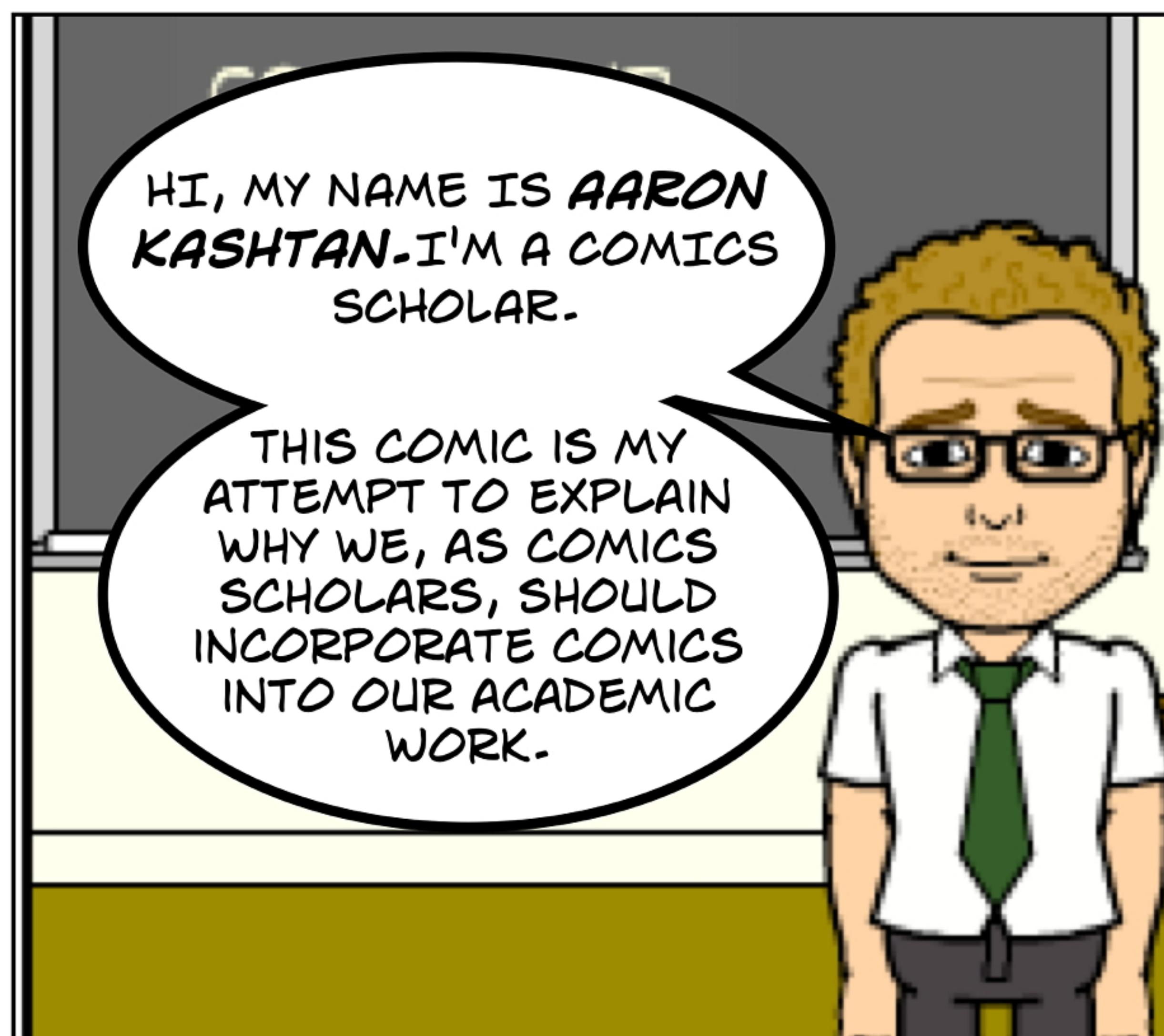


# Materiality Comics



LET'S START WITH A BASIC OBSERVATION: FOR ME, HALF THE PLEASURE OF READING COMICS IS THEIR MATERIALITY.



THIS IS NOT UNIQUE TO ME. FOR MANY FANS BUYING AND READING COMICS ARE OLFACTORY AND TACTILE AS WELL AS VISUAL EXPERIENCES. ALVARO ALEMÁN REFERS TO:

this “yielding” of the comic book to sensual experience (which includes the experience of juvenile purchasing power in the form of nickel and dime plunking on counters and the anticipation of reading pleasure that follows snatching the copy from the stand, opening the pages for the first time and taking in that unique comic book smell).

I DON'T COLLECT COMICS FOR FINANCIAL REASONS. YET I OFTEN BUY OLD COMICS WHOSE STORIES I ALREADY HAVE IN REPRINT FORM, SO I CAN OWN THE "REAL THING."



OF COURSE, THIS IS NOT UNIQUE TO COMICS. I AM SIMILARLY OBSESSIVE ABOUT BOOKS.

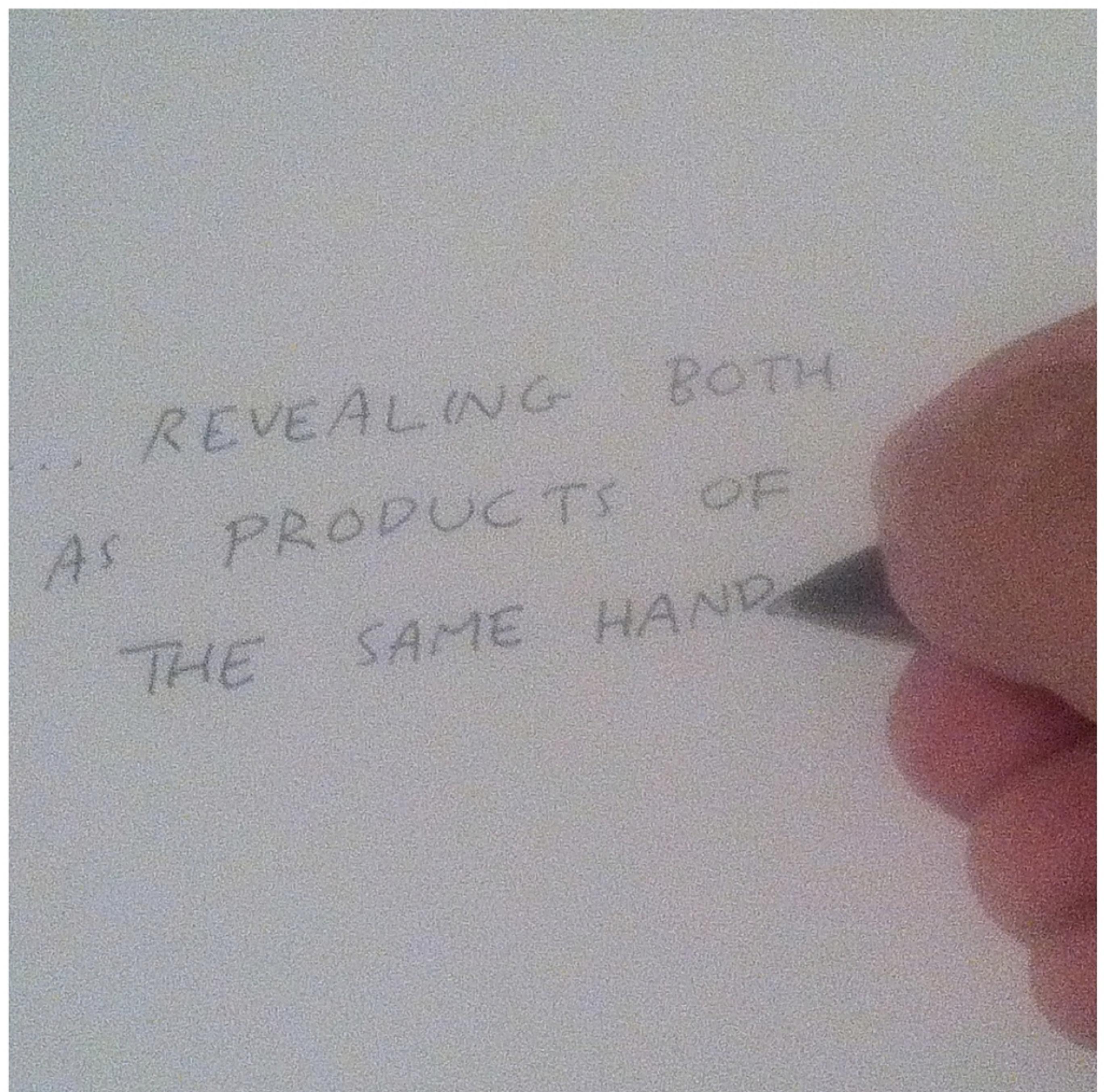
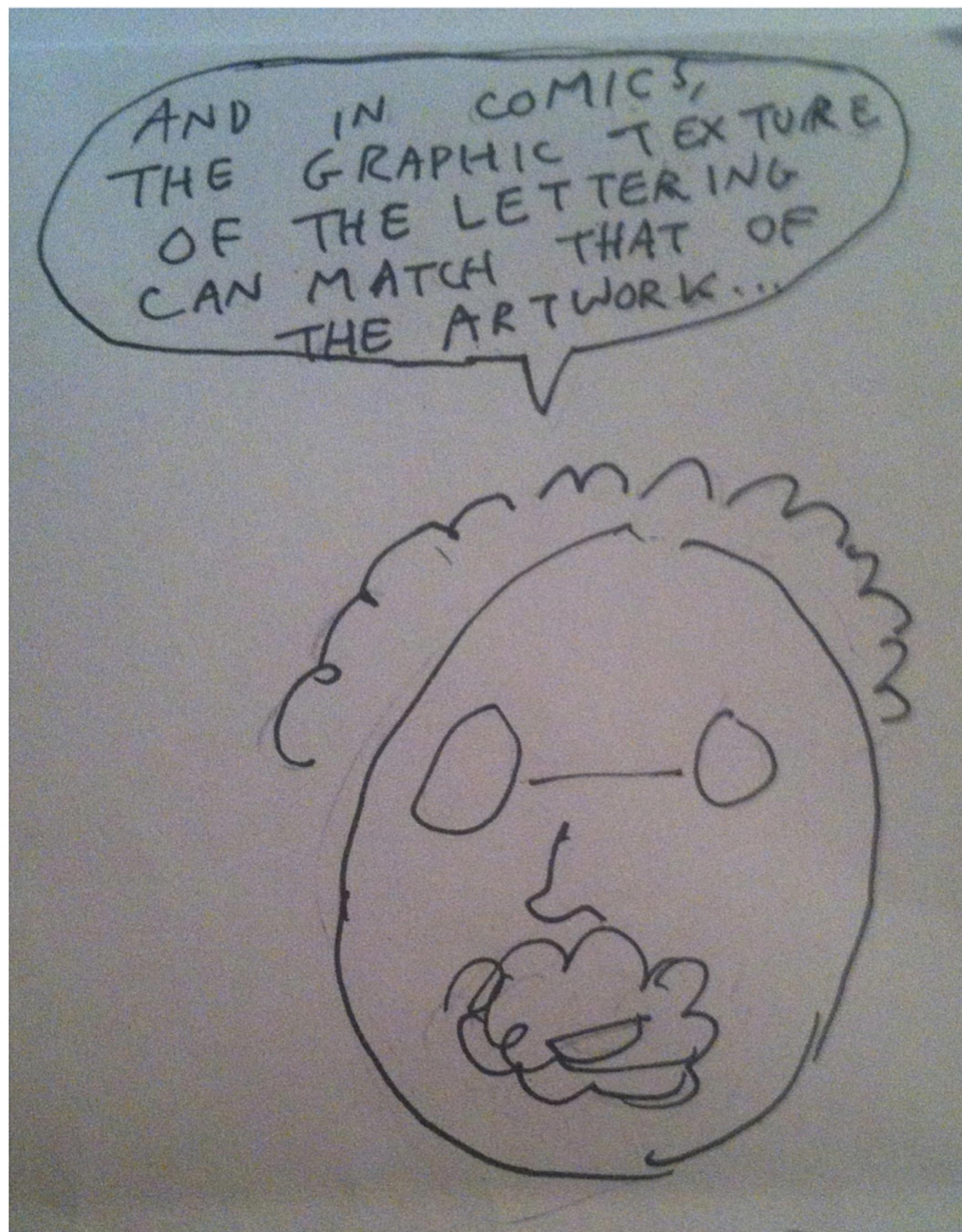


YET FOR ME, THE PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE OF READING SEEMS TO MATTER WITH COMICS MORE THAN IT DOES WITH CONVENTIONAL BOOKS. ALTHOUGH WE MAY THINK OF READING AS A PURELY MENTAL EXPERIENCE, IN FACT ALL FORMS OF READING ARE SENSUOUS, EMBODIED EXPERIENCES. AND YET I'M MORE AWARE OF THIS FACT WHEN I READ COMICS THAN WHEN I READ PROSE.



Another related thing I love about comics is their richness from a design perspective. The best comics are not only beautifully drawn, but beautifully designed. In such comics, graphic design, typography and coloring combine to produce a harmonious and elegant whole.

COMICS ARE AMONG THE FEW ART FORMS WHERE HANDWRITING IS STILL A STANDARD MEANS OF LETTERING.



