

Color, Nuance, and Trust in *Through the Woods*

The graphic novel, *Through the Woods*, is an anthology of short comics by Emily Carroll. The stories are essentially a series of original fairy tales with the trimmings of a traditional Grimm work. The overall mood is dark and very few of the characters are met with a fairy tale ending. Conversely, most of the stories are open ended and leave a great deal left to interpretation by the reader. While most of the stories are upsetting on a primal level, Carroll never has to resort to explicit gore or detail to make a moment visceral. Her work is simple.¹ However, *Through the Woods* shows a mastery of contrasting the color red with other tones to clearly convey violence in the story. It does this by relying heavily on its audience's mind and interpretations.

The story "A Lady's Hands are Cold" is a horror/mystery story about a woman who has married a man and lives with him in his isolated manor. She hears singing in the night and slowly discovers that her husband murdered his first wife and left pieces of her body hidden in the manor. She exhumes them, compiling the body parts and bringing them to her husband, and the murdered wife speaks to her and threatens her before the girl flees her husband and the manor.²

The comic uses color from the very beginning of the story to foreshadow violence to come and allude to violence in the past while simultaneously managing to show the violence of moments within the present. The story begins with a wedding in a red chapel and the

¹ Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll* (New York, NY: Graphix, an imprint of Scholastic, 2017).

² Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll*, 27.

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protagonist is dressed in a blue dress with red trimmings. The story explicitly states that she wears a “scarlet ribbon at her throat”.³ This is the start of Carroll’s use of contrasting warm and cool tones associated with the protagonist. Her demeanor is calm, but curious in the beginning parts of the story, but slowly she becomes more frantic as she strives to solve the mysteries surrounding her and the color red grows in frequency accordingly. As Kandinsky notes, color has a “PSYCHIC EFFECT [sic]”⁴ that plays upon the reader’s subconscious. In this case, as more red begins to appear in the text, the reader grows increasingly apprehensive and aware that something bad is going to happen.

Interestingly, the narrative text of the story is done in the traditional black or white found in most comics. However, the murdered wife’s speech bubbles are all done with white text on a red background. This character embodies violence. She was obviously met with a violent past and threatens violence on her former husband’s new wife. The dead wife appears to fit within the trope of a helpless murdered woman. Yet, she perhaps is given the most agency by the end of the story. This usurpation of traditional female roles fits within Mulvey’s theory that women in modern media have moved “beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness” and “builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.”⁵ Yes, the murdered wife fits the trope of a woman subjected to violence, but she is later literally able to rise from the grave to enact violence on another. And her words are spoken in red. Before you

³ Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll*, 35.

⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler (The Floating Press, n.d.), 59.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3, no. Autumn (1975): pp. 6-18), 7.

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even meet the character, her singing is done in red and the audience gleans from this visual cue that this woman will enact violence in the future.

Perhaps the most visually simplistic use of “A Lady’s Hands are Cold” is found on the spread where the new wife takes a hatchet to the wall to exhume part of the murdered wife for the first time. Though the scene takes place during the day, the spread is primarily of a cool royal blue with the new wife appearing small on the bottom left corner of the page. This represents a sense of powerlessness according to Bang, given her size and location on the page.⁶ The next page shows her resolution as she takes the hatchet to the wall. The panels of the actual destruction and violence to the wall are done in red and are tilted approximately sixty degrees to the right to show the contrast of the cool, blue panels, with the hot, red ones. Everything changes in the story as the new wife confirms her suspicions that something is wrong in her new home. It is in this moment that she tears through the walls and lies she has been living under since marrying her murderous husband. Additionally, this pivotal moment is done with zero dialogue. The audience is forced to really *look* at the moment and see it for what it is.

This is not the only time Carroll employs this tactic. Her subtle use of red without any dialogue manages to beautifully portray a moment of horrific violence in another story in the anthology aptly named “His Face All Red”.⁷

“His Face All Red” focuses on a man left alone with the knowledge that the being that looks like his brother cannot be so. He cannot share this with anyone as he had previously

⁶ Molly Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (Boston, MA: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown and Company, 2000), 72.

⁷ Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll*, 65.

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murdered his brother in the woods.⁸ In one scene, Carroll effectively depends on closure to cleverly portray important action in what Scott McCloud calls a “subject-to-subject” transition in a what looks like a traditional “moment-to-moment” transition⁹. The action happens “offscreen” of the drawn comic and relies on parallel and color to ensure that the audience understands the subtext of the moment.

The murder and disposal of the body happen over the course of two pages. Carroll had previously established that the men went into the woods to hunt a monster that turned out to be a wolf. The protagonist hid from the beast while his brother successfully slayed the animal that had been tormenting the town. Earlier pages established that the brother was more successful than the protagonist and in parenthetical thoughts before the murder Carroll sets up the protagonist’s jealousy¹⁰.

Carroll uses color to force the audience to envision the brother’s murder without explicitly drawing the scene. Three of the panels on one page portray the same image of the slain wolf. However, the second panel is colored entirely in red. This symbolic color of death is, as Molly Bang notes, used “very, very well”.¹¹ The moment feels visceral and important. And it is. Carroll’s use of color creates a “sensation”.¹² The audience can almost feel the moment that the protagonist strikes his brother and kills him. Without color, it would be literally impossible for the audience to understand what has happened. Without red, this is a static scene.

