



Comics, Narrative Structure, and Meaning-Making in Psychotherapy

Thomas Coghlan, PsyD

Owner, Blue Line Psychological Services, PLLC

Roslyn Heights, NY

tecoghlan@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT

This article examines how engagement with comic narratives may support shifts in how individuals understand and organize their experiences in psychotherapeutic contexts. While graphic medicine has emphasized comics as a means of representing lived experience, less attention has been given to how they may function as structured narrative environments through which continuity, narrative positioning, and meaning can be reconsidered. Drawing on anonymized, practice-informed case examples, this article explores how clients engaged with selected comic narratives understood as contemporary mythic storytelling. Through journaling, visual annotation, and guided reflection, clients examined origin events, narrative roles, and patterns of continuity within their own stories. Across cases, engagement with comics supported recognition of how experiences such as responsibility, unresolved harm, and silence had come to function as ongoing narrative conditions rather than discrete events. Rather than replacing existing narratives, shifts occurred through changes in how these narratives were understood. These observations suggest that graphic narratives may offer a complementary pathway for narrative-oriented psychotherapy, supporting movement at the level of meaning-making without requiring resolution of underlying events.

Received: March 31, 2026 **Accepted:** May 26, 2026 **Published:** June 15, 2026

Competing Interests: The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Graphic Medicine Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal. © 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.  ACCESS

INTRODUCTION

Graphic medicine has emphasized the role of comics and visual narrative in making lived experience visible, particularly in relation to health, illness, and identity. Through the integration of image and text, graphic narratives provide a space for articulating experiences that may otherwise remain difficult to express. This work builds on a growing interdisciplinary field that has defined comics as a legitimate medium for clinical reflection and health communication (Green & Myers, 2010; Williams, 2012). Across contexts including clinical reflection, education, and personal memoir, comics support engagement, reflection, and meaning-making beyond conventional verbal accounts.

Within narrative medicine and the medical humanities, storytelling has similarly been understood as central to how individuals interpret illness, disruption, suffering, and identity over time (Kleinman, 1988; Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995). Graphic medicine extends these concerns into visual and sequential forms, using comics not only to communicate experience, but to render visible patterns of meaning, continuity, and disruption that may be difficult to articulate through conventional narrative alone.

Much of this work has focused on the expressive capacities of the medium, particularly drawing, visual metaphor, and sequential representation. At the same time, scholarship has increasingly engaged narrative frameworks as tools for organizing lived experience. For example, recent work has drawn on models such as the Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity to examine how individuals structure experiences related to trauma, health, and identity (Milkowska-Shibata, 2025). These approaches highlight how narrative patterning shapes the interpretation of experience.

This emphasis aligns with developments in narrative-oriented psychotherapy, which conceptualize identity as organized through stories that give coherence to experience over time (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007; McAdams, 2001). From this perspective, disruption may be understood as a disturbance in narrative coherence, requiring reinterpretation to restore meaning (Frank, 1995).

Within this context, comics are uniquely positioned to engage narrative processes. Their sequential and multimodal structure makes patterns, repetitions, and tensions more visible, allowing implicit aspects of experience to emerge. While graphic medicine has demonstrated how comics support expression and communication, less attention has been given to how engagement with graphic narratives may facilitate shifts in how individuals organize and understand their experiences.

The present article examines how comics may function not only as a medium for representing narrative, but as a structure through which narratives can be reinterpreted in applied psychotherapeutic contexts. Drawing on anonymized case examples, it explores how engagement with selected comic narratives, considered through narrative frameworks informed by mythic and story-based patterns, may allow individuals to reconsider the organizing logic of their experiences. This approach is informed by the author's longstanding engagement with comics as a narrative form. As a lifelong reader, the use of these materials in psychotherapeutic contexts emerged as an extension of an existing narrative orientation, shaping the selection of material while maintaining focus on clients' own meaning-making.