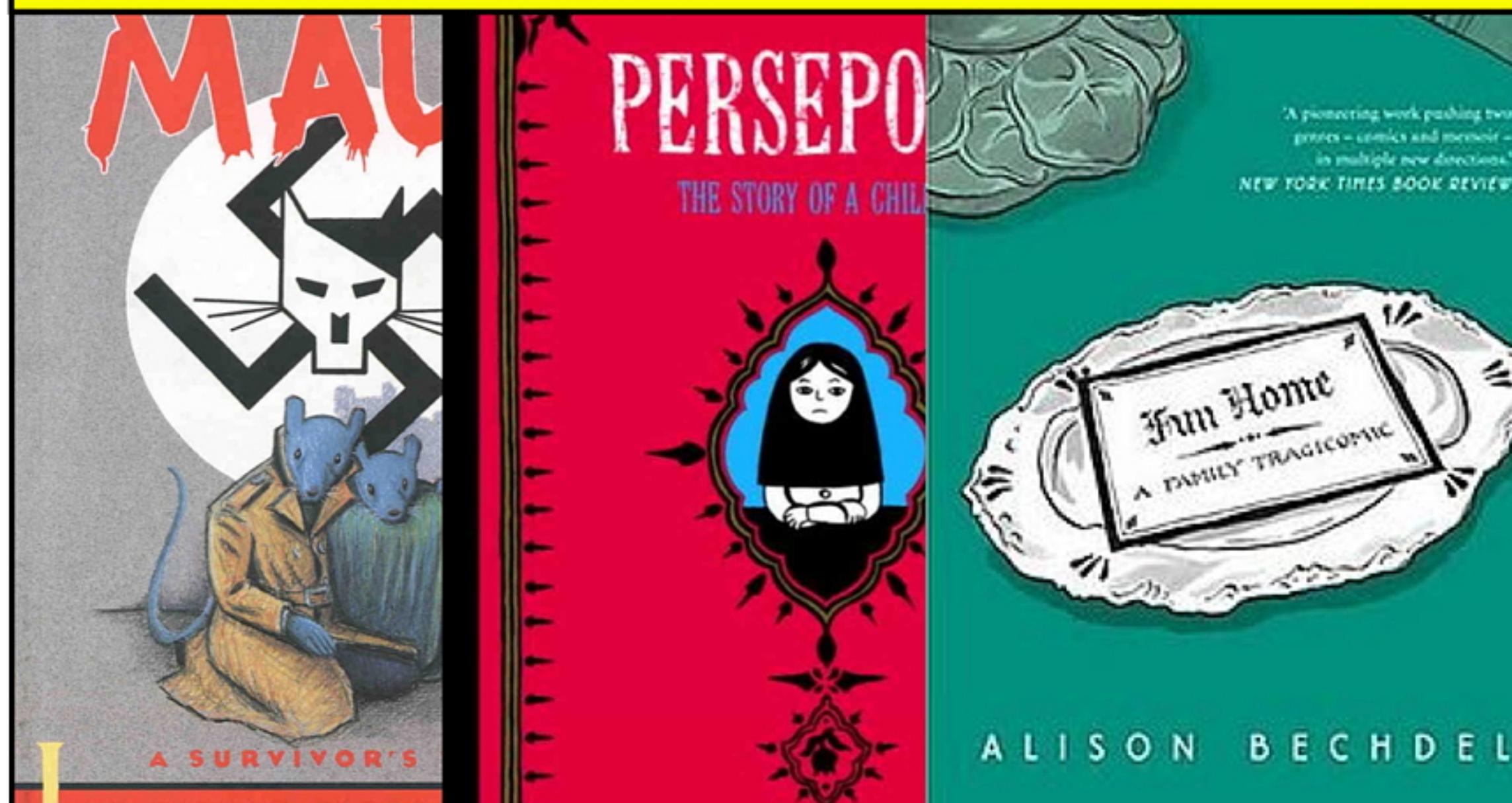
To summarize what I've been saying on these two pages: for me, a big part of the appeal of comics is what I've elsewhere called material richness. Comics are haptically and visually exciting artifacts. And in comics, everything contributes to the aesthetic experience -- not just the artwork in the panels, but the lettering, the panel borders, and everything else. (More examples of this later.)

But comics scholarship has failed to take into account the material richness of comics, either at a theoretical or at practical level.

COMICS STUDIES IS FINALLY STARTING TO GET SOME INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION.



THE ACADEMIC COMICS CANON HAS COALESCED AROUND A SMALL SET OF WORKS, ALMOST ALL OF WHICH ARE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.



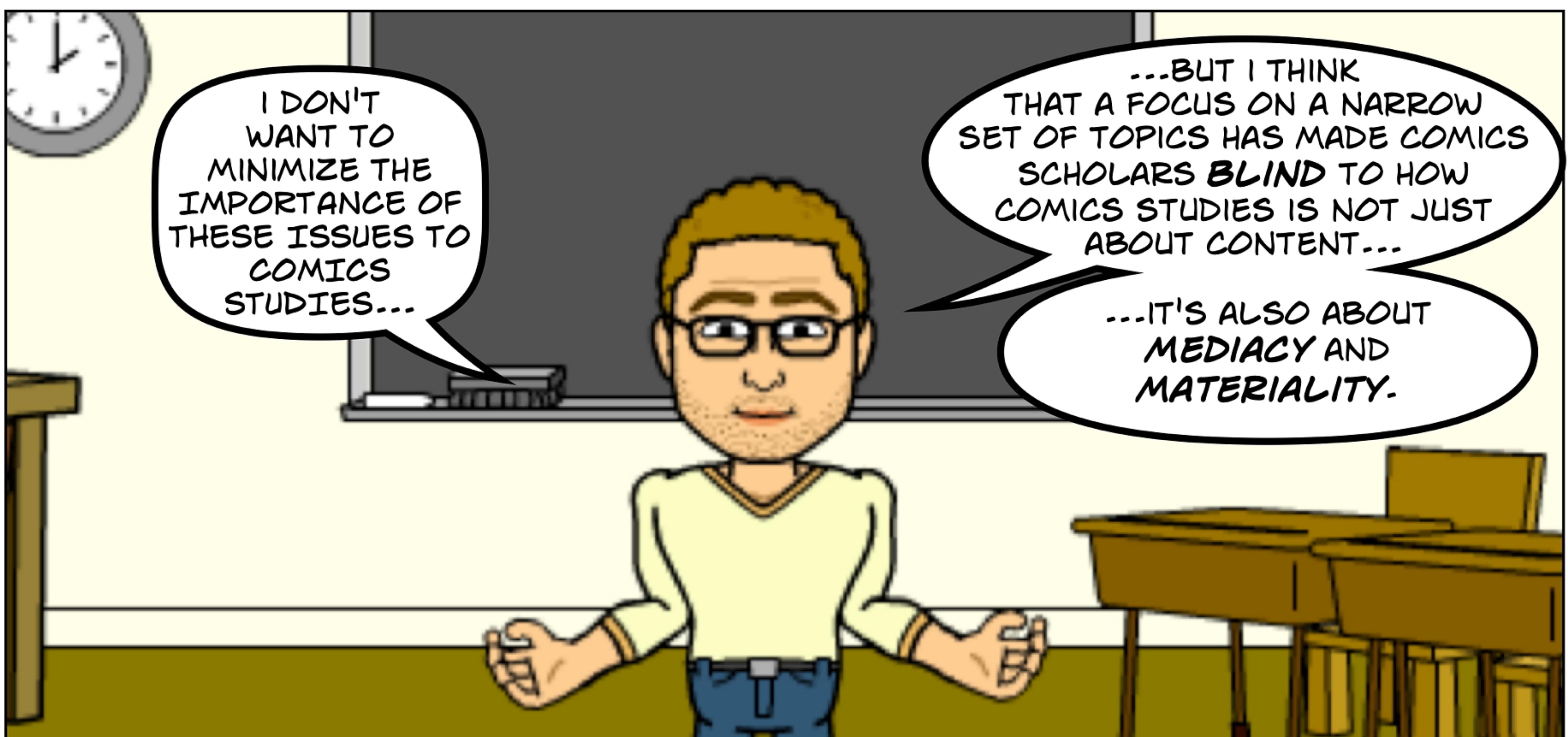
IF AN INSTRUCTOR USES JUST ONE COMIC ON A SYLLABUS, IT'S PROBABLY ONE OF THESE THREE.

YET ACADEMIC COMICS STUDIES HAS TENDED TO FOCUS ON A NARROW RANGE OF TOPICS.



AND HILLARY CHUTE HAS EVENCOME CLOSE TO ARGUING THAT FEMINIST AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS THE ONE THING COMICS ARE UNIQUELY GOOD AT:

The form of comics has a peculiar relationship not only to memoir and autobiography in general, as I will note, but to narratives of development... The force and value of graphic narrative's intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the representable that have become commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, especially in contemporary discourse about trauma.



A further problem here is that essays in comics studies frequently look like this page: expanses of gray text relieved only occasionally by images, if at all. (And often not even in an **interesting** font.)

This is of course not unique to comics studies; essays that look like this are equally common in film studies, television studies, art history, and other fields whose objects of study are visual in nature. As James Elkins points out, there are legitimate reasons why scholarship on visual texts may not itself be visual (e.g. Deleuze's cinema books are mostly unillustrated "because his central interest is the representation of time"). Moreover, in some ways, comics studies faces greater barriers to the use of images than other visually oriented fields, given the notorious reluctance of certain publishers to provide image permissions, and the lack of a disciplinary consensus as to what constitutes fair use.

Furthermore, many of us Anglo-American comics scholars have a background in the study of literature -- a field where the scholarship tends to look much like its objects of study. If most works of literary criticism are expanses of gray text with minimal images, then so are most of the works that literary critics write about.

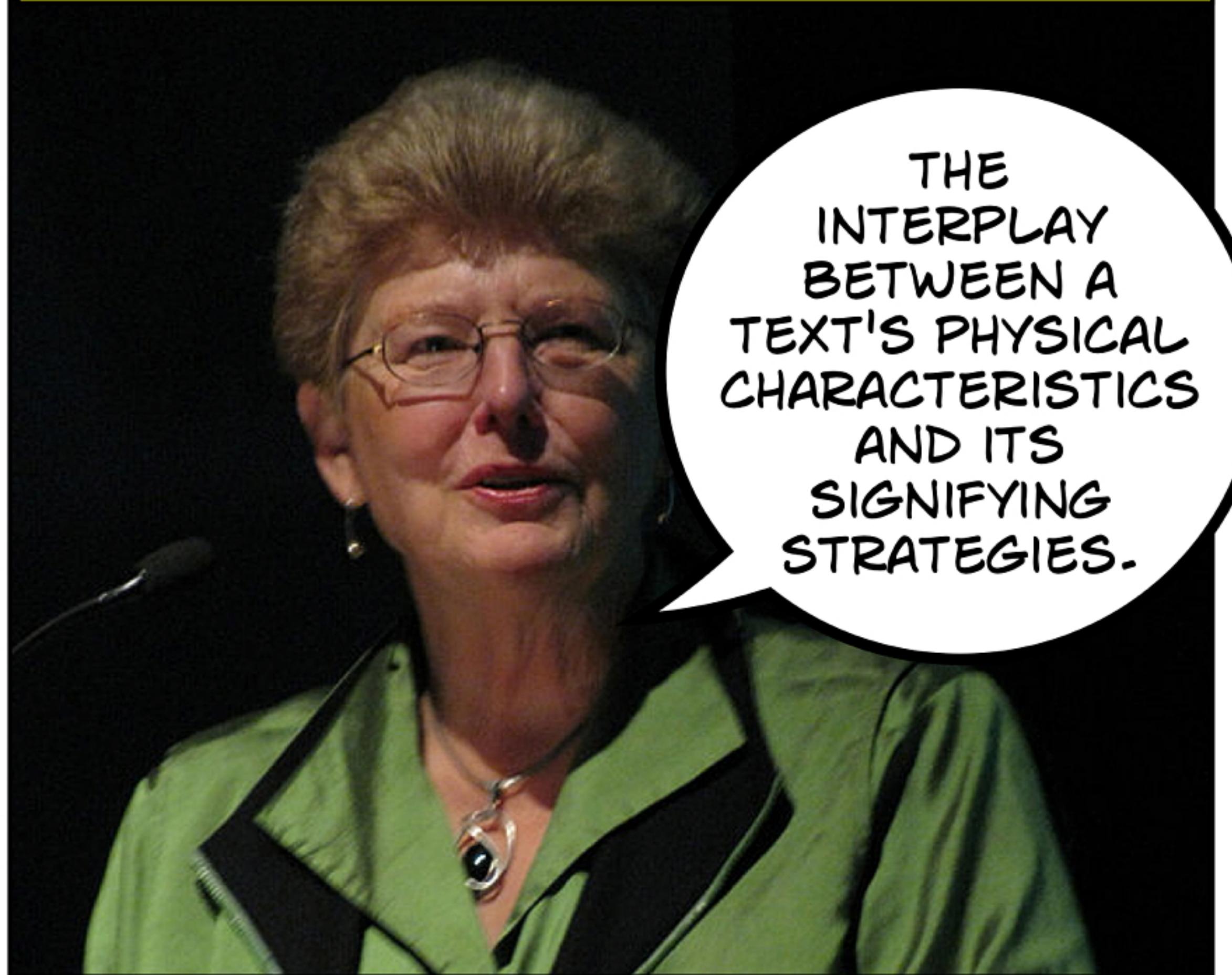
Notice this page uses panel borders instead of paragraph breaks; does that mean even this page is a comic?

