lady” Craig drew. This is a “literal” representation of how Craig is torn between the physical and the spiritual world; his actual feelings and emotions stand against the views indoctrinated by his parents and the Church. The drawing may also symbolize the repressed sexuality which, since he has a chance, he

projects onto somebody, in this case, onto Raina. This is shown on page 209, when the drawing slowly turns into the girl, and both the audience and Craig are taken back into the chronological present of the narrative. At this moment it becomes quite clear that Craig is sexually attracted to Raina.

When Booth talks about flashbacks (*Rhetoric* 190-195), he says that not the chronological order of events is important, but the effect the novel has on the reader. Thus the position of this flashback is not accidental; had it been shown earlier (in chronological order) it could not have played on the visual transformation of the “naked lady” into Raina, so the effect would have not been the same. Several flashbacks can be found throughout *Blankets*, most of them¹⁵ used to contrast the innocence and charm of childhood to the hardships and the cold reality of adolescence and adulthood.

Before dozing off, Craig is reading Luke 8:40-53 from the Bible. The part of the story which is important now is about a woman who touches Jesus and stops bleeding¹⁶, but is too afraid to tell him. (*Blankets* 198-200)



The phrase “Who touched me?” is uttered by Jesus, which, if taken out of context, has a clearly sexual undertone. Touching itself is a recurring element, having been mentioned before and also appearing a few pages after this Biblical tale. It is “the most innocent device of showing attraction”, yet even this is spoiled by the indoctrinations. The following pages from *Blankets* are not next to each other, they are on pages 126 and 221.

¹⁵ The one mentioned above is one of the rare exceptions.

¹⁶ “And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her” (ibid. 199). This might also be an allusion to menstruation, in other words, to sexuality and fertility.



On the first page, Craig and Raina are in the Church Camp, hiding, since they do not want to go to the sermon to praise God together with the other campers. It is important that except for the speech bubble, we only see the two characters, even though, of course, there is a background. This is an important device in visual media and has multiple purposes: (1) it can be used to emphasize something by eliminating the environment and not letting the readers' gaze wander¹⁷, leaving only the important parts for the audience to see, and (2) "Background art is more than mere stage setting, it is part of the narration" (*Theory* 23), so, in this particular instance, it reflects the feelings of Craig, i.e. that nothing else exists for him at that particular moment but Raina. Another important aspect is Craig's position in the picture: "readers will assign importance to characters and objects placed in the centre" (*Making* 24), says McCloud. So the message of the image seems to be that Craig's touching Raina is something very important and "sacred". However, on the next page, the portrait of Jesus turning away from the viewer is juxtaposed to Raina and a caption-box saying: "I wanted to touch her" (*Blankets* 221). Clearly, Craig does something that is not his true intention, but something that was "forced" onto (or rather into) him, as shown by the dark portrait. Even though he touched her before, he feels that somehow his feelings have changed for Raina and that they are not in accordance to the teachings of the Church; they might not be as pure as they seem.

¹⁷ Unlike in textual novels, the author has no absolute control over the reader's gaze, meaning that "there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first" (*Theory* 40). This device, however, grants the artist a little bit more control over the reading than if they drew everything.



This line of thinking is also shown on page 223. He is given Julie's¹⁸ old room where the stuffed animals come to life. He is haunted by the toys, all of them crying out "Who touched me?" (ibid. 223), emphasizing his torment.

During one evening, Raina asks Craig to sleep with her, or, to be more precise, next to her (ibid. 301). Even this makes Craig nervous, and the following morning, while they are getting ready to go outside, she positions him as a coat-rack. Since the sun is shining outside, the thin Craig casts a peculiar shadow onto the floor: a shadow of the cross.



¹⁸ Raina's older sister, who is already married.

