

COMICS IN CANADA

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Abstract

This journal article adds to the main discussion of the journal, which is to highlight the different ways culture is represented in Canadian Literature, but mainly to answer the questions: What is Canadian Literature, and what does Canadian Literature entail?

This journal article specifically will explore the development and the values of comic books and graphic novels in Canada. It will draw upon the vast history of comics in Canadian Literature, specifically looking at when and how graphic novels started gaining popularity. It will also zoom in on the drawbacks and negatives that comics have faced in literature, such as the law that was introduced in 1948 which banned all comic books which depicted crime and violence.¹

In the world of literature, comics have become more prevalent and are becoming more popular in recent years. Well-known Canadian authors like Margaret Atwood have included the use of graphic novels in their body of work, which is a testament to the advancement of comic books in Canadian Literature.

This article will draw upon scholarly articles such as, ‘Comics and Canadian Literature’ by Brenna Clarke Gray, as well as articles like, ‘Editorial Cartooning’ by The Herb Block Foundation, and ‘The Story Behind Canada’s first ever Comic Book’ by Justin Chandler.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, comic books began to gain popularity through being included in

newspapers. Comics in Canada became noticeably more popular between the years of 1940 and 1947. This was influenced by

¹ Elton Hobson, ‘Did you know comic books depicting crime are illegal in Canada?’, *Global News*, <<https://globalnews.ca/news/2685619/did-you-know-comic-books-depicting-crime-are-illegal-in-canada>>, [accessed 10 November 2021], subsequent references in parenthesis.

wartime laws that prevented the import of American comics which allowed Canadian comics to surge, seeing the creation of heroes such as Johnny Canuck (Canuck is a fictional lumberjack and a national personification of Canada. He first appeared in early political cartoons in 1869 where he was portrayed as a younger cousin of the United States' Uncle Sam and Britain's John Bull).² After this period, however, the return of the American comics caused Canadian comics to plummet out of business.³

With the surge of likeability of comics in the 1940s came unwanted attention. Many people became concerned with the depiction of crime and horror in Canadian graphic novels. This led to a law being introduced in 1948 when, according to Global News, “two boys, playing the role of highway bandits, shot and killed a man in northern British Columbia seemingly at random. When it was found that the two were voracious readers of crime comics, a

push began to legislate against the comic book industry”(Hobson, 2016).

This caused the implication of the law stating that comic books depicting crime and violence were to be banned from Canada. The law specifically states, “Section 163, 1b of the Criminal Code of Canada makes it a crime to possess, print, publish, or sell a crime comic if you are possessing that comic for the purposes of sale”. Although today the Canadian police would most likely laugh in the face of someone reporting the crime of selling comics, when the law was introduced, the publication of Canadian comics almost came to a complete standstill, which halted the development of graphic novels and comic books in Canadian Literature.

One of the more recent drawbacks to the development of comics in Canada is the lack of large publishing houses, specifically for comics and graphic novels. This meant that many comic authors and illustrators went on to work with the US. Brenna Clarke Gray includes specific examples of Canadian comic book writers

² Margery Fee and Janice McAlpine, *Guide To Canadian English Usage*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 93.

³Breanna Clarke Gray, 'Comics and Canadian Literature', *CanLit Guides*,

<https://canlitguides.ca/brenna-clarke-gray/comics-and-canadian-literature/> [accessed 15 November 2021], subsequent references in parenthesis.

who moved on to the US. Gray states that “one example is John Byrne who [...] went on to become one of the most significant creators at Marvel Comics”(Clarke, 2018) after leaving an art and design college in Canada without graduating. Gray also gives the example of “Bryan Lee O’Malley, who lives in Los Angeles and published his popular Scott Pilgrim series through Oni in Portland.”(Clarke, 2018) This factor heavily drew back the development of Comics in Canada since the fact that they are Canadian gets lost in the popularity of the US based graphic novels. Since there is less of a chance of fame and worldwide recognition by publishing comic books and graphic novels in Canada, writers are leaving to the US for better chances of getting published.

More recently, in the late 1960s, comics began to resurface slowly through self-publishing authors. Then, comic books in Canada began to gain importance through well-known Canadian authors, such as Margaret Atwood, beginning to publish comic books. Margaret Atwood including

comic books into her body of work, with her being arguably the most significant name in contemporary Canadian Literature, is a sure way to influence the importance and the views people have on comic books in Canada. This is due to Atwood having a large audience of readers that, from being fans of her novels, would be inclined to read her comic books, which may then influence more people to explore comics from other authors.