However, literary scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of materiality in literary studies. And literary theory itself is increasingly becoming multimodal thanks to the rise of DH and related scholarly approaches. Maybe comics studies has something to learn about materiality from literary studies.

And maybe the reverse is also true. Maybe literary studies has something to learn about materiality from comics, because the role of materiality tends to be much more visible in comics than in text-based literature.

Those are my key points. But to demonstrate them, I need to explain what materiality is.

KATHERINE HAYLES DEFINES MATERIALITY AS:



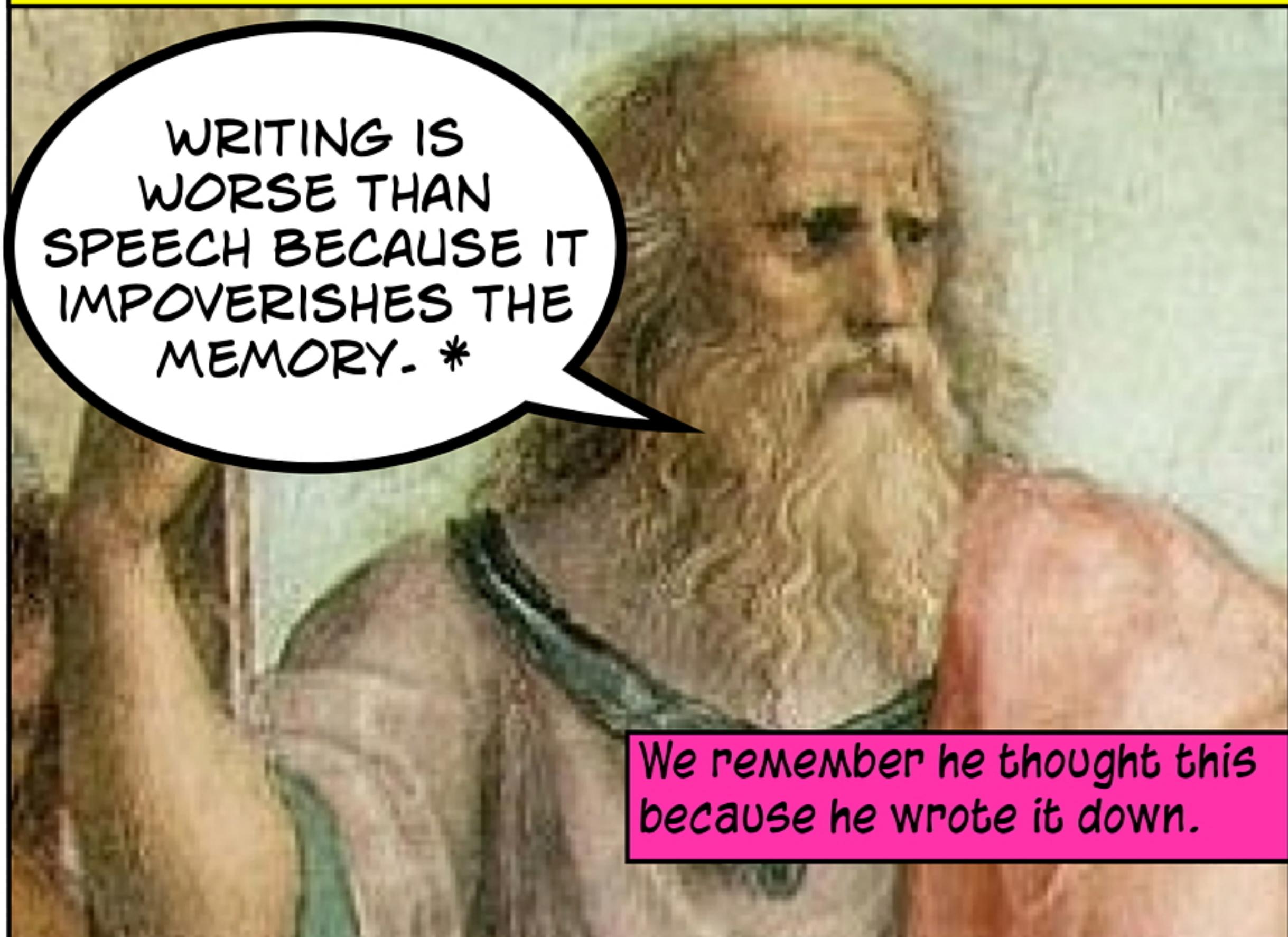
AS A VERY BASIC EXAMPLE:



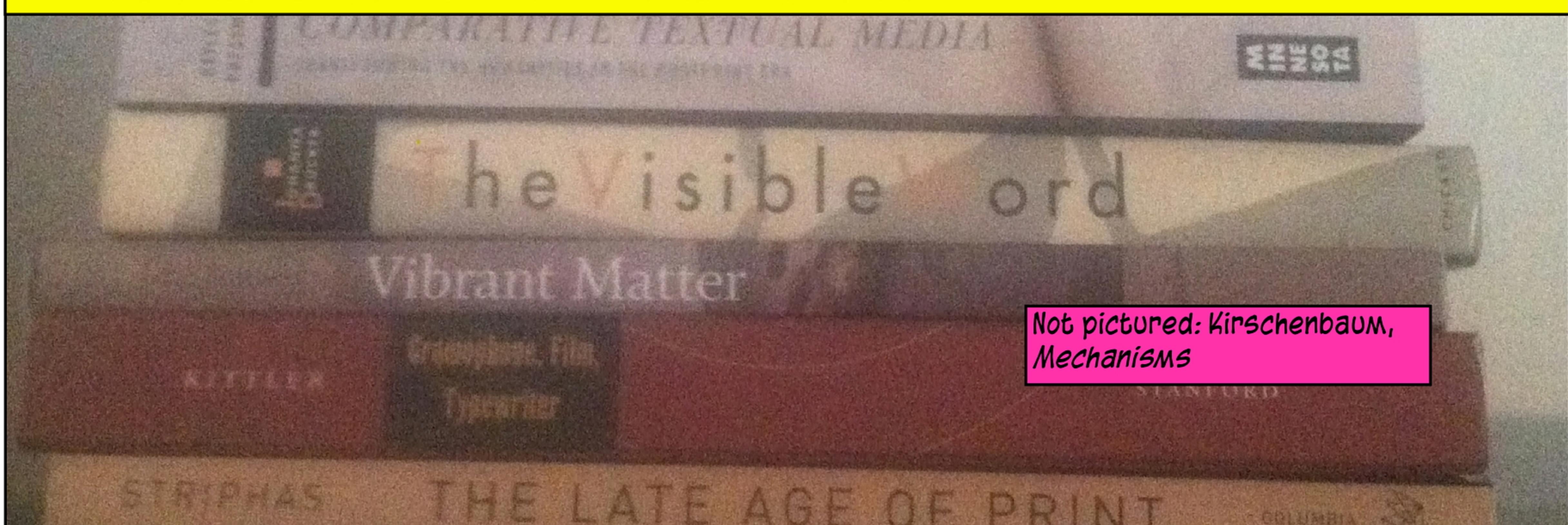
SIMILARLY:



THOUGH THE THEORY OF MATERIALITY GOES BACK AT LEAST TO PLATO'S PHAEDRUS...



--IT HAS EMERGED AS A HOT TOPIC IN MEDIA STUDIES.



SO LET'S EXAMINE WHY MATERIALITY IS IMPORTANT, USING LITERATURE AS A CASE STUDY. FOR REASONS OF SCOPE AND EXPERTISE, I'M GOING TO FOCUS ON COMPARING THE FUNCTIONS OF MATERIALITY IN COMICS STUDIES AND LITERARY STUDIES, THOUGH MATERIALITY IS ALSO AN IMPORTANT TOPIC IN OTHER FIELDS, LIKE FILM STUDIES.

MOST OFTEN, WHEN WE READ A PRINTED TEXT, WE IGNORE THE VISUAL AND HAPTIC PROPERTIES OF THE TEXT, FOCUSING INSTEAD ON ITS SEMIOTIC MEANING.

On the page:

The owl sat on the tree branch.

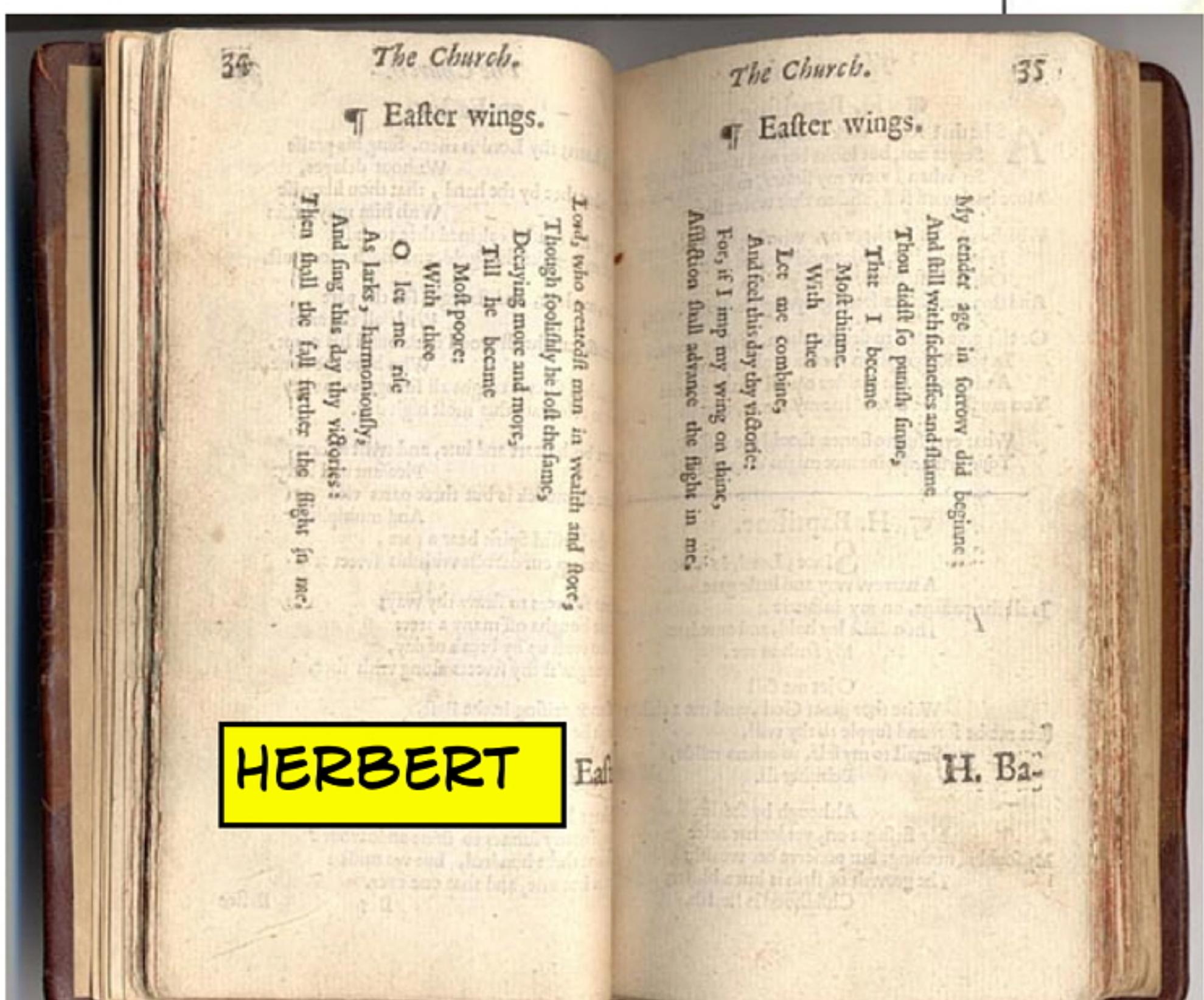


In the reader's head:

