

UNST 124g fall 2011

green consciousness

1 introduction

1.1 rhetorical modes

Everybody who sets out to communicate something to somebody else selects—whether he or she recognizes it or not—a *rhetorical mode*, a method of communication, for example, exposition, argumentation, description, or narration. The goal of expository communication is to explain and analyze information while the goal of argumentation is to assert the validity of a particular idea or point of view. Description creates or re-creates an object or situation so that an audience can construct their own understanding of that which is described while narrative places such information in a larger, ordered context. We have experience with all of these, and with essays in which more than one mode is used. Every rhetorical situation has a communicator (perhaps an author), an audience, a medium in which content is delivered (perhaps a written text), and a context in which communication takes place.

An author chooses a mode that suits his or her purpose but this selection alone does not govern the style and content of what is communicated. The **author's** attitude and background, the **audience's** attitude and background, the attributes of the **medium**, and the **context**—the time, the place, the community—all contribute to both how information is presented and how it is received. When we view Albert Bierstadt's monumental paintings of western landscapes today, we bring a different sensibility to them than did viewers in Bierstadt's time,¹ just as landscape painters today may construct very different representations of similar scenes.² Bierstadt's paintings clearly operate in more than one rhetorical mode, both now and at the time they were painted.

1.2 narrative

Defined most broadly, a narrative is a story or a fragment of a story that describes a set of events, placing them in a temporal context. Narrative may be fiction or non-fiction, written or spoken, and must have a point of view—first, second, or third person—representing one or more participant in the story. That participant may be engaged in the action or an observer. Narrative is a ubiquitous feature of human culture. We tell stories to teach, to entertain, and to establish identity within and among groups.

In her essay *Interior and exterior landscapes: The Pueblo migration stories*, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) discusses the importance of narrative in Pueblo life and tradition. She illustrates the idea that the people and the land cannot be separated into different conceptual categories using both stories *about* and stories *she learned during* her childhood at Pueblo Laguna. In so doing, she both picks up and adds new material to the bundle of stories that has been carried down to her generation by their ancestors. The grandmother of Marmon Silko's aunt insisted that the door be open when stories were told, saying

“Go open the door so our esteemed ancestors may bring us the precious gift of their stories.” Marmon Silko concludes from this

Two points seem clear: the spirits could be present, and the stories were valuable because they taught us how we were the people we believed we were. The myth, the web of memories and ideas that create and identity, is a part of oneself. This sense of identity was intimately linked with the surrounding terrain, to the landscape that has often played a significant role in a story or in the outcome of a conflict.

(p. 43) The stories are both ancient and contemporary, serving both as historical record and modern road map (both figuratively and literally).

1.3 graphic narrative

The term *graphic narrative* is used to represent a variety of media in which written words and art are used together to convey meaning in a temporal context.³ The imagery in a graphic narrative—subject, arrangement, artistic technique—is used not simply to illustrate the content of some accompanying text but rather to provide information the reader could not obtain from the words alone. Similarly, text—spoken words, thoughts, sounds—provides information that cannot be simply inferred from pictures on a page. Pictures are immediate, inducing an emotional response in the reader, while words provide specificity. The medium demands an active audience. The reader must synthesize the two narrative streams, establishing a relationship between space on the page and time in the unfolding plot.

From their inception in the nineteenth century, what we recognize as modern comics have both reflected and challenged popular culture and politics (Chute, 2008). Like all other forms of communication, graphic narratives are viewed through lens created by the details of the rhetorical situation. Limited space drives comic book artists to rely on recognizable, stylized imagery to convey as much meaning as possible. Such stereotyping may be an asset or a liability, may be read differently by different audiences, and may be used either to reinforce or to challenge cultural norms (Feuer, 2007; Royal, 2007), or more subversively, the norms of the medium itself.⁴

2 assignment

Please read chapters 1 through 4 of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (issues 21 through 24 of the comic book series) and the introduction to these written by the author, Alan Moore. The *Swamp Thing* issues we will read are revisionary narratives. Starting in 1984, Alan Moore transformed an existing fictional character in a manner that challenged the traditions of the medium and allowed him to explore contemporary environmental and social concerns. The graphic narrative format allows Moore to approach those issues in novel and accessible ways.