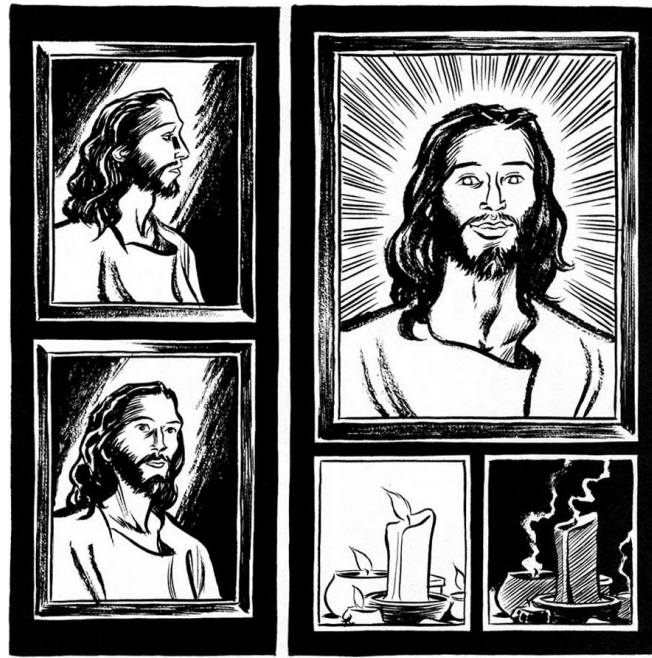
Stevens says the following about this panel:

“It is either a simple cross, suggesting Christ in general, or, given its conically pointed tip, a visual recollection of Christ the Redeemer. If the latter reading is right, the shadow adds to the purity of the scene an appropriately redemptive or salvific element.” (Stevens, n. pag.)

What he says, basically, is that even though Craig was unsure about whether his feelings were pure or not¹⁹, his sins are lifted. This is implied by the appearance of the cross. However, since the cross is also the place of physical suffering, the shadow may *foreshadow* with its form that the time of Craig’s suffering, his “crucifixion” is well under way. It may also orient us to suspect that Craig has arrived at *cross-roads*, he will have to make choices (and might have to part ways with Raina). The two sides of the cross (divided by the vertical long pole) may also indicate the two forces – the moral principles of the Church and sexual desire – Craig is going to be torn between.

The portrait of Jesus appears twice again in the novel. After Craig and Raina tease each other for a long time (which will be analysed in more detail in subchapter 5.3) they can no longer contain their feelings and desires and start kissing each other. However, they do not go as far as to make love. After the kissing and the hugging, Raina goes to sleep, while Craig thinks about this experience and a little later he notices the same portrait that turned from him in his parents’ house, but this time, Jesus Christ is not sad. At first, he is still facing away, but as he slowly turns towards the reader (just like Craig’s drawing, the movement of the head is depicted in more pictures than necessary to heighten the tension) he has a look of approval on his face, accompanied by a radiant smile.

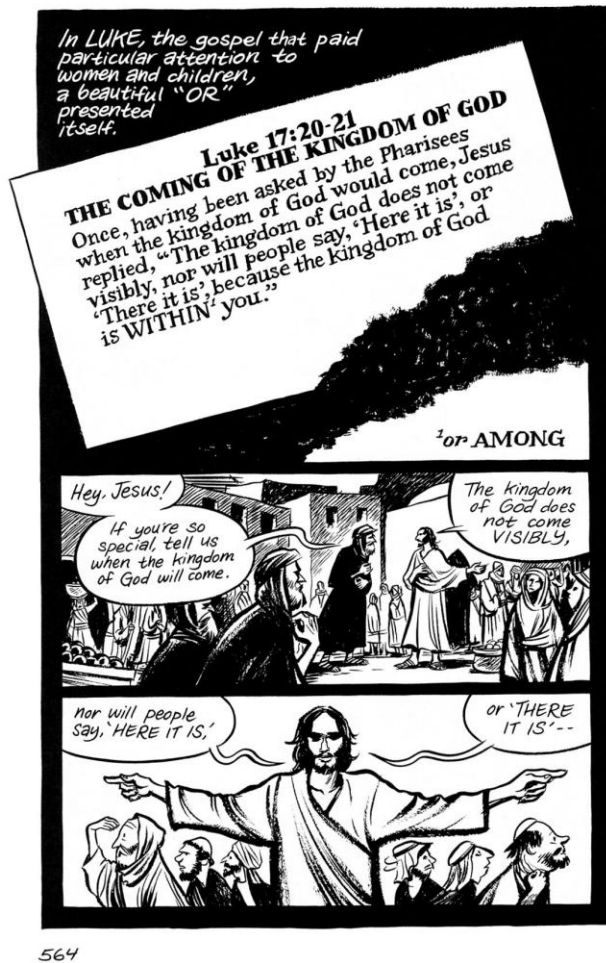
¹⁹ He arrives at the conclusion that his feelings are pure, but this could be considered further reinforcement for the reader (*Blankets* 313).



