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Proposed Essay Question – How do Anthropomorphic characters gain higher empathy and characterisation over human characters?

Introduction

For this proposal I'll be looking at three key words within my own interests of art for this project; comics, narratology and anthropomorphism. I'll be looking at how the layout of comics affects the reader, depending on styles and composition, in particular looking at theorists Scott McCloud and M Thomas Inge. For the word narratology I will focus on how good story's are written and how narratives are understood by using theorist Anne Yungson. Finally I will look at anthropomorphism with Nicholas Epley and Elizabeth Fein to understand the human interest of anthropomorphized characters. With all my key words I'll be searching for deep thinking, examination and discussions on these topics in order to link them together into my final inquiry for my independent project.

Comics

“The idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the reader is vital to the art of comics” (McCloud, 1994). Pictures can convey more than words can say alone, as visual elements in comics are designed to trigger emotional interpretations controlling how the reader views the story. Research shows that comics rely on visual cues such as facial expression, body language, and panel composition for emotional responses “Visuals are not isolated entities but are embedded within a larger communicative framework”(Alim, Mulyati, 2025,p3). As visuals are combinative for both theoretical research and innovative creativity, comics have now advanced their reach to digital platforms, especially in the form of memes and digital storytelling like web-comics(Tanwar, 2025).

“They soften the impact of reality by providing a comic distance on life’s dangers, disasters and tragedies”(Thomas, 1990, p15). Comics can be used to make light of struggles in society and are a unique form of expression varying between cultures, but still providing the opportunity to laugh at difficult times which cannot be expressed in other ways quite as fully as in the comic. How does something as simple as a comic change how we perceive things? A style of art could change our perception. For example, a cartoon style compared to realism, if we choose cartoon it is more pleasing on the eyes and light-hearted on our minds, there’s less stimuli for us to focus on for a relaxed read. Cartoons are more laid back with a humorous undertone to them but if we were to read a comic with a more realistic less abstract art style, we will view it as a more serious and complex story. This supports McCloud’s claim that

simplified visuals are more inviting and relatable, making cartoon styles feel lighter and more pleasurable to read (McCloud 1993).



Fig.1, McCloud, 2011, p.101

Something as simple as the shapes and lines in panels can create a difference in the perception of passing time in a comic. Barbara Postema discusses that since the panel serves to show the story, the 'gap' is key as it provides space for the reader to engage with the comics, expanding their creativity to fill these 'gaps' (Postema, 2013). More over, the panels, the scenes and how the lines are drawn can represent different emotions, or represent a characters perspective in one of many scenes. Drawing rigid sharp lines compared to more soft flowing lines could convey different emotions in the reader, having these lines around a character show how they feel in the present panel (Riitijoki, 2021). Comics achieve something that film and other media often cannot: they make the invisible visible, transforming emotions into visual forms that amuse, clarify, and deepen our experience. "Art does not reproduce the visible rather, it makes visible"- Paul Klee, Cartoonist. Using specific symbols in a panel can be used for expression,

swirls around the character or water droplets on them can show nervousness or anxiety in a character.

Semiotics theory demonstrates how symbols can represent different things within media and comics use these symbols to their advantage for numerous displays of expression. Spirals, droplets, and spikes to externalise internal emotional states. Research shows these symbols function as visual codes, symbols operate within learned semiotic systems allowing comics to communicate complex emotions through simple visual cues (Ojha, 2021). Flames around the character, rigid thick lines can show someone angry. Eastern media can take this further with their invention of the  anger symbol used to show bulging veins in a person's head, inventing this symbol purely for the expression in manga. Originally unique to manga this symbol now functions as part of a shared semiotic vocabulary becoming an iconic design to represent anger across art types (Cohn, 2026). This further backs up Scott McCloud's theory in comics, that when a new symbol is created to showcase the invisible it will be used by all afterwards as the defining symbol. Today comics are filled with numerous symbols that we still use from the Elder artists of comics, such as Rodolphe Töpffer, with their ideas and symbols evolving into what we use now (McCloud, 1994).

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism means to add human characteristics and quirks to non-human things like objects or more commonly animals. My question is why do we do it ?