Rather than proposing a prescriptive model, this paper presents observations on how narrative understanding may shift when individuals encounter their experiences through graphic storytelling. In this way, comics are considered not only as vehicles for expression, but as spaces in which stories may be seen differently—and, in some cases, reimagined.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Narrative approaches conceptualize identity as organized through stories that give coherence to experience over time (White & Epston, 1990; McAdams, 2001). These narratives function as frameworks through which meaning is constructed, shaping what is noticed, remembered, and given significance. Over time, such stories may become stabilized, narrowing the range of possible interpretations. Narrative practice has emphasized that alternative meanings can emerge through processes of re-authoring, in which previously unrecognized aspects of experience are brought into relation with new understandings (White, 2007).

From this perspective, disruption—whether through illness, trauma, or relational conflict—may be understood as a disturbance in narrative continuity, in which prior understandings no longer adequately account for lived experience, anticipated futures, or the individual's sense of self in relation to unfolding events (Frank, 1995). Such disruption involves more than the occurrence of distressing events alone; it reflects a destabilization of previously organizing interpretations through which experience had been understood and given coherence over time. In such contexts, reinterpretation becomes central, as individuals seek to reorganize their narratives in ways that restore continuity, orientation, or meaning.

At the same time, narrative approaches are not universally accepted as accounts of human experience or identity formation. Strawson (2004), for example, has argued against the assumption that individuals necessarily experience themselves through coherent life narratives, suggesting instead that some people experience the self in more episodic or discontinuous ways. Similarly, Woods (2011) cautions against treating narrative coherence as inherently therapeutic or universally desirable within medical humanities contexts. The present article does not assume that all individuals organize experience narratively, nor that narrative integration represents a universal clinical goal. Rather, it examines cases in which clients were already engaging their experiences through story, role, sequence, and symbolic identification, and explores how comics functioned as structured narrative environments within those existing processes of meaning-making.

Within graphic medicine, narrative frameworks have increasingly been used to interpret lived experience. Models such as the Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity have been applied to graphic memoirs to articulate patterns of transformation across experiences of health, disability, and trauma (Milkowska-Shibata, 2025). These approaches highlight how experience may be organized around recognizable narrative pathways. In some cases, this organization takes the form of a division between 'before' and 'after,' in which a single event structures subsequent experience. As one participant in the practice-based examples discussed below described, 'Before that, things just happened. After that, I made sure they didn't,' illustrating how narrative continuity may be reorganized around a perceived point of rupture.

Narrative-oriented approaches may be especially compatible with comics as a medium because graphic narratives externalize processes of continuity, disruption, repetition, and transformation in visible form. Their sequential structure allows relationships between past, present, and anticipated outcomes to be represented spatially as well as temporally, while the integration of visual and textual elements enables multiple layers of meaning to coexist. Through paneling, juxtaposition, and visual metaphor, comics can render implicit aspects of experience more visible, foregrounding relationships between events, identities, and outcomes. As McCloud (1993) observes, comics organize meaning

through sequential juxtaposition, requiring readers to construct continuity across panels through processes of closure and relational inference. This spatial and sequential structure allows relationships between events, identities, and transitions to remain simultaneously visible in ways distinct from exclusively verbal narrative forms.

Engagement with comics allows individuals to encounter narrative structures in externalized form. By interacting with stories that reflect recognizable patterns, individuals may begin to situate their experiences within broader narrative forms. This process does not require identification with specific characters; rather, it involves a shift in perspective in which experience is understood as part of an unfolding narrative structure. Such shifts may open space for reinterpretation as previously fixed meanings are reconsidered.

Scholars of superhero comics have frequently described the genre in mythic terms, emphasizing its role in expressing recurring cultural tensions through symbolic and narrative forms (Reynolds, 1992; Coogan, 2006). Within this framework, superheroes function not merely as fictional characters, but as contemporary mythic figures through which themes of responsibility, transformation, conflict, and identity are repeatedly staged and reworked. Approached in this way, comic narratives provide structured symbolic environments that may support reflection on similar patterned experiences within psychotherapy.

