Graphic Narratives as Opportunities for Professional Learning: A Sociocognitive Complexity Reading of the Graphic Novel *Queen of the Sea*

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In the graphic narrative Queen of the Sea, *protagonist Margaret tells the story of her youth on a secret island. Multimodal texts can be used as a platform for academic inquiry, enticing the reader to closely engage with the visual images, text, and the interplay between the two. Studying the sociocognitive complexity of a text invites the reader to utilize theory-of-mind thinking to identify the mental states communicated in the narrative, as well as narratological constructs such as temporality and narrative empathy. As an opportunity for professional learning, this study analyzed the sociocognitive complexity of Dylan Meconis's graphic narrative* Queen of the Sea, *using theory-of-mind thinking as an analytic frame for reading and exploring. Findings of this investigation highlight the complexity of graphic narratives and argue for their use as instructional texts in the English classroom.*

Queen of the Sea (2019), by Dylan Meconis, is a richly layered graphic novel in which protagonist Margaret tells the story of her youth on a secret island in the Silver Sea. As historical fiction, the visual images and writing invite the reader into a world loosely based on Elizabethan England. As a coming-of-age tale, readers connect with Margaret's journey towards self-identity, her developing moral codes of friendship and loyalty, and the recognition that all of us are many-layered, complex individuals. And, as multimodal art, *Queen of the Sea* can be used as a platform for academic inquiry, inviting the reader to closely engage with the tracks of visuals, text, and the interplay between the two. How a writer chooses to tell a story includes many decisions, perhaps two most pivotal are who will tell the story, or narrator selection, and how the story will be told, or the point of view within the narrative. Literary theorist Zunshine (2011) defines graphic narratives as "artifacts that coordinate text and images so that the information about people's feelings that we get from looking at their body language elaborates, contradicts, or otherwise complicates the verbal descriptions of their feelings" (p. 117). These spaces of complication invite theoretical analysis. As an opportunity for

professional learning, this study sought to analyze the sociocognitive complexity of Dylan Meconis's graphic narrative *Queen of the Sea* using theory-of-mind thinking as an analytic frame for reading and exploring.

RATIONAL FOR THE STUDY

In her review of Meconis's *Queen of the Sea*, book critic Donnelley wrote, "the best graphic novels suggest rather than decree. They allow readers to search for truth in what is shown and said, but to find it in the silence between the words, the space between the images." Graphic novels and comics hold an increasingly large space in the pantheon of children's and young adult literature. Popular graphic novels encompass stand-alone narratives, as well as best-selling series and graphic versions of classic texts. While gaining in popularity and readership amongst youth, there continues to be a gap between use of graphic narratives as instructional texts in English language arts classrooms. Advocates for comics and graphic novels have sought to define their academic worth and defend their use as legitimate texts and as literary objects with cultural and artistic value (Gardner & Herman, 2011). With the proliferation of graphic narratives on library and bookstore shelves, and their rise in stature through prominent literary awards (e.g., 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner *Maus*, 2016 National Book Award winner *March*, 2020 Newberry Medal winner *New Kid*, and 2015 Caldecott Medal Honor Book *This One Summer*), educators' focus on defense and justification for classroom use should widen to include a profession-wide stance encouraging more teachers to take up graphic novels as tools for engagement in personal and collective professional learning. Just as teachers participate in and create professional development efforts around modes of teaching with canonical literature and nonfiction, so too must we focus our professional learning on the potential for graphic novels to engage our learners, serve as platforms for literary analysis, and support classroom conversations inquiring into issues of equity, inclusion, anti-bias, anti-racism, and social justice (Carano & Clabough, 2016).

Taking up the call that teachers can align themselves with the counter-narrative of comics as texts worthy of analysis requires that we engage in our own professional inquiry into the genre. Close study, slow reading, and the application of a variety of theoretical analytic frames jolts us, as English language arts professionals, out of our comfortable positions as teachers, and invites us to reseat ourselves as learners. Professional study of graphic novels offers a rich opportunity to (re)see graphic narratives with fresh eyes, inviting us to find curiosity and new paths of inquiry, as well as a willingness to listen and learn with our school colleagues and within a larger academic sphere. This paper seeks to contribute to the conversation

by creating space for graphic narratives as professional learning opportunities for English language arts teachers and university educators.

To advocate for graphic narratives as professional learning opportunities it is important to briefly consider two arguments against graphic novels as instructional materials. The first is a historical criticism that comics/graphic novels are pleasure reading, not complex enough to warrant educational study. More recently, critics have asserted that graphic novels should not be used as replacements for more canonical texts, perhaps because of the core tension in today's teaching context - the pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests (Jones & Woglom, 2014). It may be that this argument against graphic narratives is not a case against their appropriateness, but a response to the pressure to teach in particular ways and with particular texts such that students perform highly on standardized tests. This pressure may be particularly acute for secondary teachers, whose students face a barrage of content-specific exams, college entrance exams, advanced placement exams, and high school graduation exams – all of which rarely contain excerpts from graphic narratives, if at all. Additionally, novice teachers, likely having only known a school context saturated with high-stakes testing, find these exams, the texts they favor, and test preparation modes of instruction normative. Thus, if the field of English language arts wishes to widen the canon of texts used for classroom instruction and inquiry, we must first recognize this legitimate concern. Additionally, it may be that many secondary ELA teachers' testing anxieties over using graphic novels as primary texts coincide with a lack of familiarity with the genre as "literature." Although these teachers enjoy reading graphic novels, they may have little experience engaging in collaborative and shared literary analysis of the texts. Researchers have noted that teachers need to practice pedagogical experiences analyzing graphic novels so as to be confident and effective at utilizing these texts as tools for higher-level thinking and critical analysis (Jimenez & Meyer, 2016; Smith & Pole, 2018).