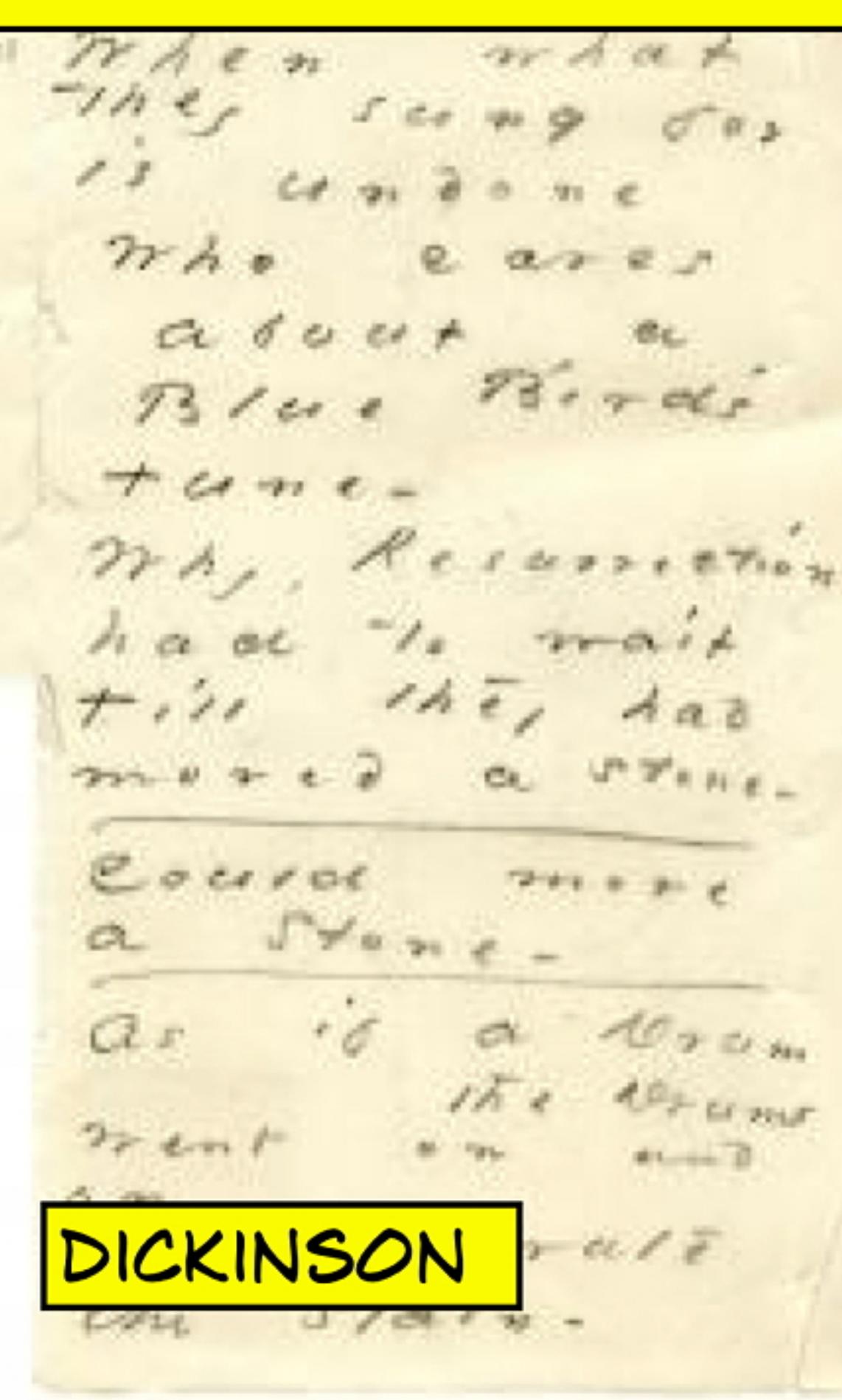
TYPOGRAPHY

MEANING

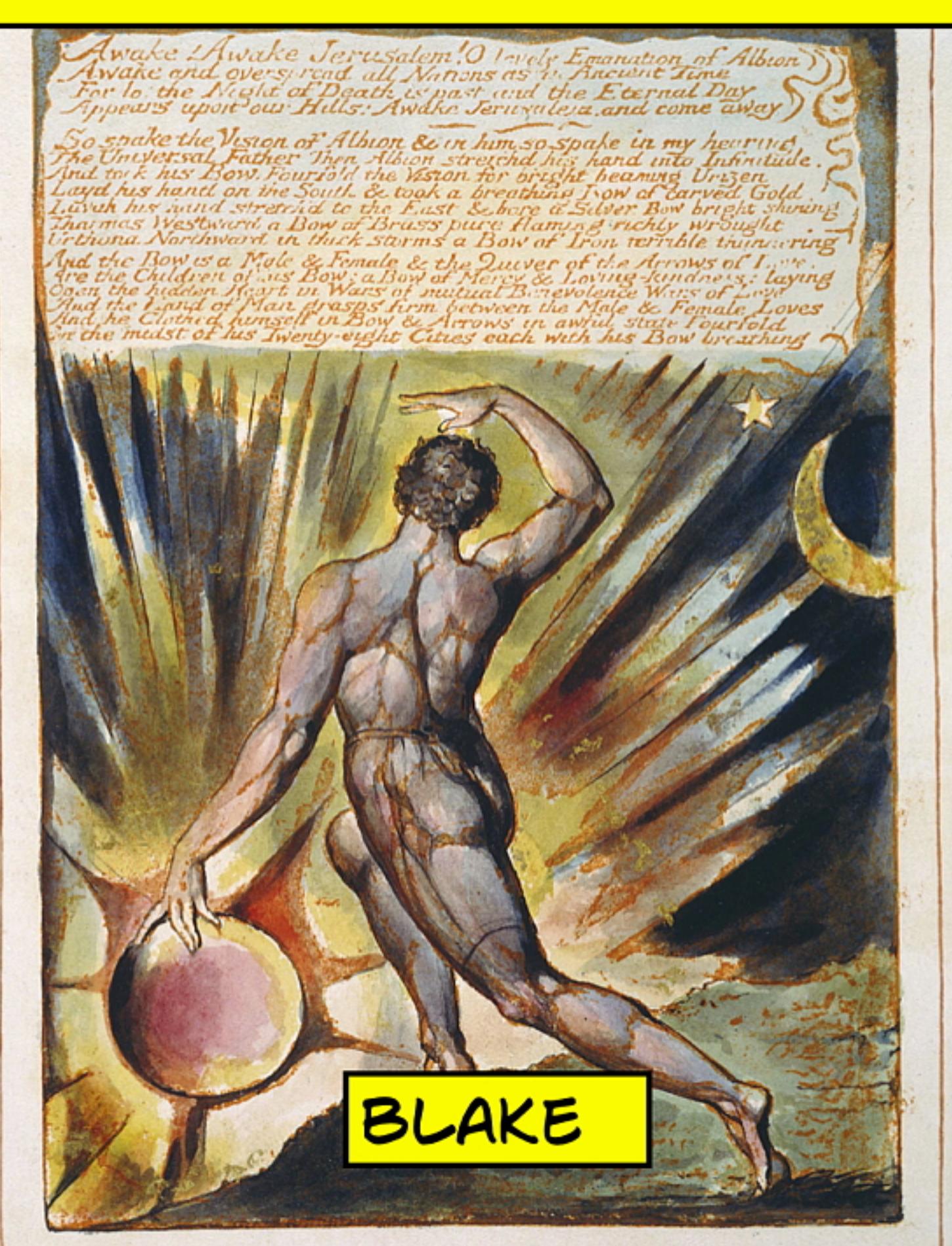
BUT FOR CENTURIES WRITERS HAVE VIOLATED THE CRYSTAL GOBLET ETHIC, USING TYPOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENT DESIGN AS TOOLS FOR MAKING MEANING.



HERBERT

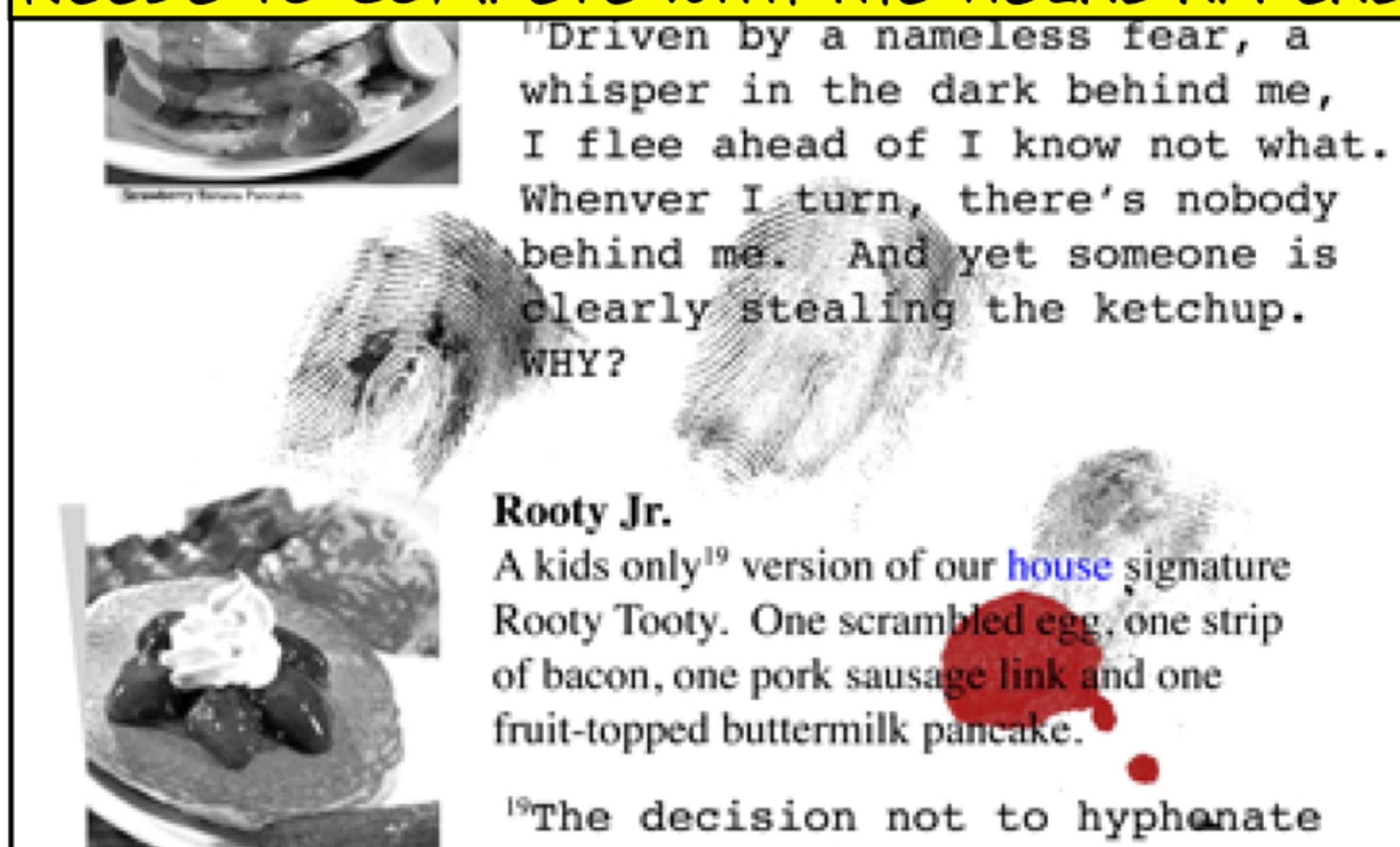


DICKINSON



BLAKE

SUCH EXPRESSIVE USES OF TYPOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENT DESIGN HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY COMMON IN RECENT AMERICAN LITERATURE, PERHAPS BECAUSE LITERATURE NEEDS TO COMPETE WITH THE VISUAL APPEAL OF OTHER MEDIA.



### Rooty Jr.

A kids only<sup>19</sup> version of our house signature Rooty Tooty. One scrambled egg, one strip of bacon, one pork sausage link and one fruit-topped buttermilk pancake.

<sup>19</sup>The decision not to hyphenate "kids only" is likely connected to the omission of the serial comma.

XKCD parody of Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves used instead of the real thing for copyright reasons.

"Driven by a nameless fear, a whisper in the dark behind me, I flee ahead of I know not what. Whenever I turn, there's nobody behind me. And yet someone is clearly stealing the ketchup. WHY?



<sup>20</sup>My life is feeding, fleeing, fighting, and forgetting.



and whipped topping.

<sup>21</sup>Nightmares again. I wake up covered in sweat, and what seems to be a thin sheen of maple syrup

### WHO IS MOHAWK GIRL?

Ham & Egg Melt  
Grilled sourdough bread stuffed with ham, scrambled eggs, Swiss and American cheeses.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Ordered this at an IHOP in Rochester, New York. There was blood on the floor. Some of it was mine.

ENOUGH WITH YOUR PANCAKES

ENOUGH WITH YOUR GOD DAMN PANCAKES!

LITERARY SCHOLARS HAVE LONG SINCE RECOGNIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALITY IN THIS SENSE. IN 1977, D.F. MCKENZIE WROTE:

The book itself is an expressive means. To the eye its pages offer an aggregation of meanings both verbal and typographic for translation to the ear.

THE EARLY QUARTOS OF CONGREVE'S PLAYS WERE PRETTY SHODDY-LOOKING (THIS IS A SLIGHTLY LATER EDITION).

## THE Double-Dealer.

### ACT I. SCENE I.

A Gallery in the Ld. Touchwood's House with Chambers adjoining.

Enter Careless, Crossing the Stage, with his Hat, Gloves, and Sword in his Hands; as just risen from Table: Mellefont following him.

Mel. **N**E'D, Ned, whither so fast? What, turn'd Flincher! Why, you wo' not leave us?

Care. Where are the Women? Pox I'm weary of guzling, and begin to think them the better Company.

Mel. Then thy Reason staggers, and thou'rt almost Drunk.

Care. No Faith, but your Fools grow noisie — and if a Man must endure the Noise of Words without Sense, I think the Women have the more Musical Voices, and become Nonsense better.

Mel. Why, they are at the end of the Gallery; retir'd to their Tea, and Scandal; according to their Ancient Custom, after Dinner. — But I made a Pretence of following you, because I had something to say to you in private, and I am not like to have many Opportunities this Evening.

Care. And here's this Coxcomb most Critically come to interrupt you.

Enter Brisk.

Brisk. Boys, Boys, Lads, where are you? What do you give Ground? Mortgage for a Bottle, ha? Careless, this is your Trick; you're always spoiling Company by leaving it.