In this context, mythic and story-based frameworks may function as heuristic tools for recognizing narrative patterning within experience. Models such as the Hero's Journey, the Heroine's Journey, and the Journey of Integrity provide flexible interpretive lenses through which themes of disruption, transformation, conflict, and return may be explored (Milkowska-Shibata, 2025). These frameworks were not treated as universal developmental sequences or imposed narrative templates, but were used provisionally and collaboratively, and only where they appeared meaningful or resonant to the individual client. While such models have been critiqued for risks of linearity, reductionism, or flattening distinct experiences into generalized trajectories, the present approach employed them descriptively rather than prescriptively. Used in this way, they may help illuminate how individuals situate themselves within their own stories, including the roles they occupy, the tensions they perceive, and the trajectories they experience as available, constrained, or foreclosed.

The present article examines how engagement with comic narratives, considered in relation to these frameworks, may facilitate shifts in how individuals understand their experiences. Rather than focusing on the creation of comics, the emphasis is on the interpretive encounter between reader and narrative, and how this encounter may support the reorganization of meaning. Through this lens, comics are approached not only as expressive media, but as structured narrative environments in which existing stories may be revisited and reinterpreted.

METHODS AND CONTEXT

This article draws on anonymized, practice-informed observations from psychotherapy in which comics were incorporated as narrative materials to support reflection and reinterpretation of experience. The material presented does not derive from a formal qualitative research study, prospective intervention design, or systematic recruitment process, but from routine psychotherapeutic practice in which graphic narratives were used as part of ongoing clinical conversations. The cases are illustrative and composite in nature, with identifying details altered or omitted to preserve confidentiality and prevent attribution to specific individuals. The approach

was informed by narrative-oriented practices that emphasize the role of story in shaping identity and meaning (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007), adapted to include engagement with graphic narratives as contemporary forms of storytelling.

In some instances, clients visually represented origin events as elements that remained present across multiple stages of their narrative, rather than as points confined to the beginning of a sequence. This allowed for consideration of how earlier experiences continued to function within current interpretations.

SETTING AND APPROACH

The work took place within an applied psychotherapeutic context in which clients engaged in ongoing conversations related to identity and lived experience. Comics were introduced as supplementary narrative materials, with emphasis on engaging existing graphic narratives as structured story forms through which clients could reflect on and reconsider their experiences.

The therapist adopted a collaborative, exploratory stance, introducing narrative prompts and inviting clients to engage with both their own experiences and selected comic narratives. Rather than directing clients toward predetermined interpretations, the process emphasized open-ended reflection on narrative position, continuity, and meaning. Prompts included questions such as 'What feels familiar about this character's position?', 'Where does the story seem stuck?', and 'What changes if this is understood as an origin point rather than the whole story?' These prompts were used flexibly and responsively to support exploration of how clients understood themselves in relation to unfolding narrative structures.

Narrative Elicitation and 'Origin Story' Development

Clients were invited to describe the presenting concern within a broader personal narrative, often identifying a point of origin that shaped current understanding. This material was developed through journaling in the form of an 'origin story,' drawing on the language of comics and contemporary myth. In some instances, clients explored their experiences in relation to flexible stage-oriented frameworks (e.g., before, origin, training, testing, growth), used provisionally and heuristically to support reflection on narrative position, continuity, and change rather than as fixed developmental sequences or prescribed stages of intervention. These frameworks were applied collaboratively and only where they appeared meaningful or useful within the client's own process of interpretation. Through this process, clients externalized aspects of their narratives, allowing experiences that were previously implicit to be revisited and examined.

Engagement with Comic Narratives as Contemporary Myth

Selected comic narratives were introduced as contemporary mythic storytelling. These were not presented as models to be adopted, but as narrative environments in which themes of responsibility, loss, transformation, and conflict could be explored. Clients engaged with specific scenes or characters, with attention to how these stories organized experience over time.

Discussion focused on identifying recurring tensions, roles, and points of disruption or transition. This allowed clients to consider how similar patterns might be present in their own narratives without requiring direct identification with specific characters.