Furthermore, ample research exists supporting the use of graphic narratives as supplementary and primary texts in classroom study (Banasik-Jemielniak, 2021; Carter, 2007; Dallacqua, 2012; Moeller, 2016; Monnin, 2010). Dallacqua's (2012) research indicates that graphic novels can successfully be used to teach formal literary devices and abstract concepts typically found in state standards and on standardized tests, and that classroom use legitimates analytic reading of graphic narratives. Place matters in the legitimization of texts as valuable academic reading (Dallacqua, 2012; Jones & Woglom, 2014; Moeller, 2016): "the fact that the participants in this study made so many academic connections was no accident. I established an academic setting surrounded by the books they had read for the study and for my reading class. ...The academic setting also made for academic discussions" (Dallacqua, 2012, p. 376). Dallacqua's (2012) classroom research with graphic novels focused on instruction analyzing literary devices such as foreshadowing, flashback, and

allusion, and abstract concepts including mood, characterization, and theme (pp. 372-373). Her work followed on research advocating for repeated readings of graphic narratives to support readers' use of multiple strategies, use of peritext, and meaning-making (Carter, 2007). More recent scholarship also encourages teachers to bring comics and graphic narratives into the classroom as tools for teaching complex literary concepts. Banasik-Jemielniak (2021) argued graphic narratives are a powerful tool for teaching verbal irony and ironic language to children. Evidence demonstrates that the textual complexity and the multimodality of graphic narratives can make them as challenging, and even more challenging, than prose texts.

Building on the research base that graphic narratives hold potential as high-quality instructional texts, ELA teachers and teacher educators could work to strengthen our own critical reading and writing skills with graphic narratives so that we are not only facile readers and consumers of these texts; we are also practiced critics. We need to know for ourselves if these texts hold complexity and opportunities for instruction, and we need to consider the unique challenges of multimodal texts, as well as modes of engagement with multimodal reading.

CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT: A MULTIMODAL WORLD

Within the graphic narrative *Queen of the Sea* author/artist Meconis deftly conveys shifts between the central narrative and characters' inner lives through changes in her visual style. These stylistic changes are indicated through use of color (e.g., wider color palette), figure depiction (e.g., width of lines, less realistic representation), and textual content (e.g., pronoun shift to third-person limited). The visual cues and shifts occur in parallel with rich vocabulary and a complex plotline communicated through the text. Graphic novels are multimodal texts and reading them requires multimodal engagement because to construct a more complete understanding of the text, readers must utilize semiotic, visual, and textual literacies (Kress, 2003; Moeller, 2016). While often considered interchangeable, visual and semiotic literacies are not necessarily the same, and in the classroom setting can be split apart so that students grapple more easily with visual images as literal images, and also images as metaphorical signs, signifiers, and symbols of larger intent and cultural meaning. Multimodality is quite simply engagement in using two or more modes of communication within the "text." Attention to multimodality as an instructional and learning necessity has only increased since Kress (2003) focused literacy researchers to attend to multimodal texts, emphasizing visual literacy.

Because we live in worlds permeated with multimodal texts, calls to prioritize instruction of critical reading and analysis of visual, audio, kinesthetic, spatial, and alphabetic texts continue to grow. Indeed, in 2020 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) focused attention on critical media literacy as a core form of 21st-century literacy. Comics and graphic novels are "the twentieth-century precursor of twenty-first-century mediums where visuals are dominant, a medium that can be interpreted and analyzed like any other text" (Ripley, 2012, p. 99). As we continue to move fluently between worlds of digital communication increasing reliant on visuals (i.e., emojis, emoticons, e-stickers, Bitmojis, and digital social media platforms emphasizing visuals or limited text, such as YouTube, Instagram, Tiktok, Snapchat, and Twitter), using graphic novels to decode images offers an opportunity to teach critical thinking and analysis in uniquely applicable and vital ways. Gee (2014) argued that multimodal reading is imperative in a world where images continue to increase in power in public and private spheres.

Importantly, research also indicates that the skills to read, analyze, and create multimodal texts need to be taught (Moeller, 2016). We cannot assume that students know how to or are facile at critical engagement with multimodal texts whether digital or in print. In contrast, recent misinformation media campaigns indicate that users of social media, multimodal texts dominated by visual images, often accept communications of images and text at face value without critically questioning the message, messenger, and the semiotic, metaphorical nature of meaning contained within the image, the reader, and the author's intent. Issues of misunderstanding and power conveyed through visual images were prominent in Moeller's (2016) research investigating students' conceptions while reading graphic novels. Moeller found that students described the visual depictions of graphic novels as more "correct" interpretations of the texts than the mental images they generated while reading the same novels in traditional form. This finding is problematic because it demonstrates students' prioritization of external interpretations over the mental and imaginary images they might have generated they read independently and together. In a world of communication bombarded with images, the establishment of a noncritical, normative belief that another person's visual depiction is more "correct" than one's own should cause ELA teachers concern. Close analysis of graphic narratives in the classroom is a positive step towards strengthening our youth's critical assessment of and confidence with multimodal texts. Moeller (2016) urges us to "begin incorporating multimodal reading into our school curriculum or risk maintaining outdated paradigms that have prevented many from successfully navigating and flourishing in our multimodal world" (p. 715).