Swamp Thing is classified in the horror comic genre, a literary tradition with ancient origins. Horror manipulates fear of the unknown to elicit an emotional response in an audience. Unlike traditional *natural horror* fiction, the “monster” in these stories is not an element of nature—insects or tomatoes for example—run amok. Instead, the horrors are of human creation and it is *the green* who must consider its response.

In reinventing the Swamp Thing, Moore and artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben call on an old motif, the *Green Man*. The most familiar expression of this motif is perhaps the foliate face used in medieval and gothic revival architecture but the imagery is older than that, extending back at least to Dionysus, the Greco-Roman god of the grape harvest and of wine. Dionysus is often pictured holding a staff wound in ivy. The seventh Homeric Hymn relates the story of Dionysus liberating himself from captivity by filling a Tyrrhenian pirate ship with vines. The Green Man of fifteenth to seventeenth-century Europe was also associated with festive occasions, carrying a staff and assisting other entertainers by clearing the way through crowds of onlookers during pageant processions, often in an intoxicated state. It is the pageant Green Man whom we see carved in medieval churches and imitated in gothic revival architecture of later centuries (for example, the Dekum building in downtown Portland).

The following questions are intended to provide some context for thinking about the ideas presented in *Saga of the Swamp Thing*. We will discuss these in class the 26th of October. You may be asked to turn in your reading responses so please prepare them appropriately. In this case, the questions will be most useful if you read the four chapters first and then read the questions.

1. Moore uses several approaches to demonstrate that *his* Swamp Thing is different from the character who had been written before. Describe, with examples, how he accomplishes this in his first four issues.
2. How does Moore encourage us to think about corporations and their interaction with nature? How does he accomplish this?
3. Moore, Bissette, and Totleben use many cultural icons to convey meaning. Here are a few to look for:
 - (a) What's up with Swamp Thing's nose in the last panel of page 39?
 - (b) What other works of fiction are referenced on pages 52 and 54? Why are they referenced?
4. Why is it important to the narrative that Jason Woodrue uses a machine to connect his consciousness with the green? What cultural concerns or sensibility is Moore reflecting here?
5. In her *This I Believe* essay, Joy Harjo uses a symbol that has cultural relevance for her community to express an idea about interconnectedness. How does Moore, in these issues of *Swamp Thing*, express the same idea?
6. Page 79: The Green Millennium! Is there a warning here?
7. Bissette and Totleben make a very specific point about the Justice League on pages 82 to 84, 90, 102, and 103. In the dialog he writes for these members of the Justice League, Moore makes a related point about the priorities of the modern technological world. What do they want us to think about here? This is similar to concerns raised by Joy Harjo in her *This I Believe* essay and by Dan Flores in *Spirit of place and the value of nature in the American west* (1998).
8. On those same pages, Moore also expresses some ideas about the super hero comic genre.

Notes

¹Fores (1998) discusses Romantic Era representations of western landscapes and what could be called a 19th century American environmental nationalism (pp. 36-37). Today, our appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of those representations may be complicated by how we understand the effects of westward expansion, the creation of National Parks, and other federal actions, on the land and on the people who lived there at the time.

²Compare, for example, Albert Bierstadt's *California Spring* (1875) and Wayne Thiebaud's *Ridge Valley Farm* (1998). Both paintings are viewable in ArtStor at the Millar Library website.

³Some definitions would not require text but all require temporal structure, or choreography on the page. The Wikipedia entry for Comics provides a concise overview of the history of the medium (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics>). Chute (2008) provides a scholarly historical analysis while McCloud (1993; http://www.ted.com/talks/scott_mccloud_on_comics.html) analyzes form.

⁴Alan Moore's **Swamp Thing** (1984-1987) and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) began one such wave of revisionary narratives.

3 assignment

1. What

4 references

Chute, H. (2008). Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative. *PMLA*, 123(2), 452-465.

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