In some instances, this engagement functioned in a manner consistent with active imagination, in

which interaction with symbolic material allows aspects of experience to emerge that may not be accessible through direct description. Comic narratives were approached as forms of modern myth, providing structured symbolic environments through which clients could encounter elements of their experience in externalized form. The material was not treated as a direct representation of the client's experience, but as a context in which meanings could be explored and, at times, reconfigured.

Narrative Positioning and Role Exploration

Clients were invited to reflect on how they positioned themselves within their narratives, including the roles they occupied (e.g., protector, rescuer, outsider, adversary) and how these shaped their interpretation of events and possibilities for action.

In some instances, clients considered their narratives in relation to broader story trajectories, including variations of the Hero's Journey. These were introduced as flexible reference points, allowing clients to explore their position within an unfolding narrative without assuming a fixed path. Attention was also given to how clients described themselves in relation to others, including shifts in self-concept across different narrative positions.

Narrative Reworking and Reinterpretation

Clients were invited to revisit and revise aspects of their narratives in light of these reflections, expanding the range of meanings within the existing story rather than replacing it. This included considering alternative interpretations of key events and different ways of understanding their role within them.

In some cases, clients explored how their narratives might continue, including possible trajectories that differed from previously assumed paths. Comic narratives supported this process by illustrating how roles and identities can shift over time.

CASE SELECTION AND REPRESENTATION

The cases presented are illustrative examples of these processes and were selected because they reflected distinct forms of narrative organization that emerged during engagement with comic material, including responsibility organized as ongoing obligation, unresolved harm organized through continuation, and silence organized through containment and invisibility. Each case reflects a composite or anonymized account derived from practice-informed observations, with identifying details removed, altered, or condensed to preserve confidentiality and prevent attribution to specific individuals. Limited contextual detail is provided intentionally in order to maintain anonymity while preserving the narrative and structural features relevant to the present discussion. The aim is not comprehensive clinical documentation, diagnostic formulation, or outcome evaluation, but demonstration of how engagement with comics may support shifts in narrative understanding. The cases are therefore presented as illustrative representations of psychotherapeutic processes rather than as discrete or fully reconstructable clinical histories.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All material has been anonymized and presented in composite form, with identifying details altered, condensed, or omitted to preserve confidentiality and prevent attribution to specific individuals. The observations discussed in this article derive from routine psychotherapeutic practice and are presented for illustrative and conceptual purposes rather than as part of a formal human-subjects

research study, intervention trial, or systematic qualitative investigation. No recruitment procedures, prospective research protocols, or structured outcome measures were employed. Care has been taken to represent clinical processes responsibly while maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals whose experiences informed these composite accounts.

CASE STUDIES

Case 1 — Reconsidering Responsibility: From Savior to Situated Actor

Presenting Narrative. The client described a persistent sense of obligation toward others, accompanied by increasing exhaustion and frustration. Their account emphasized a pattern of stepping into situations where others were struggling and assuming responsibility for outcomes beyond their control. While initially experienced as purposeful, this role became associated with depletion and a sense of being ‘stuck’ in a cycle that could not be exited.

In early sessions, the client framed this pattern in terms of personal values, describing themselves as someone who ‘does what needs to be done,’ while also expressing difficulty identifying limits. Attempts to step back were associated with guilt or a sense of failure. When reflecting on the origins of this pattern, the client identified early experiences in which responsibility was assumed in the absence of others. These were explored through journaling as an ‘origin story.’

An early entry described this origin: ‘It started when I realized no one else was going to step in. If I didn’t do it, things would fall apart. Truth is, no one’s coming. So, I became the one who does it.’ Here, responsibility was positioned as both necessity and identity.

Engagement with Comic Narrative. To explore this pattern, the client engaged with a sequence from *Amazing Spider-Man #33* (Lee & Ditko, 1966), focusing on the scene in which Spider-Man, trapped beneath heavy machinery, struggles to free himself to save others. Discussion centered on the conditions sustaining the character’s action: repetition of burden, absence of alternatives, and responsibility as non-negotiable.