SLOW READING

Instruction on how to read graphic novels should include ways of close reading referred to by Smith and Pole (2018) as "slow reading" (p. 175). Slow reading is a form of reading in which readers read closely and slowly, taking time to notice and deconstruct the interwoven and layered meanings within and amongst the images and words. They write, "because every detail matters in a graphic novel, readers need to engage in slow reading... words do not explain all the nuances in the illustrations, and the reader must figure these out. These reading strategies take time, and students need to learn the importance of slowing down to attend to both the words and the graphics" (Smith & Pole, 2018, p. 175). In graphic narratives, the complexity of visuals and considerations of authorial/artist intent are interwoven. Visual design elements such as color, space, line, size, and medium contain and communicate implicit and explicit messages within the text. This complexity warrants extended time and study (Smith & Pole, 2018, p. 174). I believe readers would benefit from repeated readings of *Queen of the Sea* to more deeply grapple with the semiotic layered metaphors within the images, the interrelations between images and text, and the possible meanings within the visual shifts in color and line that connote a shift to Margaret's inner thoughts and experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIOCOGNITIVE COMPLEXITY AND THEORY-OF-MIND THINKING

Theory-of-mind thinking is a psychology theory asserting that humans have evolved a cognitive adaptation to understand behavior as representative of underlying mental states - a kind of reading the world as attributional "mind-reading" of other people's words, actions, and presentation (Zunshine, 2011). This constant "mind-reading" can be used to make meaning of ourselves, the world, and ourselves and others in the world, and can also be thought of as recursive, as humans engage in a kind of "mind-reading" of self by carefully speaking, presenting, and acting for selves and others. In other words, with theory-of-mind thinking, we are always attributing motive, explanation, and awareness to others, just as others are to us, and we do to ourselves. Borrowing from the developing field of graphic narrative theory (Gardner & Herman, 2011) and cognitive narratology specifically (Zunshine, 2014), this study used theory-of-mind thinking as an analytic frame for reading and exploring Dylan Meconis's graphic narrative *Queen of the Sea.*

Zunshine (2014) defines theory-of-mind thinking as "our evolved cognitive capacity to see people's observable behavior in terms of their underlying mental states, such as thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions" (p. 89). Theory-of-mind thinking unlocks the socio-cognitive complexity (Zunshine, 2012) within a text, defined "as the depiction of a mental state embedded within another mental state," an example of

which during reading might be "contemplating a mental state of one character who is aware of the mental state of another character" (Zunshine, 2011, p. 119). Furthermore, in fiction, sociocognitive complexity - theory-of-mind thinking - forms through layers of embedded mental states, and begins at the third level of mental embedment, often reaching many more levels of embedment (Zunshine, 2011; Zunshine, 2014). Notably, narratologists who utilize sociocognitive complexity in textual analysis recognize that while humans can be thought of as engaging constantly and unselfconsciously in this mode of thinking, we are at the same time notoriously inaccurate in our attributions of other's thoughts and feelings. Zunshine (2011) writes, "given how many of our attributions and interpretations... are wrong or only approximately correct, they might as well call it mind-misreading" (p. 114). Our daily mind-reading of the world and others can be thought of as somewhat different from the theory-of-mind thinking we engage in while reading fiction.

> Works of fiction continuously create a pattern of mind reading that is present in real social life only sporadically. This pattern can be described as a triangulation of mental states: a representation of a mental state embedded within a mental state embedded within yet another mental state, as in, for instance I *remember* (first mental state) how *strange it seemed to me* (second mental state) that he was *so nervous* (third mental state) about their impending meeting. One does not need three characters to triangulate mental states: the same character may remember what she used to think in the past when she imagined her future feelings. (Zunshine, 2014, p. 92)

METHODOLOGY AS FINDINGS

Taking up Zunshine's (2011) assertion that "all narrative-oriented cultural representations" including graphic novels, "reflect the workings of our theory-of-mind," this study sought to ask:

> Question 1: How does reading *Queen of the Sea* with a sociocognitive complexity perspective (i.e., theory-of-mind thinking) shape my reading experience?

It's important to foreground this analysis by stating that I purposefully chose to apply an analytic frame with which I am a novice, someone still exploring the theory conceptually and grappling with its application. Taking seriously the charge that ELA teachers engage in reading of graphic novels with the goal of professional learning, selection of the theory-of-mind thinking-frame ensured unfamiliarity would facilitate close analysis. Importantly, the ambiguity and uncertainty created by application of theory-of-mind thinking sought to emulate the discomfort and frustration faced by many K-12 students when encountering challenging texts and complex analytic modes.

Taking up Zunshine's (2014) article *Theory of Mind as a Pedagogical Tool* as a kind of how-to manual, the methods consisted of textual analysis through repeated slow readings, leading from the overarching research question and centered around two more finely construed inquiries:

(Q1/A) How does Meconis's *Queen of the Sea* create its sociocognitive complexity, in other words, whose minds do we have to read to engage with the story? (Similar to Zunshine's question, p. 93); and

(Q1/B) Whose minds do we *choose* (Zunshine's italics) to read, and why, when we engage with the story? (Modified from Zunshine's question, p. 102).

These inquiries are described in the next two sections. Following an explication of the central findings, a final section highlights the findings from an additional emergent question, and how the concepts raised by that question interconnect with theory-of-mind thinking.

INQUIRY A. THINKING ABOUT THEIR THINKING: LOOKING FOR LAYERS OF EMBEDMENT

I suggested to the class that a work of fiction signals to us, already in its opening paragraphs, what kind of mind reading it expects from us. It indicates, among other things, *whose minds* we would have to read to fully engage with the story: only the characters'; the characters' and the narrator's; the narrator's and the implied reader's, and so on. We intuitively respond to this signaling by staying with the text beyond the first paragraphs or by dropping the book. Different readers, or even the same readers at different points in their lives, may be more amenable than others to engaging with the minds of narrators (as opposed to following only the minds of characters). (Zunshine, 2014, p. 93).