This particular look is basically an allusion to the outcome of the graphic novel: Jesus Christ believes that Craig's feelings are pure, approves of them, and does not want him to leave her due to his conflicts with the Church disciplines. This could be considered the resolution of Craig's conflict, since from this point on, as it was mentioned before, the reader only gets snippets of Craig's life: how Raina becomes sick on their last day together²⁰, how Craig gets reconciled with his brother, how Raina breaks up with him and how he spends his life as a young adult.

The last time Jesus appears is towards the very end of the novel. After Craig enquires about the ambiguities of the Bible, he is told that they are connected to the "growth process" of if, which he cannot accept (*Blankets* 549). Upon his leaving his parents' house, he leaves his Bible there, but during a visit, he goes to the cubby hole and has a look at it. It is at this point that Jesus appears again: he recites an ambiguous part of the Bible. This could be interpreted as yet another sign that the Jesus and the Church are separate, and one must not accept the latter to accept the former.

²⁰ And, unlike the other days Craig spent at Raina's house which were narrated in detail, only a couple of pages are dedicated to this period.



At the bottom of the picture, Craig is taking out the quilt that Raina made for him. After having said goodbye, he burnt everything she ever gave her, except for the blanket. This shows how much the blanket and Raina meant for him, but this will be explored further in the following subchapters.

5.2 “It’s sacred”²¹ – Blankets

Due to the cover of the novel, readers will associate the word “blanket” with snow, since it covers the ground. Snow is also an important symbol that appears throughout the graphic novel. On the one hand, because it is white, it can be connected to innocence: after a scene where Craig watches Raina sleep, he goes back to his (originally Julie’s) bedroom and keeps lamenting whether what he did (namely, watching Raina sleep) was sinful or not. At the end, however, he comes to the following conclusion: “Perhaps I should feel guilty... Nah. I feel as clean and pure as the snow” (ibid. 313). On the other hand, snow symbolizes the sexual tension between Craig and Raina as well. It is interesting to note that while “simple” snow can be interpreted as innocence, the snowstorm that envelops Michigan can be connected with sexuality. As the graphic novel progresses and they tease each other more and more, the snowstorm at night becomes violent in equal portion. However, as their relationship becomes progressively worse after Craig leaves Raina’s house, the snow begins to slowly melt until everything thaws out, signalling not only the end of their relationship, but also a change in Craig’s nature.



²¹ Craig commenting on Raina’s handmade quilt (ibid. 184).

Just as snow can be connected to sexuality, so can the title of the graphic novel. The first and foremost meaning of *Blanket* is its literal sense: “A large oblong sheet of soft loose woollen cloth, used for the purpose of retaining heat, chiefly as one of the principal coverings of a bed” (*OED* 2a). This interpretation appears in the graphic novel itself when Craig gets a hand-made quilt from Raina as a present.



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However, if one considers “the thing” itself, one must also consider what exactly a blanket does: it covers the bed and the people sleeping in it. This can easily be connected to sexuality, and the blanket can also be used as something to hide this sexuality from others, in the case of *Blankets*, from the parents, for example. This secrecy is clearly shown when Craig’s mother asks him where he would sleep if he went to Raina’s house, and after telling his mother that Raina’s parents are Christian, she lets Craig go to her place. Even in the aforementioned scene when he is watching Raina sleep, he thinks: “Thank you [God] for the rhythm of her

movements, curling --- sprawling, her contours lapping like waves around the *blankets*” (*Blankets* 310, emphasis mine).

Mentioning the last appearance of this quilt is important. When Craig visits his parents after having moved away, he takes out the blanket and reminisces.