HIS KEY EXAMPLE WAS THE WORK OF WILLIAM CONGREVE.



IN HIS 1710 COLLECTED WORKS, CONGREVE ADDED THINGS LIKE TYPOGRAPHICAL ORNAMENTS AND ORNAMENTAL CAPITALS, CREATING A GREATER SENSE OF REFINEMENT.



## THE DOUBLE-DEALER.

### ACT I. SCENE I.

A Gallery in the Lord Touchwood's House, with Chambers adjoining.

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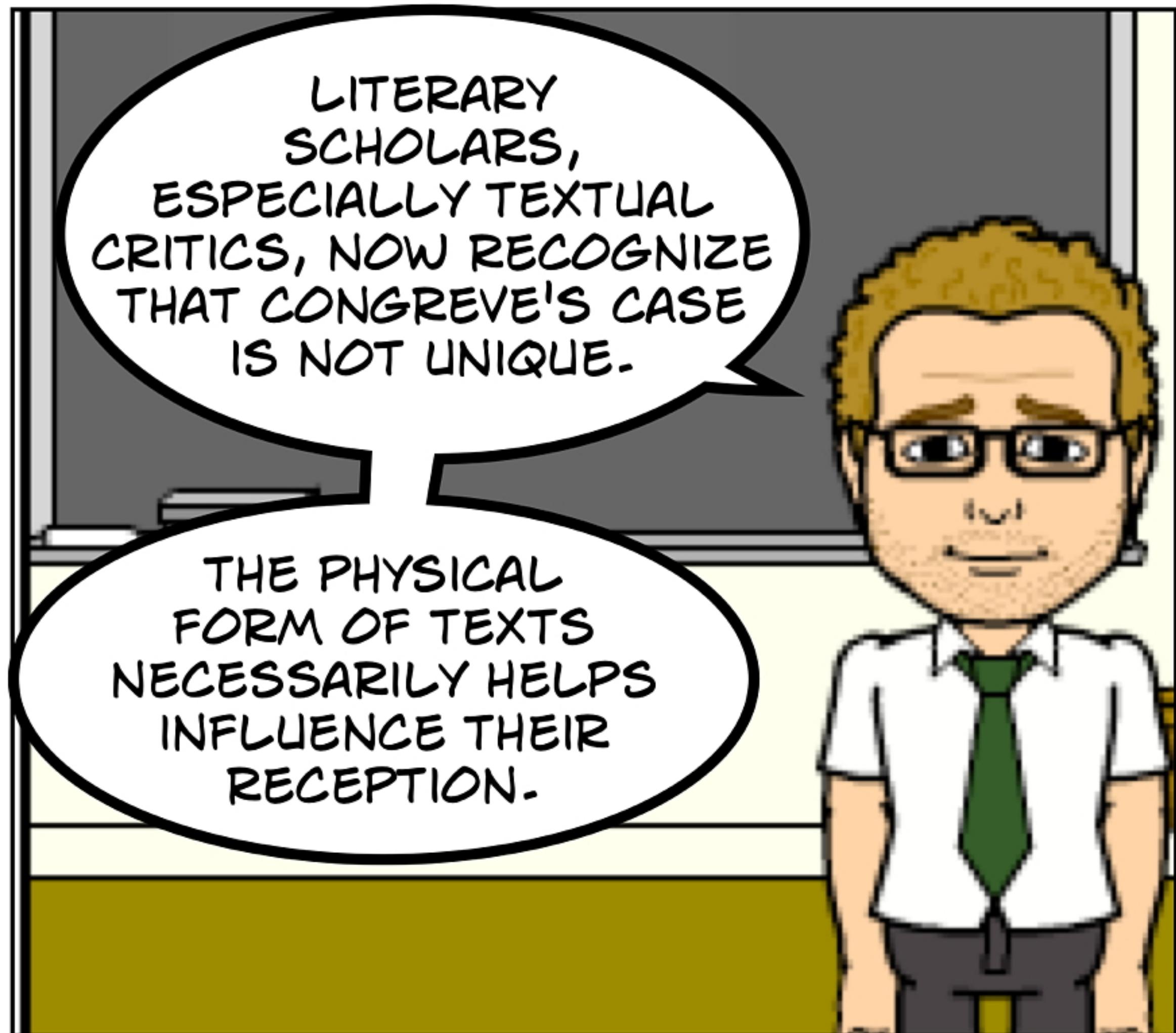
MELLEFONT.

**E**D, Ned, whither so fast? What, turn'd Flincher! Why, you wo' not leave us?

Care. Where are the Women? I'm weary of guzling, and begin to think them the better Company.

Mel.

THE REVISED TYPOGRAPHY OF THE SECOND EDITION HELPED TO SHIFT CONGREVE'S IMAGE, DEPICTING HIM AS A REFINED NEOCLASSICAL AUTHOR, NOT AN UNSAVORY POPULAR ENTERTAINER.



THUS, DH PROJECTS LIKE THE *ROSSETTI ARCHIVE* ARE DEVOTED TO MAKING TEXTS VISIBLE IN THEIR ORIGINAL TYPOGRAPHIC AND MATERIAL CONTEXT.

[Rossetti Archive Home](#) → [Exhibit](#) → [COLLECTION INTRO](#) → [Browse Collection](#)

This collection contains 35 texts and images, including:

[Ballads and Sonnets](#) text      [Manchester City Art Gallery](#) oil

**Scholarly Commentary**

**Introduction**

The poem is not one of DGR's great sonnets, and it pales before the majestic painting it was written to accompany. Nevertheless, it is quite an interesting and important text. Both sonnet and painting deliver

**Astarte Syriaca (for a Picture)**  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti

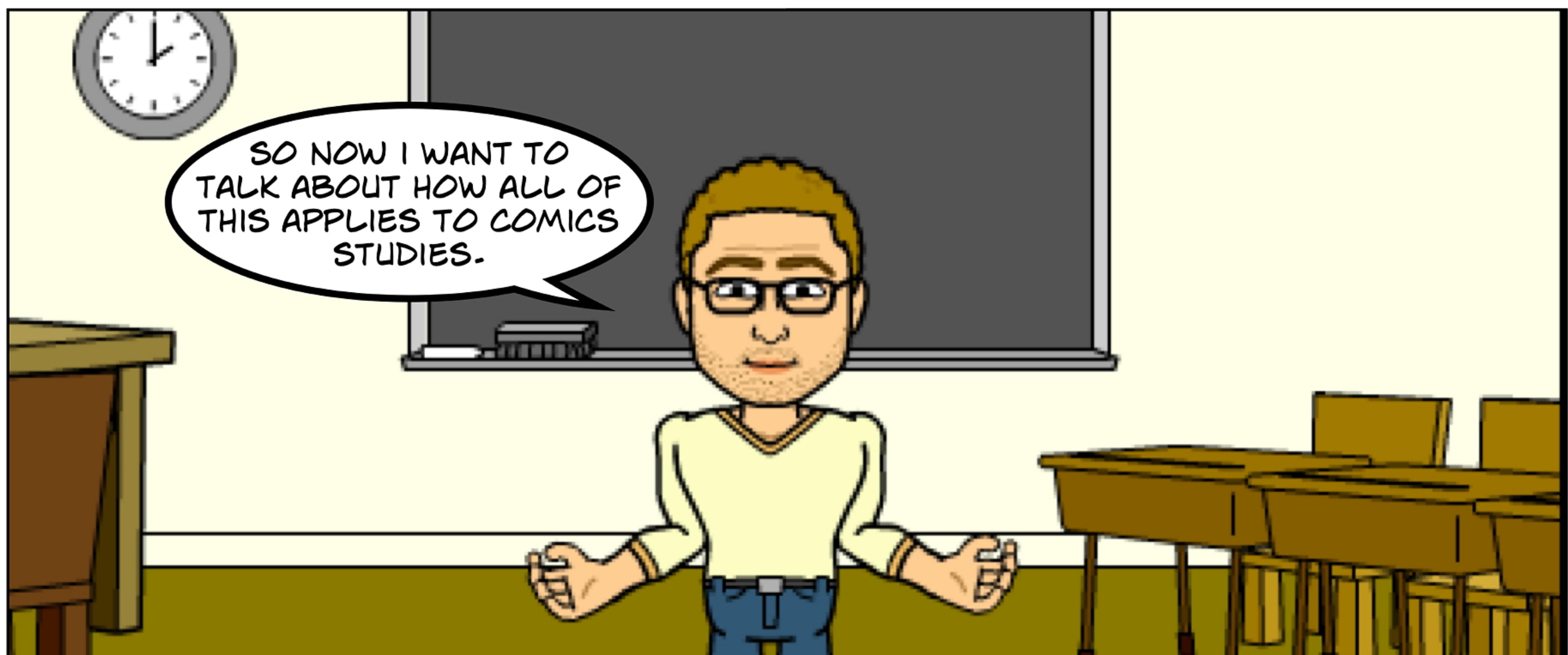
**General Description**

Date: 1877 January-1877 February  
Date: 1875-1877  
Rhyme: abbaabbacddcccd  
Meter: iambic pentameter  
Genre: sonnet  
Model: Jane Morris (principal figure)  
Model: May Morris (left attendant figure)

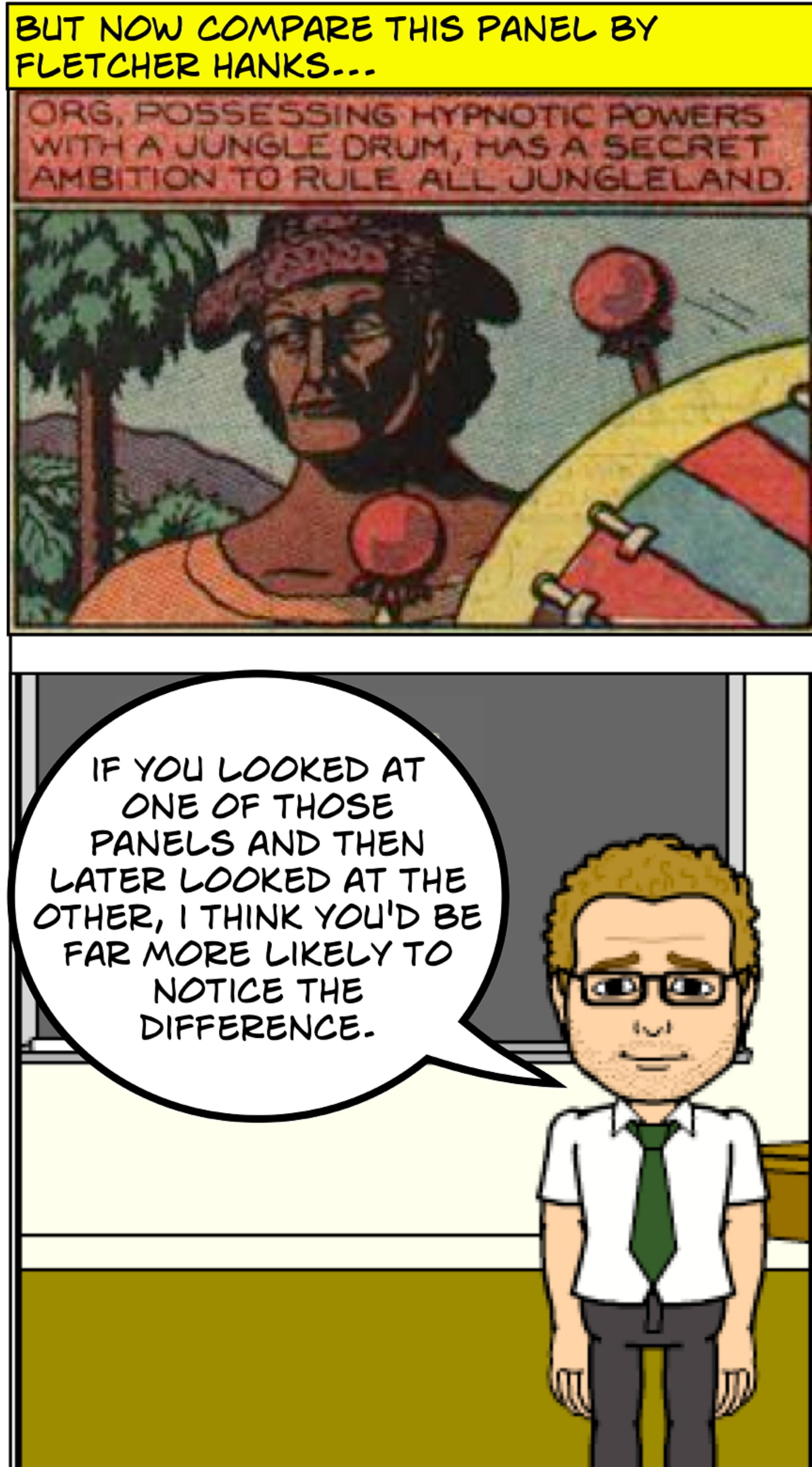
**Bibliography**

- Agosta, 93-96
- Golden, "DGR's Two-Sided Art".

DH SCHOLARS ALSO USE EXPRESSIVE TYPOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR DATA VISUALIZATION; A SIMPLE EXAMPLE IS THE WORDCLOUD.



Well, here's an example -- and i'm sorry if I'm belaboring this point. Compare this panel to the next panel. Can you tell the difference? Probably, because you're looking for it. But normally, if you looked at one of these panels and then later looked at the other, you'd perceive them as the "same" text. In prose text, things like typography, lineation and paragraph breaks seem (the key word is "seem") to be accidental features that don't impact the meaning of the text. Indeed, the whole point of crystal goblet design is to make us ignore the rhetorical effects of design features.