This section aims to describe the findings of theory-of-mind guided inquiry, as well as the path by which those findings were illuminated. Arguably, it is the story of findings as methodological practice. The story of this analysis focuses primarily on opening sections of *Queen of the Sea*. These sections are representative of later portions of the text and the findings of analysis therein. However, for explanatory purposes, with regards to addressing how slow reading of a graphic narrative can serve as a professional learning platform, the opening sections of the novel offer ample investigative depth.

The beginning of *Queen of the Sun* creates a map for the reader as to the potential sociocognitive complexity to be expected. Research question 1/A investigated how sociocognitive complexity is created in the narrative through the author's/artist's design of the minds with which the reader must engage. An examination of this inquiry required parsing the modes of storytelling within the entire text, resulting in an identification and categorization of four textual modes. While the central narrative largely progresses sequentially (Mode 4), there exist two additional interruptive modes (Modes 2 & 3), and the opening

sequence (p. 1-6) stands apart from the remainder as unique (Mode 1). Pages 1-26 introduce the four modes of storytelling within the text. Each of these modes is indicated by the interplay of text and visuals.

TABLE 1

Modes of Storytelling Identified Through Analysis of Mental Embedments, pp. 1-26

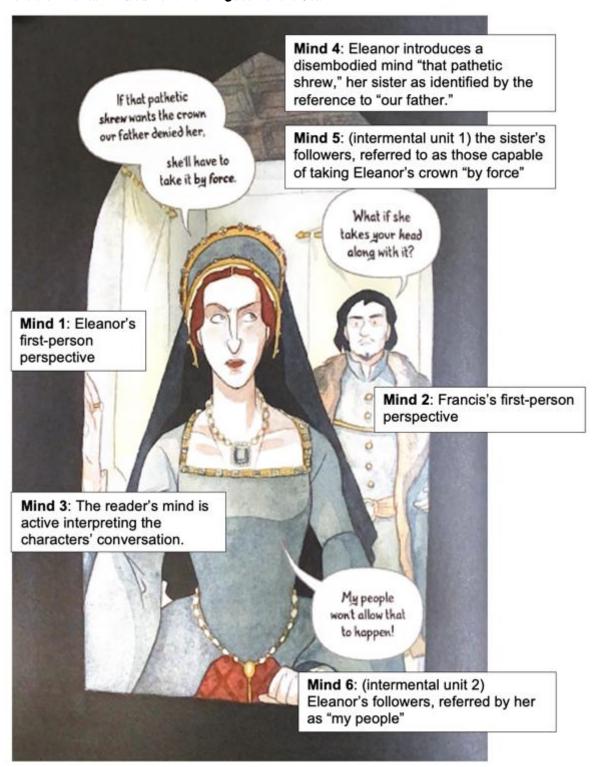| MODE OF STORYTELLING	DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS	PURPOSE OF THE MODE
MODE 1	Opening sequence of narrative (pp. 1-12). Characters speak in first-person (Margaret absent). Includes embodied, disembodied, and intermental unit minds. Plot proceeds chronologically. Images conveyed through line-defined, sequential frames and panels. Color palette is muted.	Introduces the setting and central conflict. Establishes third-person, omniscient narrative perspective as storytelling device. Present the story as though watching a play or film.
MODE 2	Margaret narrates as embodied or disembodied. Characters speak in first-person. Includes embodied, disembodied, and intermental unit minds. Short explanations may proceed chronologically as stories within the larger story. May contain unlined, floating panels and/or singular images located centrally on the page. Color palette is muted.	Establishes a secondary, "explanatory" mode of storytelling interrupting the overall narrative chronological sequencing. Margaret speaks directly with the reader in an Aside form.
MODE 3	Margaret narrates as embodied or disembodied. Short explanations may proceed chronologically as stories within the larger story. Visual style unique. Use of wider color palette containing vibrant, primary colors. Less realistic figures convey a child-like perspective. Thicker lines are used in visual images.	Establishes a third mode of storytelling, also "explanatory," in which Margaret teaches the reader about as issue or idea central to understanding her perspective of *her* story. Margaret is communicated as the artist and speaker of these Soliloquies.
MODE 4	Primary mode of storytelling, commencing pp. 24-393. Characters speak/think in first-person with some narration by Margaret, establishing a limited third-person narrative perspective. Includes embodied, disembodied, and intermental unit minds. Line defined, sequential frames and panels convey the events. Color palette is muted.	Reintroduces and proceeds with the dominant story mode using limited third-person perspective. Present the story as though watching a play or film, as seen through Margaret's presence.