Throughout the novel, the sexual undertones of a *blanket* are only implied, whereas its explicit meaning is a gesture of friendship and/or love. As Craig narrates: “read in sequence, like a comic strip, they told a story”. If this is considered as a type of metanarration, meaning that *Blankets* is “aware” that it is a graphic novel, this sequence and the quilt can be interpreted as something else: *Blankets* is a comic that tells a story, a certain part of somebody’s life. If we follow this line of thought, then the blanket (as a part of somebody’s, in this case, Craig’s life) can be understood as the life of somebody. Further proof of this comes when Craig wakes up from a dream near the end of the novel: “But the act of waking is dependent on remembering. We use ritual as a mnemonic device, holiday as a ritual with meaning, and the seasons as increments of measurement” (ibid. 574-575). This implies the

cyclical nature of life: how people use recurring elements in order to remember the things they do not wish to forget. Considering this interpretation, then, Raina can be considered as someone creating part of somebody's life, "arranging the pattern". This creates an image of Raina as someone sacred or divine, which is explained in more detail in the next subchapter.

5.3 “Sacred, perfect and unknowable”²² – Religious icons and symbolism in *Blankets*

Since the narrative is presented through Craig’s point of view, the reader is shown a wide array of different symbolical and metaphorical pictures, reflecting how he interprets certain elements and aspects of his life. Due to his being religious, many of these concern some kind of religious icon or symbol and this subchapter shall analyse why he sees certain things the way he does.

Having written many poems to Craig, Raina asks him to draw something beautiful on the wall of her room. He decides to draw a tree, which, when finished, grows into a full-sized one and they sit on the branches (ibid. 343): they, in a way, enter Craig’s art.



Raina notices that the leaves are made up of her poems. Considering the amount of religious symbolism in *Blankets*, one might easily consider this the Tree of Knowledge, and, as seen in the picture, Craig is clearly plucking off a fruit. If one, at least right at the beginning, does not consider Paradise as the site of the Fall of Man, but considers it the place where someone feels at home and believes that he or she is at the happiest place on Earth, then Craig might consider Raina’s house his Paradise. However, by plucking the fruit, he is damning himself. It is interesting to note that Craig’s confession of his love comes after this scene, which, as the reader is told, is unrequited.

²² Craig says this about Raina while he watches her sleep (ibid. 429).

This is, however, not the last occurrence of the “forbidden fruit”. After having teased each other for a very long time, they almost let their desires take over. This time, a kiss is initiated by Raina, who gives a monologue in response to Craig’s feeling lustful: “Well, which is scarier – LUST or TEMPTATION? Lust: that you might want me against my will...or temptation: Temptation being that I might want you even more.” (ibid. 392-394).



Not only is Raina depicted as Eve, being in Paradise under the Tree of Knowledge, undressed, but she is also offering a bite of an apple, making Craig sin with her. This is explicitly stated in the text, and they almost give into their desires. However, Raina’s mother is just arriving and is preparing to enter the house. As soon as she does, Craig and Raina leap away from each other so that they do not give any indication to the mother of what they are doing. Even though the apple is drawn between them, representing temptation, it is also hovering above them, showing that theirs is not the only temptation: it is clear that the apple is also placed between Raina’s mother and father. It is necessary to know that they are seeking a divorce, and even though they tried counselling, it did not work (ibid. 216). Still, Raina’s father has not given up yet, and this picture is the clearest indication of the temptation of

going up to her. His longing is visible not only from his nervous expression, but how he presses his hand against the window of the car.

Even though Raina is presented here as the source of temptation, she is also shown as a pure, divine creature. I shall differentiate between three categories of this depiction (images from *Blankets* 315, 246 and 306, respectively)



The first category can be called semi-physical, meaning that due to some sort of natural phenomenon, for example, some shadows, she is implicitly given the image of an angel. The first scene takes place after Craig and Raina first “slept together” and meet in the living room. As the sun shines in through the window, the back of the chair she is sitting on gives her shadow wings, making her look like an angel. The second category can be called physical as Raina is explicitly given the physical image of a divine creature, in this case, an angel. The third and last category can be called symbolical as she is given the physical appearance of something sacred due to the narrative being filtered through Craig’s point of view: she is presented as such right before they sleep together (side by side) for the first time.