Give our human attributes to a dog or a plant and why we enjoy it? To begin this research, it is important to recognise that people understand human experience because they share it, yet this framework does not extend to nonhuman agents whose experiences lie outside the boundaries of human perception. A person could not fully understand what it is like to be a cat, so for a humans sake they apply their knowledge and experience of being human to better know the experience of said cat (Epley, 2007) . Examples of everyday anthropomorphism include, talking to your pet like a person, drawing faces onto front of cars, in advertisement such as M&Ms who have humanised versions of their product. These behaviours reflect our tendency to project human traits onto nonhuman agents (Pfiffelmann). Anthropomorphism allows us to empathise more with objects around us by projecting our desires, thoughts and emotions onto them like we do when we talk with people(Kühne, 2022).

“In order to understand their mental and emotive state, and that the more similar the other agent is to the empathizer the stronger the empathy expressed”
(Riek,2009).

Through my research I have found that anthropomorphism helps us become more empathetic toward the world around us, even when interacting with nonhuman agents.

The deeper my research went on anthropomorphism, I found the relations between them with Furies is the structure upon which the entire community is built. The idea of anthropomorphism, projecting our ideals and traits of people to non-human things leads onto creating these characters with these traits no longer based on a pre-

existing object that exists in reality. Anthropomorphism allows people to project their own traits, ideals, and personalities onto non-human characters, which is exactly how fursonas are created by blending aspects of the self with an animal form. “Fursonas act both as representations of the self and presentations for others” (Heidinger, 2025, p54). In fur-science, they did research on these fursonas with interviews on the reasons why they chose these specific fursonas. Some say it’s to highlight certain aspects of themselves or a new version of them self with more confidence, while others use them to experiment their identity onto this character for expression.(Plante, courtney, 2023). They can be used to highlight certain parts of our selves we love and want to express more in the open, encouraging yourself to explore and understand yourself then finally expressing it in an excepting community(Coyote, 2020).



Fig.2, Sorene, 2024

While anthropomorphism is used as a form of empathy making things more inviting, research also shows it can do the *opposite* when something is almost human it becomes disturbing. An example of anthropomorphized horror are Xenomorphs in alien. Looking at them design wise they are considered to be a mix of human, insect and mechanical horror which can evoke an uncanny valley effect in people.

“lack of eyes on the creature completely removes that familiar feeling we have when we come face to face with monsters. We can’t read the creature, making it much harder to understand its intentions.”(Wood, 2025)

Their heads are very phallic, adding a human characteristics to their design involving human sexual nature into their horror. The species force their reproduction into other species with sexual violence, they play on the human fear of rape to scare male audiences to understand it from a women perspectives(Snyder, 2014). Xenomorphs demonstrates how anthropomorphism can be used not only to invite empathy but also to provoke deep discomfort, amplifying its horror by reflecting distorted versions of our own bodies, behaviours, and vulnerabilities.



Fig. 3, Giger, 1979

Narratology

When writing the narrative for your work there are a few things to consider, the structure and technicality when writing the beginning, the type of language one will be using, would it have a set point of view, more specifically what are we telling the reader (Yungson, 2021)? What is written at the start can effect and change the readers understanding of narrative, giving writers Creativity to manipulate how one will perceive the story. The perspectives and forms build a strong understanding into narrative media has become important in today's world, genres of fiction and nonfiction, films, documentaries, comics, games, and oral narratives are all being studied in narratology(Kivak, 2023).

Reflection theory argues that literature mirrors the conditions of society that produces it, This includes norms, values, class structures, and collective anxieties. "Not only is the effect of literature upon its readers of interest but also the limitations which a specific reader-audience imposes upon authors"(Inglis, 2020, p533). Authors

right to reflect their opinions, and values at heart to get understanding and recognition from the readers, it helps to become empathetic to people's human experiences in the world. In digital literary studies, their research focuses on how literature produce narratives based on the world it is created in. The idea that a literary work's style is shaped by the social and political conditions of its time(Smeets, 2026).