Minds in Mode 1

The storytelling of Mode 1 is primarily defined by the absence of the central narrator Margaret. This mode begins the graphic novel and introduces the characters/minds of Eleanor and Francis within the sequence of panels encompassing pp. 1-11. In Mode 1, both Eleanor and Francis speak in first-person point of view, although the visual construction of the panel communicates a third-person omniscient narrative perspective. This "fourth wall" visual construction (to borrow a term from theater studies), implies that the reader's mind is actively invited to make sense of the Minds presented. Initially, there are three layers of mental embedment, the minds of Eleanor, Francis, and the reader. However, within the dialogic exchange between Eleanor and Francis the sociocognitive complexity increases. Eleanor's dialogue introduces a disembodied mind, "that pathetic shrew" who has taken "the crown our father denied her." In this way, a fourth mind to consider is her absent sister. Eleanor's next spoken phrase, "she'll have to take it by force," communicates the first of what Zunshine (2014) and Palmer (2010) refer to as an *intermental unit*, which is a way of thinking about small (e.g., familial) and large (e.g., institutional) social groups. Thus, in addition to the unseen sister the reader is introduced to the collective mind of the sister's unseen followers, and next, to Eleanor's absent followers, referred to as "my people." At this point, on a single page, the reader has been introduced to six minds which must be engaged to make meaning of the story. Additionally, already the narrative initiates grouping of the minds - Eleanor, Francis, and "my people" on one side, and "that pathetic shrew" sister and her followers on the other. Sociocognitive complexity requires the reader to grapple with embodied and disembodied minds as well as individual minds, collective intermental units, and the relationships amongst the minds presented (Zunshine, 2014, p. 95).

Theory-of-mind thinking asks the reader/researcher to describe comprehension of the minds present in the text's meaning-making unit (i.e., in this case, p. 2) as a sociocognitive map. The purpose of the sociocognitive map is to interpret the embedded nature of the minds extant and interacting within a portion of text as a means of illuminating the complexity of the characters' relationships as well as the intricacies of story elements like plot, setting, and external and internal metaphorical representations. I submit my sociocognitive map of p. 2:

> Francis *implores* Eleanor to flee the castle, but Eleanor is *unwilling* to do that. Eleanor *believes leaving is a sign of cowardice* and that her people *will loyally protect her.* Eleanor's sister *wishes to take power* from Eleanor and has *loyal* troops who *desire* her to come to power. The reader is *meant* to begin a tenuous alliance with Eleanor.

FIGURE 1

Levels of Mental Embedment within Queen of the Sea*

**Example explicating the Minds identified within Mode 1, p. 2*

The use of italics in the map indicates reader interpretation of the identified minds as actively involved in purposeful, communicative acts. For example, arguably, Francis doesn't simply tell Eleanor to leave the castle; his words, "What if she takes your head along with it?" imply a seriousness and urgency akin to the verb *implore.* Likewise, by foregrounding Eleanor's character in the frame and placing Francis behind her, Meconis communicates Eleanor's power over others. Additionally, the use of an exclamation point in her final statement, "My people won't allow that to happen!" reiterates that power. This interpretation is one possible construction of the sociocognitive complexity of the embedded mental states. The conversation between Francis and Eleanor continues through p. 11. Throughout that sequence, the sociocognitive complexity is further complicated with the introduction of the mind of Eleanor's hound (p. 5), the mind of a guardsman (p. 7), and the additional intermental unit of the sister's court (p. 8).

Mode 1 can be interpreted as serving multiple purposes. First, Mode 1 introduces the larger setting of the story, that of an island kingdom suffering war and political conflict. Second, one of the central conflicts is introduced, that Eleanor must flee her position as Queen and seek refuge due to a coup led by her sister. Mode 1 also introduces the primary mode of narratorial perspective employed by the author, via visual images and character dialogue, third-person omniscience. This nascent analysis of the sociocognitive complexity reveals a text meriting further literary analysis.

Minds in Modes 2 and 3

Page 12 begins Mode 2, defined by the introduction of the narrator-protagonist-guide, Margaret. This mode of storytelling is interspersed throughout the remainder of the text. In an interview with *Comics Journal*, author/artist Meconis refers to this mode of storytelling as an "explanatory essay," in this instance serving the purpose to help readers' "initial settling into the world building" (Dueben, 2020). Mode 2 is defined as a first-person explanatory mode in which Margaret interrupts the chronologically sequenced narrative to speak directly to the reader. These direct narrations are woven throughout the graphic novel, similar in function to Shakespearean asides. Margaret speaks to the reader as a confidant and companion, providing important contextual details about the story elements, as well as revealing her private thoughts and emotions in a manner meant to develop rapport with the reader. Frequently within Mode 2 the text jockeys for prominence with changes in the visual elements, and the visual design shifts result in images created with marked differences, including the absence of the line defined, sequential frames that define the primary mode of storytelling in Modes 1 and 4. In Mode 2, the visual images may or may not convey chronological sequencing. For example, the three, floating, unlined panels of p. 14 do communicate chronology; however, the images on the previous two pages, 12 and 13, are singular conveyances meant to introduce a story

element – specifically a metaphorical, symbolic representation of Margaret's character (center of p. 12), the island setting of Albion (top left, p. 13), and the visual image of Margaret's character (bottom right, p. 13).

Interrupting the explanatory function of Mode 2, p. 15 introduces Mode 3. As with Mode 2, Mode 3 is used by the author/artist throughout the entirety of the narrative as an interruptive mode that encompasses short sections of text in which Margaret tells the reader about her experiences, while also *teaching* the reader by her own hand. Similar in form and purpose to the technique of soliloquy, Margaret's "teaching" predominantly takes the form of religious history and fables (p. 15; pp. 55-64; pp. 295-296) and imagined conversations and maps (pp. 40-41; pp. 292-293), all of which serve to invite the reader into Margaret's private revelations around spiritual/emotional issues. In this mode Margaret is teaching the reader about something she believes is important to understanding *her* story. Mode 3 is also defined through visual shifts created by Meconis's use of a wider, more vibrant color palette, thicker lines outlining the drawings, and a less realistic, more childlike style of figure (human and nonhuman) drawing. The example of Mode 3 on p. 15 is brief, wherein Margaret has "drawn" examples of four types of nuns, as means of explaining the kind of nuns with whom she lives (i.e., the Elysians). The next example of Mode 3 occurs on pp. 40-41 and contains a map of the island as "drawn" by Margaret, connected to her explanations of each site's importance.