Initial responses emphasized admiration: ‘He doesn’t give up—he just keeps going because people need him.’

As discussion progressed, attention shifted to the structure of the scene. The client noted the character’s isolation and the repeated tension between obligation and limitation. This reframing appeared to shift the focus from endurance as a virtue to the constraints within which that endurance was required. Revisiting their origin story, they wrote: ‘It’s not just that he chooses to help. It’s like he doesn’t have another option, not if he’s true to himself. He’s already decided who he is, so he has to keep going.’

This marked a shift from viewing responsibility as a series of choices to understanding it as an ongoing condition.

Narrative Reworking and Visual Externalization. The client was invited to experiment with visual representation alongside written reflection. They produced a series of doodles depicting a figure lifting an increasingly large weight, with each panel showing the figure becoming smaller relative to the burden. In the final panel, the figure remained in place, holding the weight without movement.

Describing the drawing, the client noted: 'It doesn't go anywhere. It's just the same thing over and over.' The change in scale across panels appeared to reflect not only increasing burden, but a diminishing sense of agency in relation to that burden. The visual sequence highlighted the repetitive, non-progressive nature of the role.

The client then rewrote their origin story: 'I've been telling this like it's something I chose, but it doesn't feel like a choice. It feels like I stepped into something and never stepped out.' This introduced a distinction between the original context in which responsibility emerged and its continued application.

Shift in Narrative Positioning. A shift emerged in how the client described their position within their narrative. Earlier accounts emphasized identity defined by action; later accounts differentiated between the conditions that gave rise to the role and the ways in which it had persisted.

In a subsequent session, the client stated: 'I think I've been acting like it's always that moment—that if I stop, everything collapses. But that's not actually where I am anymore.'

This introduced greater flexibility in understanding responsibility as context-dependent rather than absolute.

Reflection. This case illustrates how engagement with comic narrative, alongside written and visual reflection, may support shifts in how responsibility is understood. The comic material enabled recognition of the pattern as sustained over time, while the client's own drawings made its repetitive structure more apparent.

This shift did not resolve the tension between responsibility and limitation but altered how that tension was understood and located within the client's narrative. Through this process, responsibility was reconsidered not only as a value, but as part of a broader narrative organization that could be examined and reinterpreted.

Case 2 — Reconsidering Justice: From Avenger to Ongoing Condition

Presenting Narrative. The client described persistent anger related to a past interpersonal harm, accompanied by a belief that closure required acknowledgment or consequence. Their account emphasized a perceived imbalance—something that occurred without resolution—and a corresponding sense of obligation to 'hold onto it.'

In early sessions, this was framed in moral terms: 'It's not even about revenge. It's about making it right.'

At the same time, the client described increasing rumination and difficulty disengaging from the event. When reflecting on its origin, they identified a moment of significant violation followed by 'nothing happening after'—no acknowledgment or repair.

This was developed through journaling as an origin narrative: 'That's where it started. When nothing happened. That's when I realized it was on me to carry it.' Here, responsibility was framed as custodianship of the unresolved event.

Engagement with Comic Narrative. To explore this pattern, the client engaged with material related to *The Punisher*, focusing on the structure of Frank Castle's narrative. Discussion emphasized

continuity rather than specific acts, highlighting how identity is sustained through repetition.

Particular attention was given to *The Punisher* vol. 12, 13 (Rosenberg & Kudranski, 2019), in which Castle rejects institutional justice and positions himself outside any framework of resolution. This prompted a shift in the client's understanding.

Initially, they described the character as: 'someone who makes sure things don't just get ignored.' As attention shifted to the structure of the narrative, they reconsidered: 'It doesn't ever actually end. It just keeps going.'

This emphasis on continuation appeared to contrast with the client's initial assumption that justice implied eventual resolution. This marked a shift from viewing justice as an outcome to understanding it as a sustained condition.