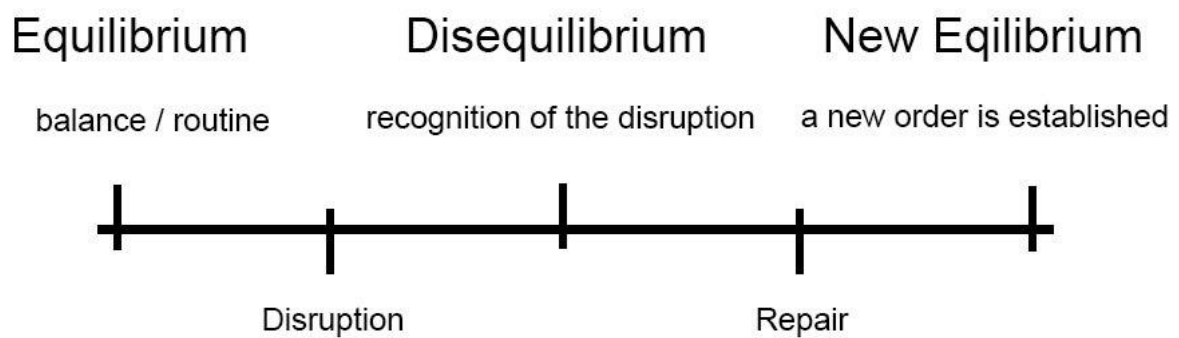


Fig.4, Media Studies, 2020

Todorov claims there to be 5 stages to narratology. The first stage of narratology is equilibrium, where were introduced to a character and the world and how it functions regularly. Secondly is the disruption, set up for the change in the characters normality, building tension to a drastic change. Next is recognition of the disruption and the effects it now has on the built story. Repair, fixing the disruption trying to maintain the order at the start of the story. Lastly is the new equilibrium, how the world is left after the effects of the destruction and repair and how things continue on with the changes(Kent,2026). He argues that all narratives move from an initial state of balance to disruption and finally to a restored equilibrium.

Conclusion

Bringing my research together, I find that comics, anthropomorphism and narratology can be used to create strong, emotionally resonant illustrations. Comics operate as a hybrid medium of visuals and text, to be used to provoke great emotions with its unique style of story-telling with pictures alone. With my research I found its relations to semiotics with every line, shape, colour, and spatial arrangement functioning as a signifier. In comics, these signifiers often express both physical and emotional states. Anthropomorphism has led me to find that it is not just about projecting human traits onto animals. Anthropomorphism can also be applied to objects or even concepts. Through an artistic view, it can be applied to make anthropomorphic characters for empathetic and psychological closeness through their abstract nature. Anthropomorphic characters often act as visual metaphors allowing readers to project their own feelings onto simplified or stylised figures, as the abstraction removes barriers that might exist with fully realistic human characters. But just as they can serve as a form of comfort they can also be used to convey discomfort and fear with the uncanny valley and create creatures solely for the purpose to play on human made fears. Narratology has led me to believe that there is a structure best followed for creating a great story, Todorov's equilibrium theory. Just like comics they can be used to provoke strong emotions with writing that comes from their experience of life, readers can find a sense of relatability in their writing.

“I write because I want to make sense of the world, and while words may not work the same for everyone, I do believe that using language to express what we feel and think and how to respond to the experiences we have can be enormously helpful”(Brady, 2026).

When merged together, these three areas demonstrate how art can function as complex symbolisms and metaphors, producing illustrations that are not only visually compelling but also layered with emotional and narrative depth.

From my research the questions that I have been pondering, how can my key words be combined to be one piece? Can anthropomorphism be used to drive the story along stronger within the comic/narrative setting? How can comics and narratology be used together to create a better story? What anthropomorphic animals can make for a great story? Would I want to use animals or anthropomorphize objects for my final project? What human experience could I possibly use to create an anthropomorphic creature to symbolise that experience? For my independent project I will be furthering my research into how I can best represent the uniqueness of the human experience based on my own experiences of culture, politics, love, trauma, socialising and symbolism. Each of these themes offers a different emotional and narrative potential, and my challenge is to determine how best to represent the uniqueness of the human experience through a non-human form. This will help me with my research for next year and my final question that will lead into my independent project.

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