While comics may not be as prevalent in Canada compared to the US, and they certainly aren’t a prominent genre in Canadian Literature, they still have traditions and hold values to Canadian Literature. An example of this is the editorial cartooning tradition. An editorial cartoon, according to The Herb Block Foundation, is also known as a political cartoon. It is an “illustration containing a commentary that usually relates to current events or personalities.”⁴ Editorial Cartooning, in both English and French Canada, is the longest-running type of comic. Editorial comics hold a political tradition, for example ‘Hark! A Vagrant’

⁴ Author Unknown, ‘Editorial Cartooning’, *The Herb Block Foundation*,

<<https://www.herbblockfoundation.org/editorial-cartooning>>, [accessed 13 November 2021].

by Kate Beaton, which includes pop culture, feminist themes and Canadian History.

According to TVOntario (TVO), the first ever comic book published in Canada included *The Iron Man*, and it was called 'Better Comics #1'. Released in March 1941, 'Better comics #1' "marked the beginning of a unique but little-known period of prosperity for home-grown comics publishing in Canada".⁵

Comic books being released in this time ensured community discussion. Community discussion is a vital aspect of the culture of comics, as it meant that Canadian children could connect with one another through the letter columns, almost becoming the first social network for the children. Justin Chandler, from the TVO article, 'The Story Behind Canada's first Comic Book', states, "They encouraged kids to form clubs, to raise funds for the war effort, to save scrap, to have paper drives, to contact each other and stay in

touch"(Chandler, 2021). This highlights one of the main reasons why Literature is important to Canadian people. Comic books allowed children, who had no other way of contacting each other, to converse and have a chance to connect with one another through the use of literature. This is juxtaposed with the reason for the comic book ban being enforced due to the two boys who shot and killed someone. Comic books and graphic novels clearly have different aspects of interaction.

Canadian culture is represented in a multitude of ways through the use of comic books and graphic novels. An example of this is through Bengough's body of work. John Wilson Bengough was one of Canada's earliest comic book writers, as well as being an editor and a politician. He is most known for creating political cartoons. In 1873, Bengough founded 'Grip', which is a comedy magazine. It included a range of mostly political cartoons, some of which were his own. According to historian John Bell, Bengough was "probably the most

⁵ Justin Chandler, 'The story behind Canada's first-ever comic book', *TVO*, <<https://www.tv.org/article/the-story-behind-canadas-first-ever-comic-book?amp>>, [accessed

13 November 2021], subsequent references in parenthesis.

significant pre-20th-century Canadian Cartoonist.”⁶ Through his work, Bengough uses humour to indicate the stress of Canada’s national identity since there was a rise of two political powers. He often portrays Canada as a young woman under the wing of Cousin Johnny, who represents the US, and she is typically guided by Mother Britannia, who represents England.

Canadian literature is rich with culture. Culture that has spread to the rest of the world. Canadian literature, specifically comic books, has introduced the world to some of the most well-known superheroes in the comic book industry. In an article released in 2017 by the University of Alberta, they state, “When it comes to Canadian content in comics, few artists can claim the influence John Byrne has had. [...] Byrne became best known for his distinctive work on ‘The Uncanny X-men’, during which he championed the inclusion of the now-iconic Canadian character Wolverine.”⁷ Canadian comics contributing such well known characters to

the world of comic books clearly depicts the influence that Canadian Literature has on the world of literature as a whole.

In consideration of this, comic books and graphic novels are a significant aspect of literature. It is a creative way to tell important and entertaining stories. Having comics be recognised as a crucial aspect of literature opens the doors for many more people. People who are less interested in reading large novels with a long word count, or people who are not a fan of poetry, for example. Comic books and graphic novels provide a way to tell stories that regular fiction, poetry, and script can’t. With the blend of illustration and writing, it paints a clear picture for the reader and can make the story easier to follow. This style can be more beneficial for those who have a hard time concentrating on books or those who struggle to really immerse themselves into the story and have a clear view of what the world the author has created looks like.

⁶ John Bell, *Invaders from the north : how Canada conquered the comic book universe*, (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), p. 189.

⁷ Author Unknown, ‘A new Golden Age of Canadian comics?’, *University of Alberta*,

<<https://medium.com/u/ualberta2017/a-new-golden-age-of-canadian-comics-44d942d5af11>>, [accessed 15 November 2021].

The main point that has been introduced concerning the importance and values of Canadian Literature within this article is that comic books and graphic novels have, more recently, become a significant aspect of Canadian Literature. It provides a variety of culture, by including serious political and world views into their work.

It also includes well-known faces, such as Margaret Atwood, which allows Atwood to display her talent through a different format compared to writing novels, which highlights her talent and range. Comic books need to be recognised by all as literature, and Canada are well on their way to give comics the recognition that they deserve.

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