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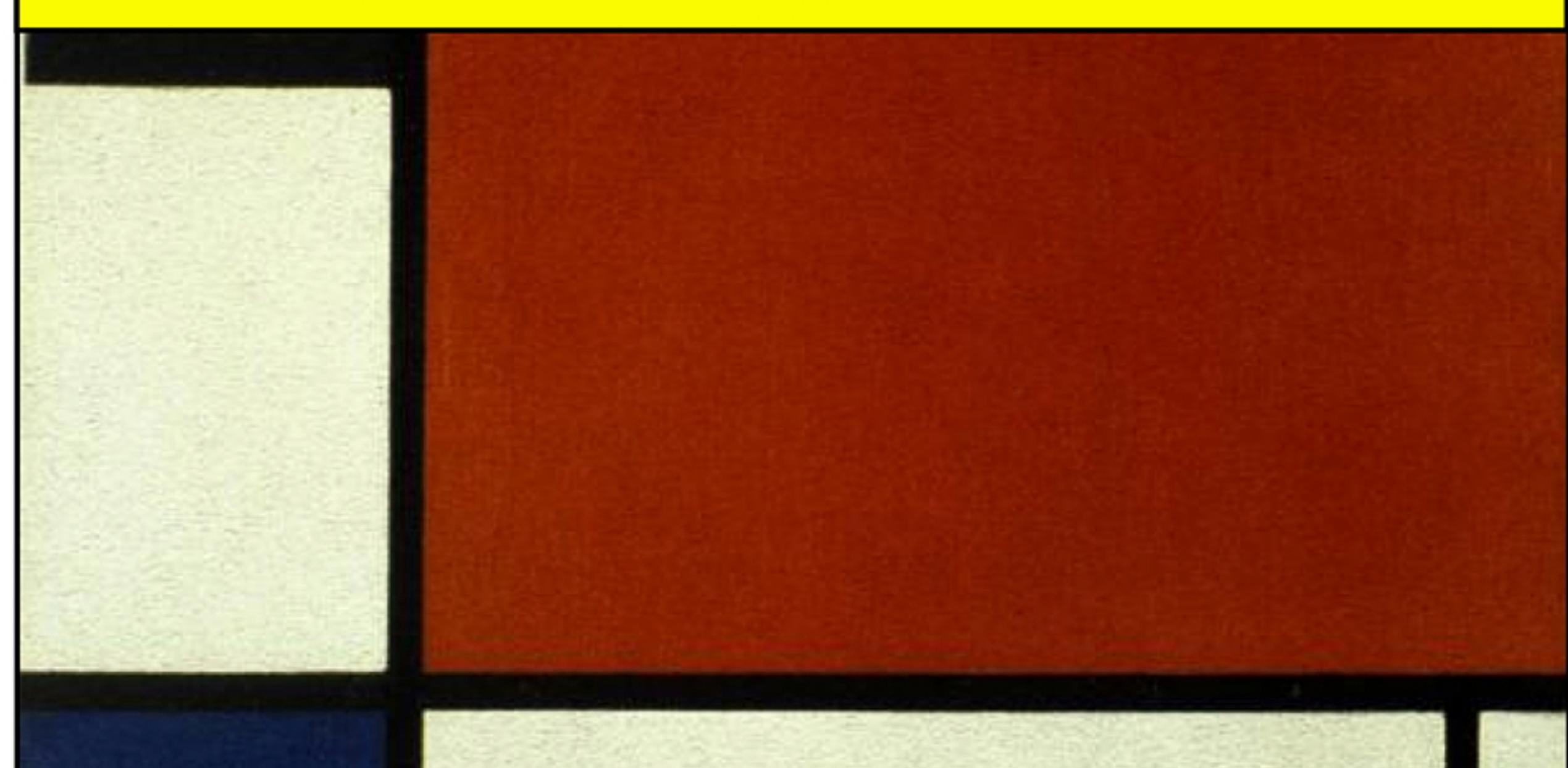
Indeed, the whole point of crystal goblet design is to make us ignore the rhetorical effects of design features.

...TO THIS MODERN REMASTERED VERSION CREATED BY RYAN VALENTINE.

ORG, POSSESSING HYPNOTIC POWERS WITH A JUNGLE DRUM, HAS A SECRET AMBITION TO RULE ALL JUNGLE LAND.



AND THE REASON WHY IS BECAUSE OF SOMETHING WHICH I THINK IS A CENTRAL AFFORDANCE OF COMICS --



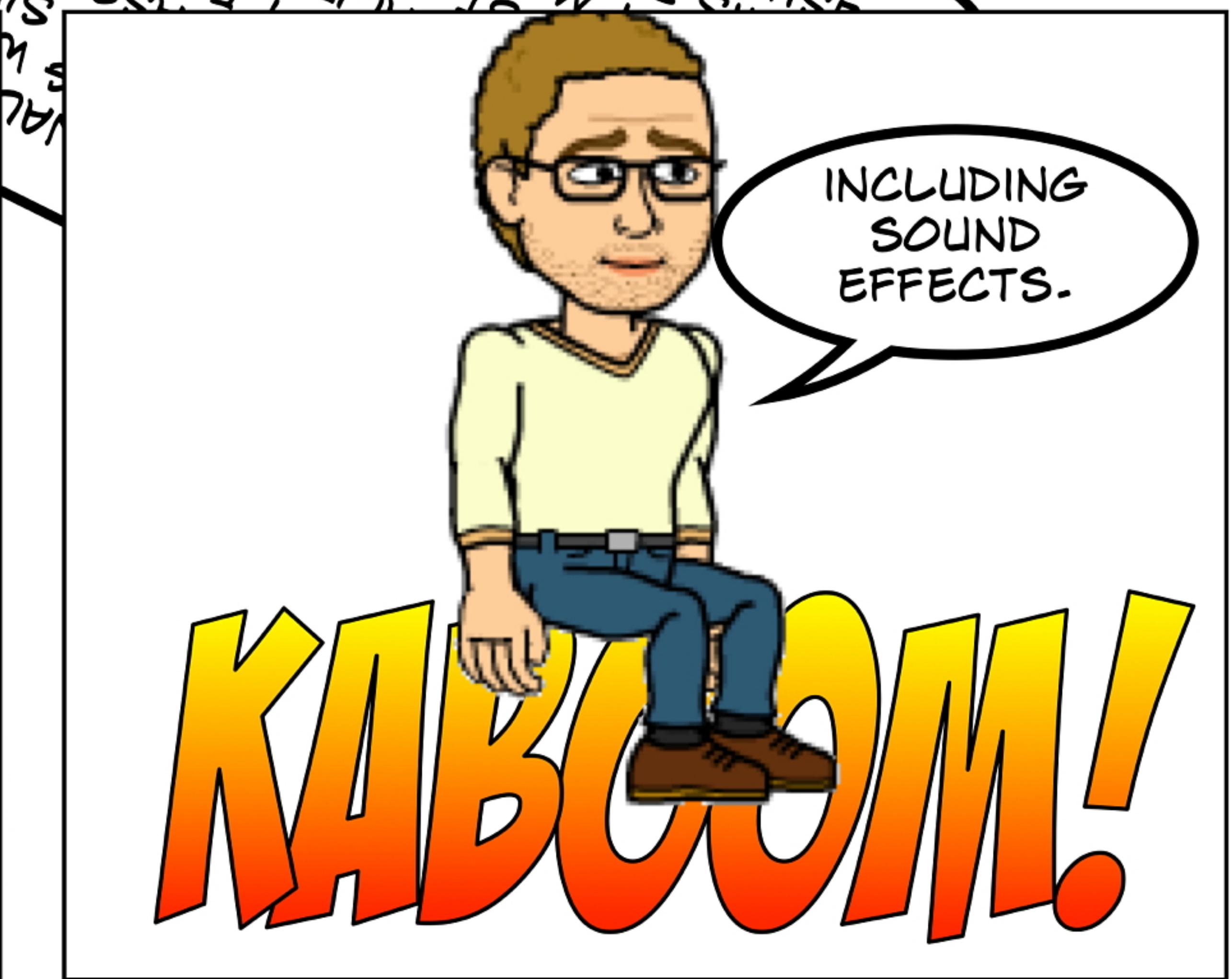
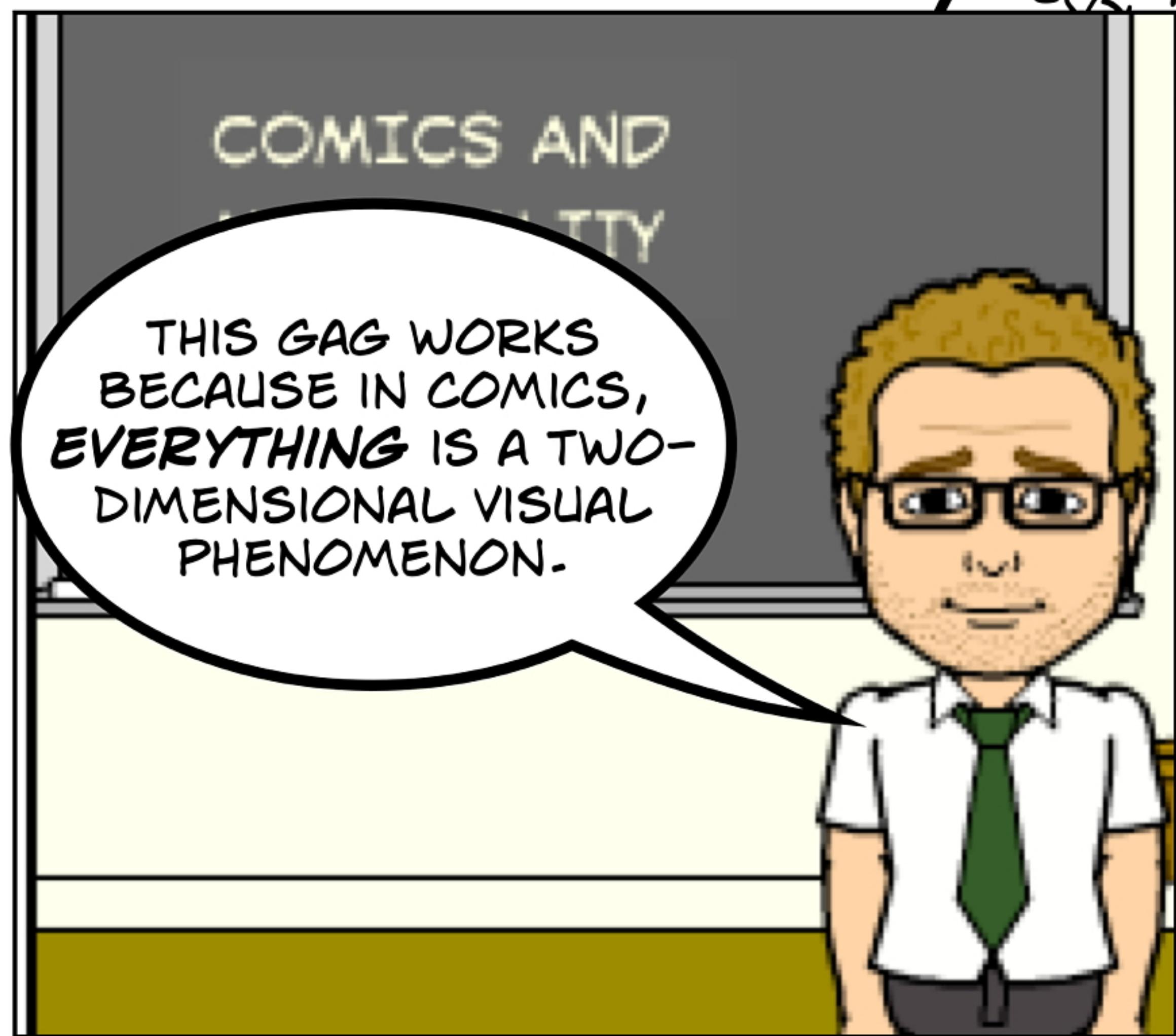
THEIR EMPHASIS ON FLATNESS AND SURFACES.

COMICS ARE TWO-DIMENSIONAL; THEY DEPICT EVERYTHING, INCLUDING WORDS AND IMAGES, AS EXISTING ON A SINGLE VISUAL PLANE. WE USUALLY ASSUME THAT WORD BALLOONS DON'T EXIST ON THE SAME LEVEL OF REALITY AS THE IMAGE, BUT THAT'S JUST A CONVENTION. FOR INSTANCE, IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO READ THIS PANEL AS SHOWING ME BEING CRUSHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON.