Narrative Reworking and Marginal Visual Mapping. The client brought a printed version of their origin narrative into session and began annotating it with notes and simple drawings. Along the margin, they sketched a journey sequence: a figure moving forward through stages resembling departure and escalation, but without return or resolution. A visual marker representing the original harm appeared early in the sequence and remained visible in later panels, suggesting persistence rather than transition. The continued presence of this structure across the sequence appeared to indicate that the event had not been left behind but carried forward as a constant reference point. In this way, the original harm appeared to function not only as a remembered event, but as an ongoing orienting structure through which subsequent experience was interpreted.

Next to the line: 'That's when I realized it was on me to carry it,' they added: 'Or I decided that's what I had to do.'

In a revised journal entry, they wrote: 'That's when it started to feel like it was on me to carry it. And I didn't question that.' This shift suggested movement away from understanding responsibility as a fixed obligation arising directly from the event itself, toward recognition of how that obligation had become narratively organized and sustained over time.

This introduced a distinction between necessity and interpretation, allowing the original moment to be reconsidered without being dismissed.

Shift in Narrative Positioning. The client began to describe their experience less in terms of an unresolved event and more as an ongoing internal structure: 'I've been treating it like something that's still happening, even though it's not.'

This altered the relationship between the event and the present, allowing for the possibility that the narrative could change even if the original circumstances did not.

In a later journal entry, the client wrote: 'It's not that it got resolved. It's that I don't have to keep it in motion.' This marked a movement away from a role defined by continuation toward a position in which continuation itself could be reconsidered.

Reflection. This case illustrates how engagement with comic narrative and visual annotation may support shifts in how unresolved experience is organized. *The Punisher* material allowed the client to recognize a narrative structured around continuation rather than resolution.

Marginal drawings further externalized this structure, with the figure's continuous forward movement—without return—making visible how the narrative had been sustained over time. This recognition appeared to introduce a degree of distance between the original event and the perceived necessity of maintaining it in motion.

The shift did not resolve the original event, but occurred at the level of narrative organization, where the necessity of maintaining the story in its existing form was brought into question.

Case 3 — Reconsidering Silence: From Unwitnessed Survival to Narrative Visibility

Presenting Narrative. The client described a persistent sense of containment surrounding a past critical incident, characterized by reluctance to disclose details and a tendency to minimize its significance. While not initially identified as central, aspects of the event resurfaced in the form of intrusive recollections and heightened vigilance in similar contexts.

In early sessions, this was framed as self-sufficiency: 'I handled it. I don't need to go back into it.' At the same time, the client described a sense of disconnection, noting that others' perceptions did not fully account for what had occurred. When reflecting on the origin of this pattern, they identified an incident involving coercion and loss of control, followed by a lack of acknowledgment.

This was developed through journaling in a highly condensed form: 'It happened. I got through it. That's it.' The brevity reflected both containment and reluctance to engage more fully with the experience.

Engagement with Comic Narrative. To explore this pattern, the client engaged with *Alias* vol. 1, 1 (Bendis & Gaydos, 2001), featuring Jessica Jones. Discussion focused on the depiction of coercion and its aftermath, particularly how the narrative conveys persistence and the tension between outward functioning and internal disruption.

The client observed: 'She doesn't talk about it like it's a story. It's like it's still there, even when nothing's happening.'

This framing appeared to resonate with the client's own experience of the event as present but not fully integrated into a coherent narrative. This prompted consideration of how the event might remain present within their own narrative, not as a completed episode but as an ongoing condition.

Narrative Reworking and Visual Externalization. The client brought a printed version of their journal entry into session and began annotating the margins with notes and simple drawings. Alongside the original line: 'It happened. I got through it. That's it.' they wrote: 'That's what I say. Not what it feels like.'