For someone religious these three levels and object may exist on can be of high importance. This is why the approval of Jesus is so significant for Craig: he really did believe that he found his true love, someone with whom he could live his life. However, this is interrupted when Raina breaks up with him and he only recuperates from this when he says goodbye to her and burns everything she had ever given him. When he returns to his parents’ house at the end, he sleeps with the blanket. When he was a child and started using dreams as

a means of escape from the hell of reality, clouds in the pictures used to signal a change from the physical world to the world of dreams, just as it is used in the following sequence:



Even after having spent years without her, he still wishes to be with her, but this will never happen. Even though at first this might seem as a purely sexual and lustful dream, the angels' saving Craig and Raina from the demons indicates not only that his love was pure, but also that even in his dream he is without sin.

5.4 “No matter how temporary.”²³ – Changes in Craig’s character

At the beginning of the novel, Craig is presented as a normal, everyday child: he’s mischievous, he’s arguing with his brother and he is bullied at school; basically, he is a relatable character to most readers. However, he is often scolded by his parents either for something unchristian or something related to their poverty. His escapist approach is present for a very long time in the novel, but it is forced into the background after he meets Raina. She could be called an “anchor”, someone who keeps Craig on the ground: she is not as religious and believing as he is (as shown during their debate about Heaven on pages 295-298) and this seems to be a reason why he also becomes doubtful. This is the most important change in Craig’s character and every other alteration stems from this one: as soon as he starts doubting the Bible and the Church, he opens up and, so to say, starts living and stops concentrating on how temporary his physical life is compared to eternity in Heaven (this is what the title of the subchapter alludes to). This shift in his focus is clearly shown in the few scenes that the reader is presented with of Craig’s life in the city. Another instance is on page 560:



²³ *ibid.* 582

He lies to his parents so that he does not deny them “the reassurance that [their] family would be reunited in Heaven” (ibid. 532). This is something that would have been unimaginable for the Craig shown in the bulk of the novel. His view on sexuality also differs from what the reader finds out during Craig’s teenage years. Even though he is shown as trying to pick up girls and failing, the important aspect of this notion is that is actually trying. He can be said to “evolve” from a passive observer to an active participant of his own life.

6. Conclusion

Blankets is an emotional story. The representation of first love contrasted to the Church and its disciplines evokes a cornucopia of feelings not only in the protagonist, but also in the reader.

After dealing with the history of the term and the genre *graphic novel* and saying a few words about *Blankets*, I gave a brief description of the situation of sexuality and religion in graphic novels since, unlike the same situation in novels, this is one that is not necessarily widely known. Due to the dual nature of *Blankets*, I gave a brief analysis of the main devices it uses not only in the drawings but also in the text. The main chapter of my paper consists of four parts. The first one talks about the different ways Jesus Christ or different symbols connected to him appear in the novel. The second subchapter analyses the several, either explicit or implicit, meanings of the term *blanket* and what they mean regarding sexuality. The third subchapter explains why certain widely-known religious icons like the Forbidden Fruit or the Tree of Knowledge appear and how they can be related to the main character. The last subchapter details how his experiences regarding sexuality and the Church change his character as he becomes active instead of remaining passive.

The main sources used were mostly connected analysing graphic novels, more specifically the works of Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, while Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was relied on when interpreting the narrative peculiarities of *Blankets*. Interestingly enough, Booth's concepts can be applied to graphic novels, too, with the twist of the dual mediality, which creates the need for further academic research. Even though Booth's *Rhetoric* was written about 20 years before McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, the latter does not take into account the former; the academic research of graphic novels has only been around for about 30 years and narrative theory does not seem to have reached graphic novels yet.

Sexuality and the Church are only two of the many different aspects of the novel that would require further analysis. I have already touched upon a few of these topics, for example how childhood is contrasted to adulthood, why Plato's Allegory of the Cave appears in the novel or how a detailed analysis of the drawings may affect the interpretation of the verbal parts or of the narrative aspects. A deeper exploration of these subjects, however, would also make a very interesting paper. As mentioned before, the academic analyses of graphic novels

is still in its infancy in contrast to the huge amount of literature verbal novels have been the subject to, so the field itself is mostly unexplored territory.

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