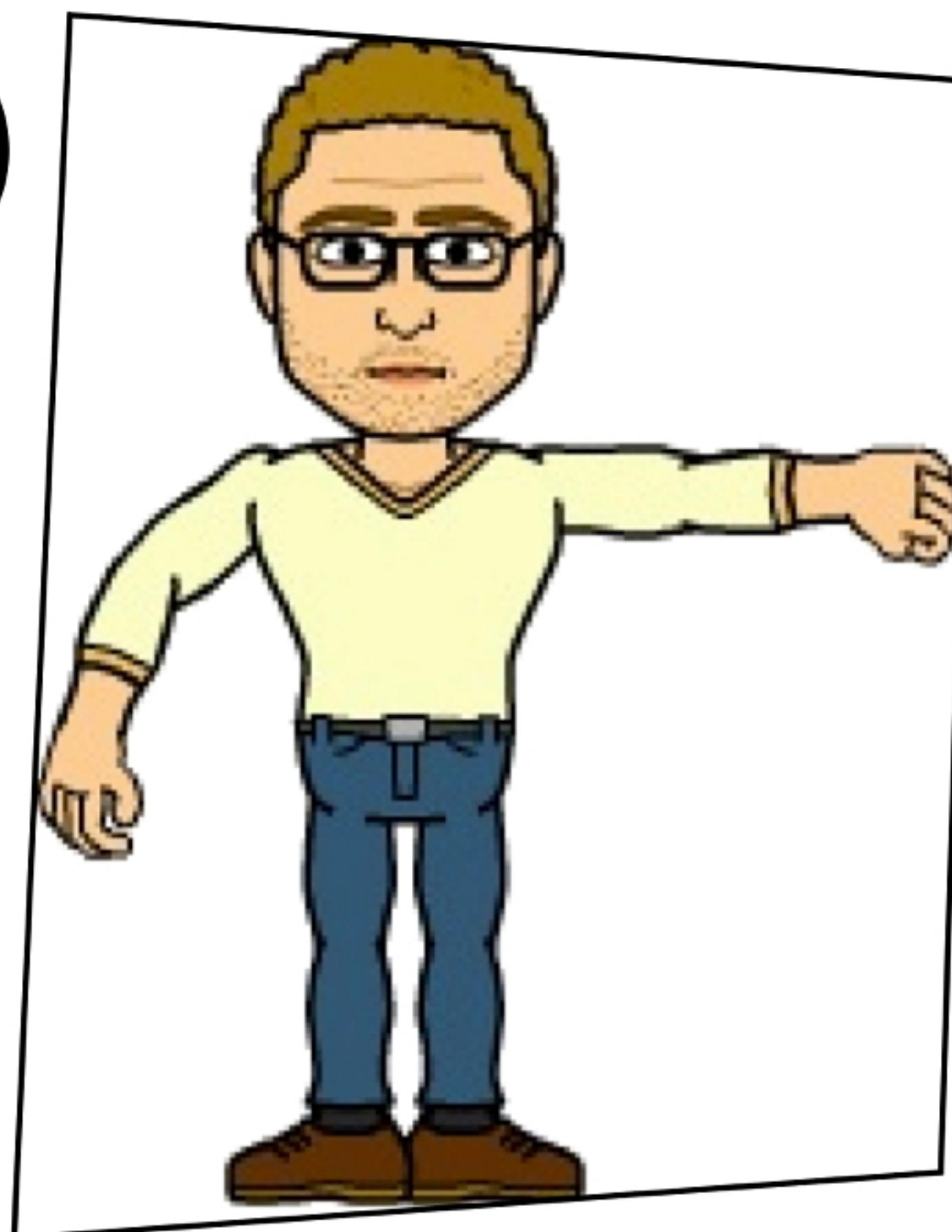
AND IN THIS PANEL, I'VE MANAGED TO LIFT THE GIANT WORD BALLOON AND FREE MYSELF.



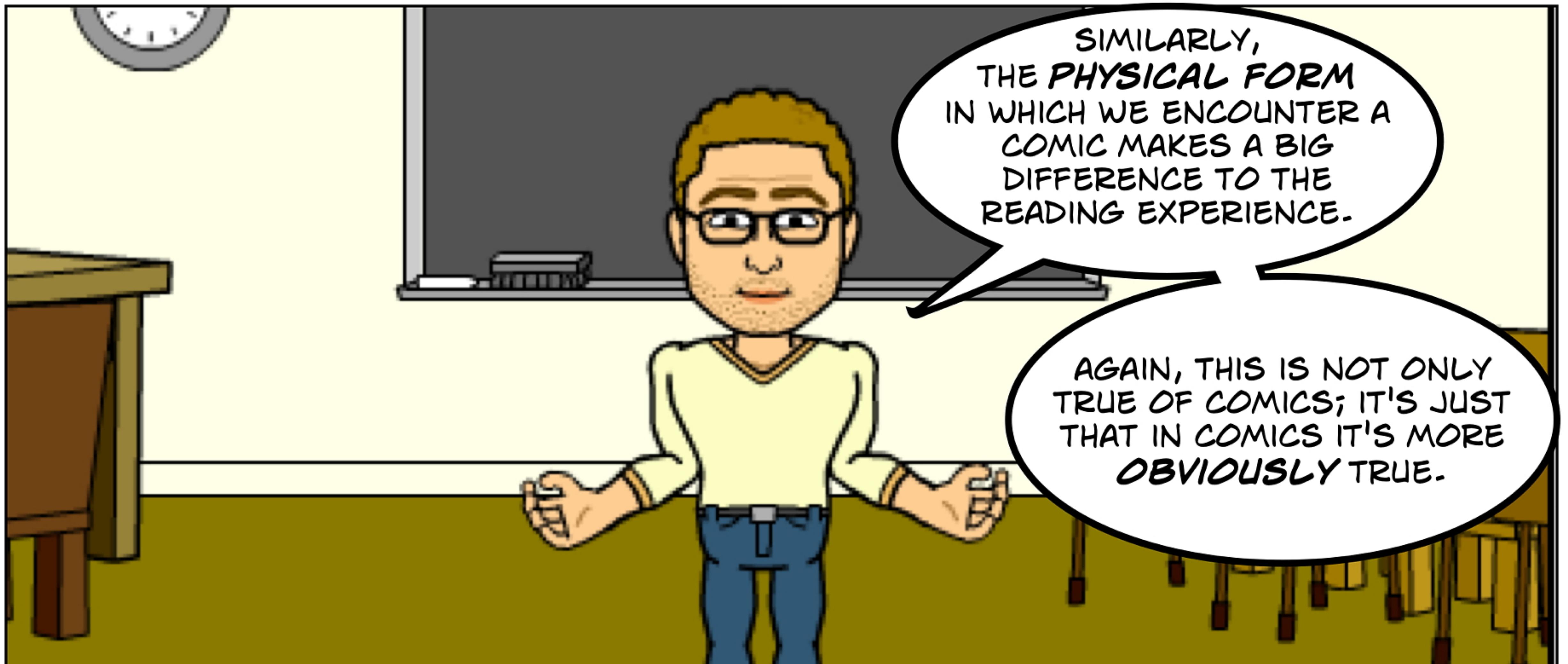
ASHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON.  
MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO  
READ THIS PANEL AS SHOWING ME BEING  
CRUSHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON.



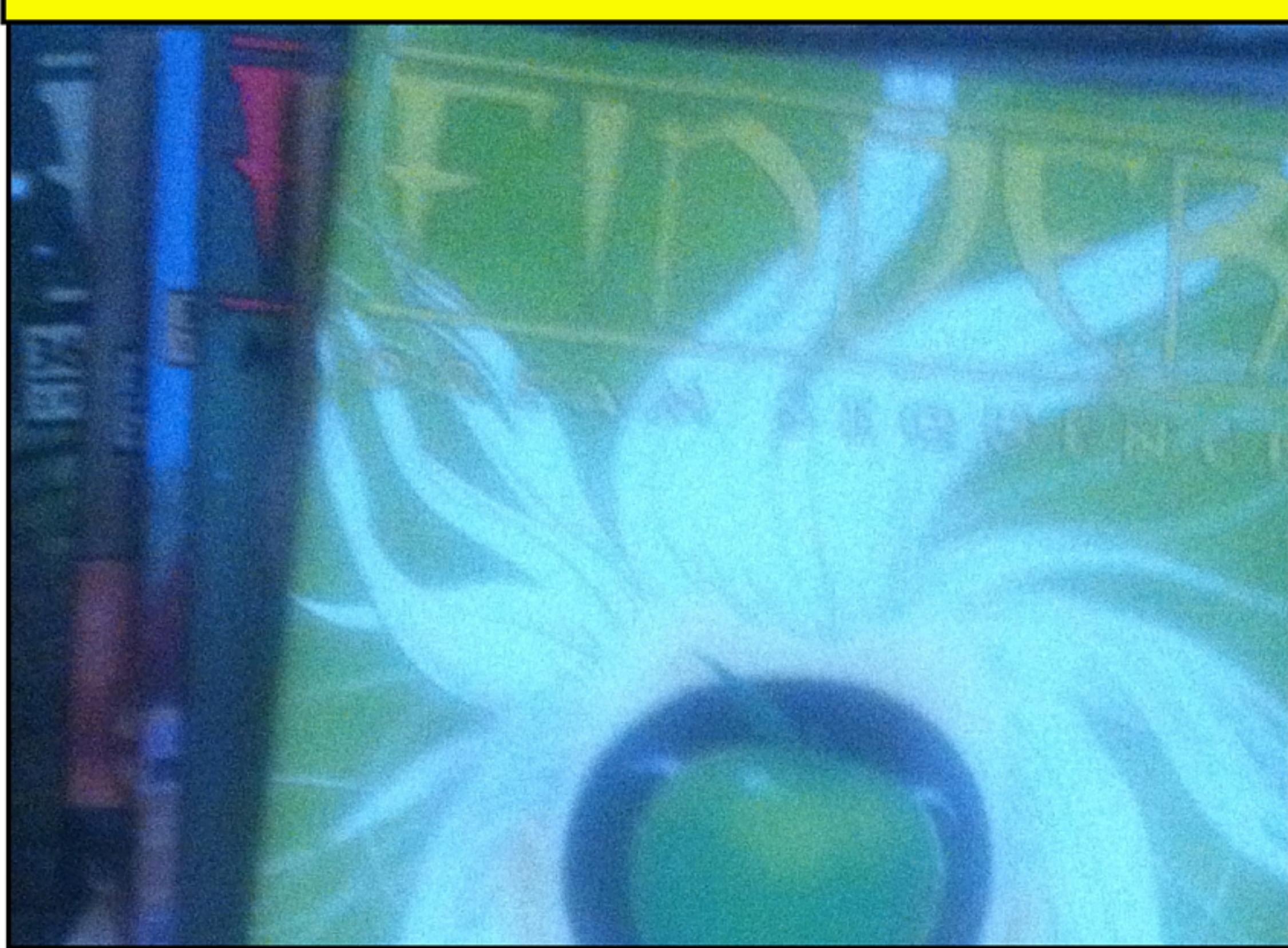
OR PANEL BORDERS. SUDDENLY I FEEL A BIT CLAUSTROPHOBIC.



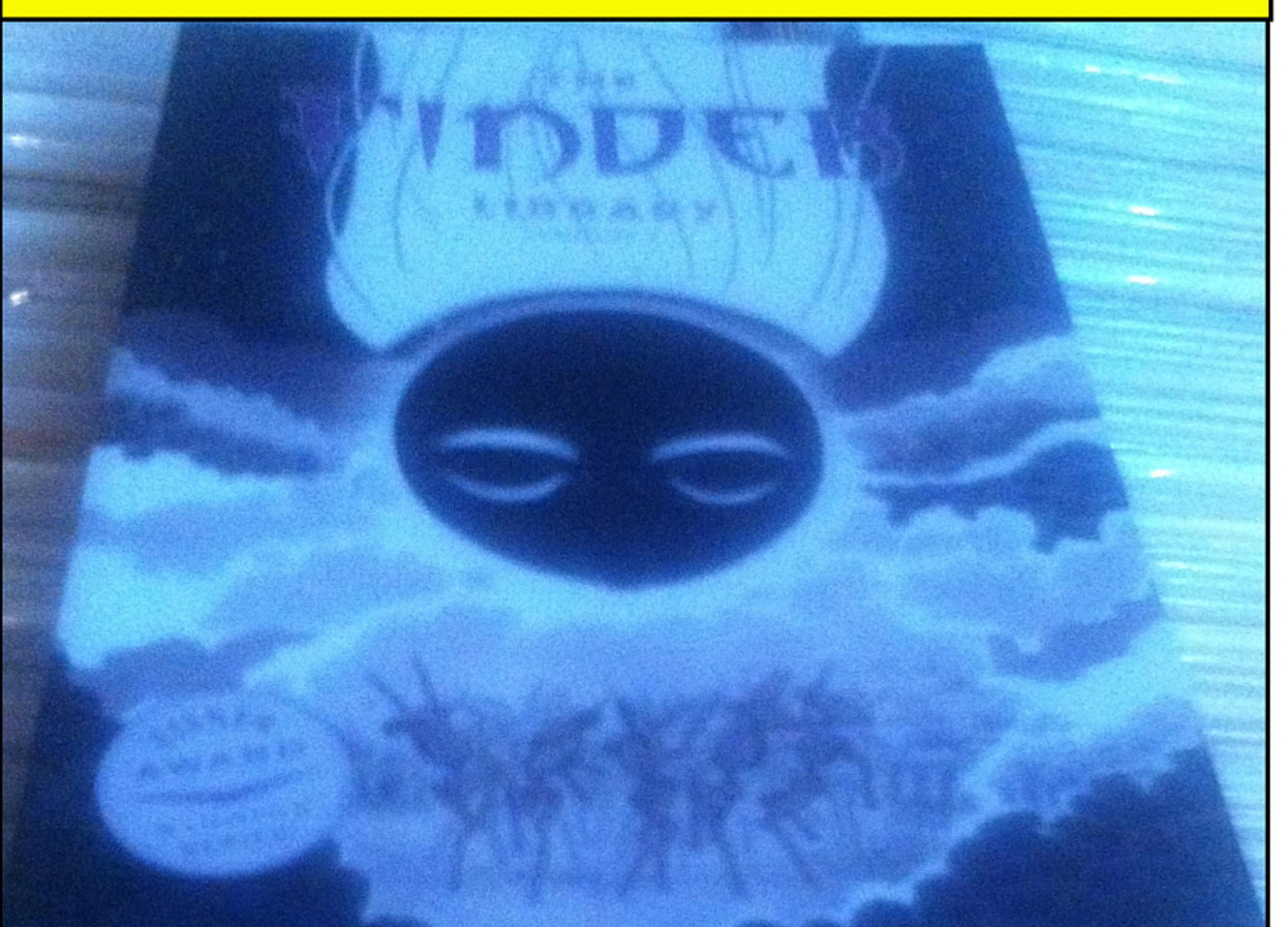
TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY: IN COMICS, EVERYTHING MATTERS. WORD BALLOONS, PANEL BORDERS, ETC., CONTRIBUTE TO THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE COMIC AS MUCH AS THE ART DOES.