Returning to the analysis of mental embedment, within Modes 2 and 3, who are the minds with which we contend? These modes of interruption in the chronological story deepen the reader's connection to Margaret, as she reveals her private thoughts, significant stories, and her "drawings." The reader makes meaning from an engagement between Margaret's mind and the reader's mind who responds to her secrets, thoughts, aspirations, and pains. And while in Modes 2 and 3 other minds/characters are referred to and introduced, these are seen through Margaret's perspective, and their words are heard through the prism of Margaret's thoughts. Thus, at least three levels of mental embedment can regularly be found in Modes 2 and 3.

Minds in Mode 4

Mode 4, the primary mode of the text, begins on p. 24, in the second frame as Sister Agnes, asks, "What have you learned Margaret?" Line-defined, sequential panels are reintroduced containing speaking and thinking characters, each of whom speaks for themselves, attended at times by Margaret's simple narration. In this way, the narrative perspective is limited third-person point of view. The minds and mental embedments the reader must interpret are varying. Secondary characters whose minds are important to understanding the story include Sister Agnes the Prioress, William, William's Mother, other Sisters, and

later Mother Mary Clemence, Eleanor, and Francis. Additional intermental groups are introduced as well, most prominently, God, the island, and the Old Ones.

This analysis of sociocognitive complexity in *Queen of the* Sea and the subsequent identification of Modes 1-4 indicates two important points. First, it is clear that *Queen of the Sea* is a highly complex social narrative, within which readers must make sense of a number of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Although Meconis described herself writing, "for a kid who's going to identify with Margaret's worldview," as perhaps a "precocious thirteen-year-old," it is clear that this graphic narrative is a sophisticated, multimodal text. Furthermore, as a fictional historical retelling, Meconis invites the reader to activate everything they know or think they know about royalty, succession, nuns, and European history. At the same time, a reader could read and enjoy the entire story without realizing that the island of Albion loosely resembles England, and Gallia refers to France. In this way, the investigation shifts focus to question 1/B, an investigation into reader agency.

Inquiry B. Reader Agency, Empathy, and How Selection Shapes Meaning Making

Question 1/B asks, whose minds do we *choose* to read and why, when we engage with the story? To answer this question this section focuses on a Mode 4 short exchange between Margaret and Sister Agnes (p. 24-26). Before describing this analytic process, it is valuable to clarify what Zunshine means when she refers to reader agency as a reader choosing which character minds (e.g., embodied, disembodied, and intermental) to engage with during the meaning-making process. Zunshine (2014) considers there to be differences between theory-of-mind reading with embodied and disembodied characters. She postulates that because of our social tendencies, most readers tend to favor mind-reading of embodied characters over disembodied ones; "it is possible, in other words, that when we think of mental states in fiction... our first impulse is still to reach out for entities that have manifested their "presence" by embodied social engagement with other characters" (p. 102). In graphic novels, embodied characters are visually displayed on the page.

Zunshine (2014) argues that the minds readers attend to while reading serve as guideposts to meaning-making and correspond to characters and intermental groups with whom we feel empathy and connection (see also Keen, 2006; 2011). Studies into narrative empathy define empathy as a capacity to imagine oneself in another's position, a cognitive act that is also an emotional expression. Previous research into narrative empathy and graphic novels has studied artist/author use of animal characters and anthropomorphism as a visual tool for eliciting empathy in the reader (Keen, 2011; Herman, 2012; Munslow Ong, 2016).

Meconis directs the reader to keep Margaret's mind at the center of the reading experience. This construction is indicated through the author's development of the storytelling modes described as Modes 2-4, as well as Margaret's embodied presence throughout the text (p.12-394). Once Margaret enters the story, on p. 12, she never leaves. Her mind is always present, either physically as found in Mode 4, which is when the narrative commences through a series of sequential, closed line frames and panels, alternating between disembodied/embodied selves in Mode 2, or as a disembodied speaker in Mode 3. In this way, using theory-of-mind thinking causes the reader to engage the text with Margaret's voice as guide, resulting in the development of narrative empathy for Margaret as well as solidarity with her preferences, beliefs, and intuitions about characters and situations. Through the establishment of narrative empathy focally with Margaret, other characters are seen through her gaze. For example, at the beginning of the reading journey, before employing sociocognitive analysis, I did not comprehend Eleanor-in-visuals and Eleanor-in-text as seen through Margaret's perspective. I instead read the character of Eleanor as *herself*, which left me wondering why Meconis chose to present the character (in words and visual images) as often unflattering, harsh, and even cruel. With a theory-of-mind perspective, those author choices can be understood as attributions of characters' mental states. Shifting the reading experience to theory-of-mind thinking with Margaret as guide, dramatically changed interpretations of Eleanor's character. This empathetic repositioning allowed for a reinterpretation of Eleanor as seen by the child character Margaret. By choosing to construct and engage the narrative via Margaret, Eleanor was no longer simply brash, but also brave. Her cruelty could be reconceived as passion, fear, and courage.