⁸ Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll*, 48.

⁹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York, NY: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 70.

¹⁰ Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods: Stories by Emily Carroll*, 78.

¹¹ Molly Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, p. 74

¹² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 191.

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Additionally, as Bang notes, red is an “aggressive” color.¹³ The woods are portrayed with muted tones throughout, but this flash of red surrounded by black “gutters” and drab scenes makes it stand out through contrast.¹⁴ This trend is continued. The following page shows the protagonist dragging his brother to a previously discovered hole in the forest and the blood on his head stands out against the scenery.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the parallel paneling of the wolf’s death strengthens the murder’s impact. Parallel is often an effective device for clarification but is also used to draw comparisons. While Carroll’s technique to portray death with color and closure is impactful and striking, her use of the exact same technique two pages prior diminishes the brother’s death by comparing it to an animal being put down after terrorizing a village. It is understandable that she would want to establish that these series of images mean something is being killed, however the repetition is not necessary for understanding. Using parallel images leads to comparisons between the wolf and brother. There is no prior correlation to the two except in the staging of their deaths. The brother is not shown to be dangerous or frightening as the wolf is. Rather, he is a well-liked and successful man in the village. Perhaps Carroll meant to symbolize that the killing would lead to glory for the killer, as she established that the brother would receive the town’s gratitude for disposing of the wolf rather than the protagonist, but there is nothing to indicate this beyond a throwaway line right before the murder. However, even if it were intentional, this loses any potency as it is not clear that this

¹³ Molly Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 66.

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was her intention. Repeating the technique feels more like clarification rather than an intentional direct comparison to the wolf and brother and is redundant.

Interestingly, despite Carroll's uncertainty in that the audience might not understand the murder scene without establishing her technique earlier, she relies heavily on the reader's perceptiveness to convey such a pivotal plot point. She relies on what McCloud calls "closure". The reader is "observing the parts, but perceiving the whole".¹⁵ This is highly effective. The audience knows that the protagonist has murdered his brother. His ominous shadows obscures half of the panel leading to the repeated three moments. The dead wolf is shown. The same image is overcast in red. The scene returns to normal. Our closure is then reinforced by the image of the protagonist dragging his brother's body to the hole in the woods. This is interesting because there is action happening in the story, but the image is essentially static. McCloud coins this sort of transition between panels as a moment-to-moment. However, according to McCloud moment-to-moment transitions typically necessitate "very little closure".¹⁶ It can be argued that this is truly a subject-to-subject transition which requires more audience application, but it *looks* like a moment.¹⁷ Subject changes in comics require the audience to make leaps of closure to understand what is happening. But Carroll never actually changes the subject when the reader considers the image alone. The red is the only thing that changes and that red also changes the kind of transition. Carroll deliberately does this. She intentionally conceals a subject-to-subject transition as a moment-to-moment in order to

¹⁵ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 63.

¹⁶ Scott McCloud, 70.

¹⁷ Scott McCloud, 71.

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emphasize that it is just a slice in time where an incredibly meaningful piece of action takes place. It looks as if nothing has changed, when in reality everything has.

She does this while taking a commonly used technique to traditionally used to establish that only a small moment has passed by showing very little change in the image and inverting it to a total change in subject with the simple use of color. Carroll uses red to change a moment-to-moment transition with little closure to a subject-to-subject transition and relies on the audience to perceive the most important plot point of the story entirely in their imaginations.

Carroll's art style also never relies on gritty realism to reinforce how horrific or violent these moments are. Her style is on the iconograph side. It is simplistic, but highly effective. If she were to rely on a realistic style in *Through the Woods*, Carroll would have lost that fairy tale, dream-life feeling to her work and likely lost much interpretation to realism. McCloud notes that by "*stripping down* an image to its essential '*meaning*' an artist can *amplify* that meaning in a way that realistic art *can't*."¹⁸ If she had shown a detailed rotting corpse or visceral moment of fratricide, she would have lost a great deal of audience interpretation to reality. There are instances where *not showing* leads to a more horrific image as our imaginations can be far more frightening than reality.

She is also able to leave the story to audience imaginations by completely excluding text from both works. When the brother is murdered and when the new wife smashes through the walls, there is no text. There are no sound effects. The audience is literally left with only the images on the page. It is left to imagine the sounds of a wall being smashed through and forced

¹⁸ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 30.

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opened. The strike to the head is never explicitly written, but the audience knows it happens and can visualize the sound within their own minds. Carroll is a master of “less is more” to represent violence. Graphic novels rely on a multitude of themes and techniques to convey a message using only images and words. Carroll cleverly shows a pivotal plot points using pictures. Throughout these important scenes, no words are exchanged, and no sounds are given. It is all left to the reader’s interpretation.

Carroll’s use of the color red and subtlety in paneling and dialogue (or lack of dialogue) usage makes for a more interesting and enjoyable reading experience. It keeps the audience from becoming bored and relies on them to fill in the blanks of what are often horrific moments of violence or terror. Carroll relies on an iconographic, simplistic style to effectively display contrasts and her use of color and contrasts are superb. *Through the Woods* seamlessly uses the color red, contrasts, and iconography to tell interesting, enthralling stories, and leaves much of the horror to the audience’s imagination.

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