In the margin, they sketched a small figure surrounded by a darker outline, extended across repeated iterations, suggesting a persistent boundary. The repeated outline appeared to function less as a depiction of a single moment and more as an indication of something carried across time. Describing the drawing, the client noted: 'It's like it didn't end—it just stopped being visible.' This appeared to reflect a distinction between absence and invisibility, in which the experience was no longer actively articulated yet continued to shape perception and response. As Chute (2016) observes in her work on graphic narrative and trauma, comics can render persistence and temporal simultaneity visible through visual sequence and spatial arrangement. In this context, the repeated outlines and annotations appeared to externalize aspects of experience that remained present despite limited

verbal narration.

They then rewrote the journal entry: 'It happened, and I kept going. But it didn't just stay there—it's still part of how I move through things.' This introduced the possibility that continuation and persistence could coexist.

Shift in Narrative Positioning. The client began to describe their experience less in terms of containment and more in terms of visibility, distinguishing between what had been spoken and what had been experienced.

In discussion, they noted: 'I've been acting like it only counts if I say it out loud. But it's already there.'

In a later journal entry, they wrote: 'I don't have to turn it into a full story for it to be real.' This marked a shift away from an all-or-nothing narrative toward a more flexible understanding in which aspects of experience could be recognized without full articulation.

Reflection. This case illustrates how engagement with comic narrative, alongside written and visual reflection, may support shifts in how experiences are organized when they have not been fully integrated into verbal narrative. The *Alias* material allowed the client to recognize persistence without resolution, supporting a reconsideration of the role of silence.

Marginal annotation and visual representation externalized elements of the experience, expanding the original narrative and supporting a more differentiated understanding of how the event continued to function. This shift allowed acknowledgment to emerge without requiring full narrative articulation, creating space for recognition without immediate disclosure.

Discussion

The cases suggest that engagement with comic narratives may support shifts in how individuals organize and interpret their experiences, particularly when those experiences are structured around stabilized patterns. Clients did not adopt new stories; rather, change occurred through reconsidering how their narratives were organized—specifically, how roles, events, or interpretations had come to function as ongoing conditions rather than context-dependent responses. At the same time, these observations should not be understood to suggest that all individuals organize experience narratively or that narrative coherence constitutes a universal therapeutic aim. The processes described here emerged within contexts in which clients were already engaging their experiences through story, sequence, symbolic identification, or narrative positioning, and the meanings that emerged remained contingent, provisional, and context-dependent responses.

In some instances, experiences were organized around origin events that continued to function as active reference points. Rather than remaining in the past, these events shaped how subsequent situations were interpreted. As one client reflected, 'It's not just something that happened. It's like it never stopped happening.' Here, narrative organization depended not only on memory, but on the continued presence of earlier conditions within current experience.

Across cases, clients moved from identifying with narrative positions as fixed toward recognizing them as structured and potentially variable. Responsibility, unresolved harm, and silence were each reconsidered as patterns sustained over time rather than inherent conditions. This shift allowed for greater flexibility in how these positions were understood and enacted.

These changes suggest that the primary mechanism was not the introduction of new content, but the externalization and recognition of narrative structure. Comics supported this process by making temporal and relational patterns visible. Through sequential representation and repetition, aspects of experience that might otherwise remain implicit—such as persistence or lack of progression—became more accessible, allowing clients to engage with their narratives from a different position.

In this respect, comics extend narrative-oriented approaches by providing a structured environment in which narrative processes can be observed as well as described. While narrative therapy emphasizes re-authoring through language, these cases suggest that visual and sequential forms offer additional pathways for engaging with narrative organization. Unlike static visual art or general visual journaling, comics organize meaning through sequence, juxtaposition, recurrence, and the spatial arrangement of events across panels, allowing relationships between past, present, and anticipated outcomes to remain simultaneously visible. This multimodal structure may make patterns of continuity, repetition, and disruption more accessible by externalizing how experiences are linked over time rather than representing isolated moments alone.

Client-generated drawings and annotations further supported this process by externalizing narrative structure. Comic narratives also functioned as forms of modern myth, offering structured representations of recognizable patterns without requiring direct identification with specific characters. This allowed clients to engage with their experiences symbolically, using narrative as a context for exploration rather than a model to replicate.