Theory-of-mind thinking as a selection of whose mind(s) from which to construct narrative meaning also invited a slow reading analysis of the visual images. Throughout *Queen of the Sea,* the visual depictions of characters' emotions create immediate and intimate connections between the reader and the minds on the page. The depictions of faces and facial expressions, body language, and hair were prominent features of emotional state. Interestingly, depictions of women's hair (and the covering of women's hair) came to signify mood and atmosphere in the narrative. For example, as the tension of the story increased, so too, did the unruliness and windsweptness of women's hair. Additionally, through Margaret's mind, interpretations of Eleanor's visual images showed a dynamic character whose postures and expressions could not be reduced in simplistic terms (e.g., haughty or brash). Instead, the images imply a complex character. It may be that my attention to hair was an example of how the multimodality of graphic narratives invites readers to explore minute detail and imbue it with meaning; "graphic narratives, particularly those committed to visual experimentation, intuitively exploit our tendency to obsessively watch, interpret, and

reinterpret emoting bodies while remaining mostly unaware of the various steps involved in this process of fictional mind-reading" (Zunshine, 2011, p. 129). Thus, by attending to the construction of textual comprehension through Margaret's character, and the resulting development of empathy for and with her, the analysis of both the visuals and text changed.

An Emergent Investigation of Time

Additionally, and perhaps, because of the novelty of the theoretical approach employed, between the two primary research questions (Q1/A and Q1/B), additional questions arose around reading with considerations of the concept of embedment within theory-of-mind thinking. These questions emerged in a manner similar to the employment of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), and resonated around the idea that *Queen of the Sea* is a cultural artifact that contains and communicates particular constructions of time as well as particular social environments, specifically those containing primarily female-female relationships and interactions.

In my initial readings of *Queen of the Sea* (i.e., without theory-of-mind thinking), I read the central plotline with the understanding that the characters were living the story as it occurred in real-time. I was right *there* with the characters as the events happened, completely overlooking clues that indicated otherwise. However, utilizing a theory–of-mind approach interrupted these assumptions and led to questions about temporality in the narrative. Through analysis of the embedment of social relations between character(s), realization developed of narrative hints that Margaret was narrating past events. For example, in analyzing the layers of embedment on page 12, Margaret *doesn't know* where she was born, she wants *you to know that she doesn't know*, and *she knows that the not knowing* is connected to discovering the identity of the "true queen of Albion;" the identity of whom is a secret *worth knowing*. Looking from this perspective, it became clear that the narrator-Margaret might sometimes be different than the character-in-frames, present Margaret. This knowledge was implicit in earlier readings but ignored. Thus, a new analytic question emerged: When is Margaret experiencing the action of the narrative as it is happening (i.e., for the first time), and when is she retelling events of the past?

From this wide-eyed realization came the decision to read more closely to discern when Margaret could be described as an "experiencing-I" in-the-moment narrator, and when she was the older Margaret, reflecting back and recounting to the reader narrator (Herman, 2010). This emergent inquiry was not simple, because the embeddedness of mental states indicated that throughout the narrative narrator Margaret is the older, reflective self. Yet, in much of the story (i.e., all of Mode 4) she is also depicted in the "present-day" action as the "experiencing-I." In her analysis of Bechdel's (2007) graphic memoir *Fun Home,* Zunshine

(2011) finds Bechdel uses this same temporal literary construction. In describing her analysis, Zunshine (2011) introduces Herman's (2010) concept of "distributed temporality" in narratives, which refers to an older first-person narrator who looks back on past events through a view of themselves as a younger first-person narrator - which Herman refers to as the "experiencing-I." Thus, while it may seem that the narrative moves forward sequentially as though the events are occurring in the present, they are in fact past events, and the reflective, looking back narrator (older Margaret) recounts them for the reader. As a further complexity, that reflective, older Margaret may also be a disembodied self who is elusive or infrequently indicated in the narrative.

This final analytic path investigated possible temporal shifts and indications of reflection in the narrative. A small section of text (p. 24-26) can be used to exemplify two findings around temporality. It's worth mentioning that these findings felt important as a reader/researcher, but for others more experienced with graphic narratives perhaps they would not feel so valuable. It is important to highlight this realization because it gets to the heart of why ELA teachers and teacher educators should use graphic narratives for professional learning. If teachers are to become confident users of these texts in the English classroom, we must be deeply knowledgeable about their complexities and characteristics.

A close rereading of p. 24 found the first hint of "retelling" by the reflective Margaret narrator. The text, "so that was the end of my asking questions," can be attributed to Margaret's previous desire to seek answers to her arrival on the island. It was "the end" of asking questions, communicating finality. The visual clues accompanying these words were a smudged word-thought cloud, as opposed to a line-defined word-dialogue bubble. This statement was a thought shared with the reader from Margaret's mind. The disembodied older narrating Margaret can be interpreted to be looking back, while the reader views the 12-year-old Margaret on the page. Subsequent examples confirmed the theory of temporal duality in Margaret's narration. Margaret's retellings, as well as in-moment thought reflections, are indicated through visual communication of smudged, lineless thought clouds. In this way, a theory-of-mind perspective invited attention to temporal expressions communicated by the visual images as well as text.

Second, on page 24, the first panel concludes the Mode 2 storytelling style of explanatory segments that began with Margaret's introduction as the primary narrator on page 12. This page depicts the first temporal shift from Margaret as explaining a situation, in this case, retelling of her investigations into how she came to be on the island, to a present tense, in-the-moment scene between Margaret and Sister Agnes. This temporal shift is the reader's first introduction to how Meconis will cue the reader and establish the central narrative. Panels two through five (p. 24) immerse the reader in present tense with the characters.

The narrative appears to commence forward with a dialogic exchange between Margaret and Sister Agnes, both speaking in the first-person. Reread with the temporality in mind, however, indicated that the disembodied narrator Margaret was still there, hovering around the page, in the reader's imagination, one of the many minds with which to contend. This multi-perspectival approach complicated the reading experience when analyzing from a theory-of-mind perspective. Margaret and Sister Agnes are both speaking in first-person; they are both the "experiencing-I"s. And yet the story progresses from an implied third-person limited point of view. The reader is meant to understand that Margaret's reflective narratorial point of view is carried throughout, while at the same time the reader also serves as a shared narrator, constructing the meaning from the first-person dialogue within which the characters engage in what seems like present tense. In this way, while Margaret is in the scene - literally drawn into the panels - the reader does not "see" the scene from her eyes/point of view, and instead the reader lives through the conversation with a past her. This temporal duality allows the reader to construct a present-tense narrative understanding while keeping Margaret's narratological position at the fore as the primary storyteller.

Thus, in inquiry into question 1/B, the analysis of whose mind the reader *chooses* to read from revealed shifts in time in addition to the development of narrative empathy. By stopping to analyze the temporal shifts, the intricacy of the temporal construction of point of view in the narrative was highlighted. These findings further reiterate the complexity of this graphic narrative and serve to further dispel concerns that *Queen of the Sea* is not literary enough for classroom learning and instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study set out as a two-part challenge. First, I sought to investigate the complexity of the graphic novel *Queen of the Sea* as a way of considering its instructional potential for classroom use and its power as a text worthy of focused professional learning. I knew *Queen of the Sea* was a beautifully written and illustrated narrative with well-developed characters, an interesting plot, and multiple examples of literary devices such as metaphor and motif. But was it truly *complex*? If questioned by critics of graphic novels, or asked how teaching with this text was effective preparation for high stakes testing, could I explain the complexity of the text and its utility as an instructional tool and vehicle for critical reading? To answer these questions, I took up the second challenge as an engaged textual analysis using sociocognitive complexity and theory-of-mind thinking as a tool to reposition myself as a learner and researcher.

In Zunshine's (2011) research into the sociocognitive complexity of graphic novels she writes, "we process visual information about people's mental states in a fast, messy, and intuitive way, which we then

inevitably misrepresent in our straightened out and ossified verbal accounts... I am sure that we perceive a slightly different pattern of embedment every time we reread a graphic narrative of high sociocognitive complexity" (p. 129). This recognition of different readings, patterns of meaning-making, and illumination of assumptive thinking proved true in this study. Grappling with constructions of characters' mental states -- essentially mind-reading of their mind-reading – promoted analysis of multimodal complexity in powerful ways. Reading fiction engages theory-of-mind by inviting the reader to create attributions of mind throughout the text, including attributions about characters, plot, and setting. ELA teachers will connect these attributions of mind to inferential thinking, and rightly so (Kelly & Taboada Barber, 2021). Theory-of-mind thinking takes up inferential thinking as a complex sociocognitive task (Zunshine, 2011; Kelly & Taboada Barber, 2021). The engagement with the character's thoughts and feelings encompasses an interpersonal mind-reading conversation and an intrapersonal act of pleasure, especially when reader mind-reading is rewarded as the frames, pages, and narrative progress.

Earlier in the rationale, I asserted that the current political-social context of English teaching is fraught, and this context includes a recognition that our teaching and our students' learning are to some extent judged by students' performance on standardized tests. Whether we wish it so or not, the context is real. The extent to which we are aware of the power of this context to affect how we select texts for classroom use is variable. Some teachers may feel the pressures acutely, and thus text selection reflects more traditional canonicity. In those situations, there may be graphic novels in classroom libraries that are discussed with students. Perhaps teachers and students can be found reading graphic novels for pleasure, but they are rarely used as primary instructional texts. For other teachers, graphic novels and comics are included in classroom activities as supplements and bridges and as invitations to understand, analyze, and create expressions of literary knowledge. The research described here asserts that teachers should move confidently toward including more graphic novels into learning opportunities. First, critical literary analysis indicates that graphic narratives like *Queen of the Sea* contain multimodal complexity worthy of classroom use. Additionally, the ubiquity of visual images in our culture increases the need for direct instruction in critical thinking and visual literacy. Graphic novels offer teachers and students a unique modality for such collaborative and prolonged study. Finally, Jones and Woglom (2014) ask us to consider how the texts we select for classroom use reveal what we believe about children and youth. Could normalizing graphic novels as primary teaching texts also say something different about what we value about reading, youth culture, learning, and art?

This investigation strengthened my belief that educators have a professional responsibility to bring graphic narratives more strategically and thoughtfully into the forefront of classroom instruction. This

conviction is an expression of affirmation for the genre and for youth. There is a social justice pedagogy in teaching with these texts. For many children and youth, the increased accessibility of multimodality and genre familiarity invites them to read graphic novels with some confidence and ease. That invitation opens the door to a world of learning opportunities for investigating the complexities of graphic narratives. Freire (2000) reminds us that reading the world is the first step to writing and reading our lives into the world. This is true for our students, and it is also true for ourselves, our colleagues, and our profession. Engaging in professional learning around specific texts heightens our awareness of genre, text complexity, and the habits of critical thinking elicited by theoretical frames that push us to think deeply.

This research endeavor confirmed that ELA teachers and teacher educators should include graphic narratives as primary instructional tools and opportunities for professional learning. When we become critical analysts of graphic narratives, we are better equipped to refute critics who argue that graphic novels lack the textual complexity to serve as preparatory activities for standardized tests. On the contrary, close reading of multimodal texts requires attentional engagement and critical thinking, both vital skills for successful performance on standards-based exams. We are also better able to advocate for in-depth, independent, small-group, and collective literary study of longer graphic narratives like *Queen of the Sea*. We also communicate the value of visual literacy and visual communications to our students and colleagues. To meet these goals, we must increase our advocacy for engagement with graphic narratives in professional development.

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