At the same time, the shifts observed were modest and specific. Clients did not resolve the concerns that brought them to therapy; rather, change occurred in how those concerns were understood and positioned. This suggests that engagement with comic narratives may support movement at the level of meaning-making without necessarily altering external circumstances or eliminating distress.

Several limitations should be noted. The cases are drawn from practice-based observations and are not intended to represent systematic or generalizable findings. The use of comics was integrated into ongoing therapeutic work, and it is not possible to isolate their effects from other aspects of the process. The selection of materials was also shaped by the author's familiarity with the medium, which may influence both choice and use. Different materials or approaches may yield different forms of engagement.

Further work could examine how these processes function across a wider range of contexts, including settings in which clients have varying levels of familiarity with comics or narrative frameworks. It may also be useful to explore how different forms of graphic narrative—such as autobiographical comics, graphic memoirs, or collaboratively produced visual material—support different aspects of narrative engagement.

Within graphic medicine, this article contributes to discussions of comics in relation to health, identity, and lived experience. Consistent with broader work in graphic medicine emphasizing the capacity of comics to engage complex lived experience through the integration of visual and narrative forms (Czerwiec et al., 2015), the present cases suggest that graphic narratives may also function as structured environments for engaging with the organization of narrative itself. While existing work has emphasized expression and communication, these cases suggest that comics may support reconsideration of how experiences are organized across time and interpreted in relation to identity, continuity, and change.

In this respect, the article extends conversations within narrative medicine and the medical humanities concerning how individuals interpret illness, disruption, and identity through story (Kleinman, 1988; Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995), suggesting that graphic narratives may support these processes not only through representation, but through visible externalization of continuity, repetition, and narrative positioning over time. Rather than functioning solely as expressive media, comics may allow individuals to encounter relationships between events, roles, and interpretations in ways that become available for reconsideration within psychotherapeutic contexts. By making implicit patterns visible, graphic narratives may support reconsideration of how experience is structured over time.

In this sense, comics are not only vehicles through which stories are told, but environments in which stories may be encountered differently. The shifts described did not arise from new narratives, but from changes in how existing narratives were understood. As one client reflected, 'It made sense then. I just never updated it,' highlighting how earlier responses may persist beyond their original context.

REFERENCES

- Bendis, B. M., & Gaydos, M. (2001, November). Secret origins. *Alias* vol. 1, 1. Marvel Comics.
- Charon, R. (2006). *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. Oxford University Press.
- Chute, H. (2016). *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Harvard University Press.
- Coogan, P. (2006). *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. MonkeyBrain Books.
- Czerwiec, M. K., Williams, I., Squier, S. M., Green, M. J., Myers, K. R., & Smith, S. T. (2015). *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. Penn State University Press.
- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Green, M. J., & Myers, K. R. (2010). Graphic medicine: Use of comics in medical education and patient care. *BMJ*, 340, c863. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.c863>
- Kleinman, A. (1988). *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. Basic Books.
- Lee, S., & Ditko, S. (1966, February). The final chapter! *The Amazing Spider-Man* vol. 1, 33. Marvel Comics.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperPerennial.
- Milkowska-Shibata, M. A. (2025). The heroine's journey and the journey of integrity: Illustrating women's truths in a graphic memoir on health, disability, and childhood trauma. *Graphic Medicine Review*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.7191/gmr.1033>
- Reynolds, R. (1992). *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Rosenberg, M., & Kudrinski, S. (2019, July). War on the streets: Part two. *The Punisher* vol. 12, 13. Marvel Comics.

- Strawson, G. (2004). Against narrativity. *Ratio*, 17(4), 428–452.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2004.00264.x>
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Williams, I. (2012). Graphic medicine: Comics as medical narrative. *Medical Humanities*, 38(1), 21–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2011-010093>
- Woods, A. (2011). The limits of narrative: Provocations for the medical humanities. *Medical Humanities*, 37(2), 73–78. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2011-010045>