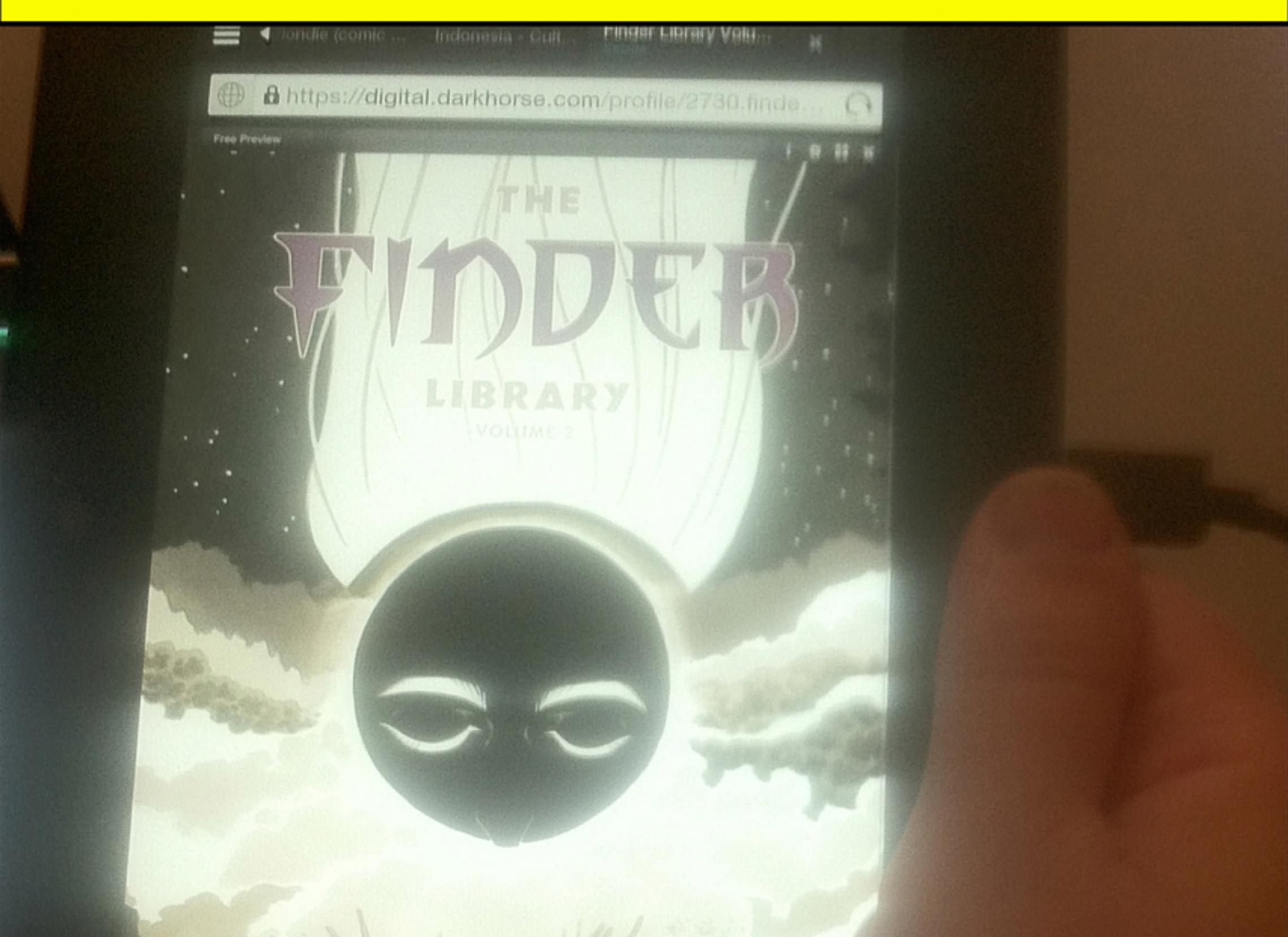
FOR EXAMPLE, READING COMIC BOOKS IS A VERY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FROM READING A TRADE PAPERBACK --



--EVEN ONE THAT REPRINTS THE EXACT SAME COMIC BOOKS.

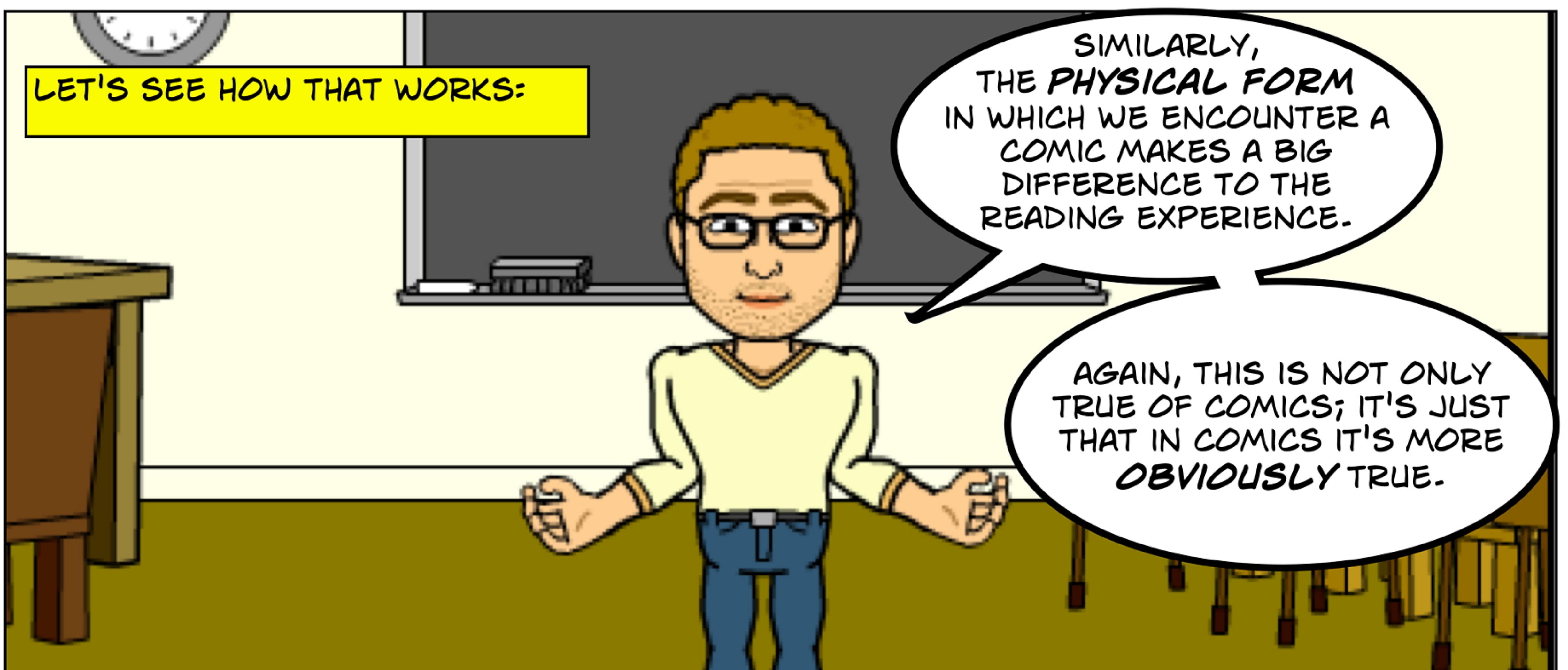


WITH DIGITAL COMICS, THE EFFECTS OF FORMAT UPON THE READING EXPERIENCE ARE EVEN MORE STRIKING.



FOR EXAMPLE, MANY DIGITAL COMICS APPS INCLUDE A "GUIDED VIEW" FUNCTIONALITY, IN WHICH EACH PAGE IS DISPLAYED ONE PANEL OR SECTION AT A TIME, RATHER THAN ALL AT ONCE. FOR READERS USED TO READING COMICS IN PRINT, THIS IS HARD TO GET USED TO, BECAUSE IT FRAGMENTS THE PAGE INTO A MULTIPLICITY OF INDIVIDUAL PANELS, AND MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO VIEW THE PAGE AS A COMPLETE UNIT.

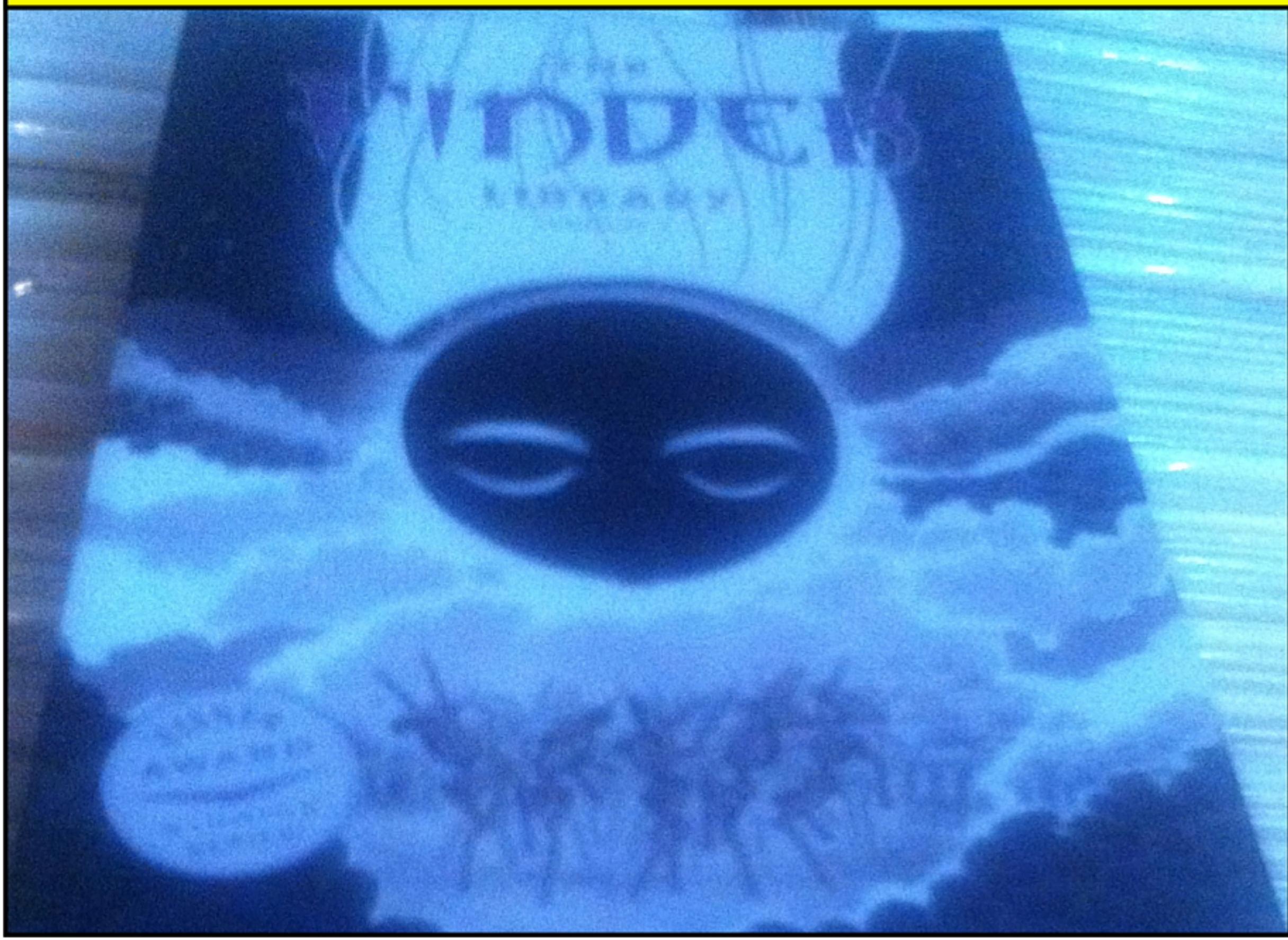
GUIDED VIEW IS NOT INHERENTLY BETTER OR WORSE THAN MORE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF READING COMICS; IT JUST OFFERS A DIFFERENT READING EXPERIENCE.



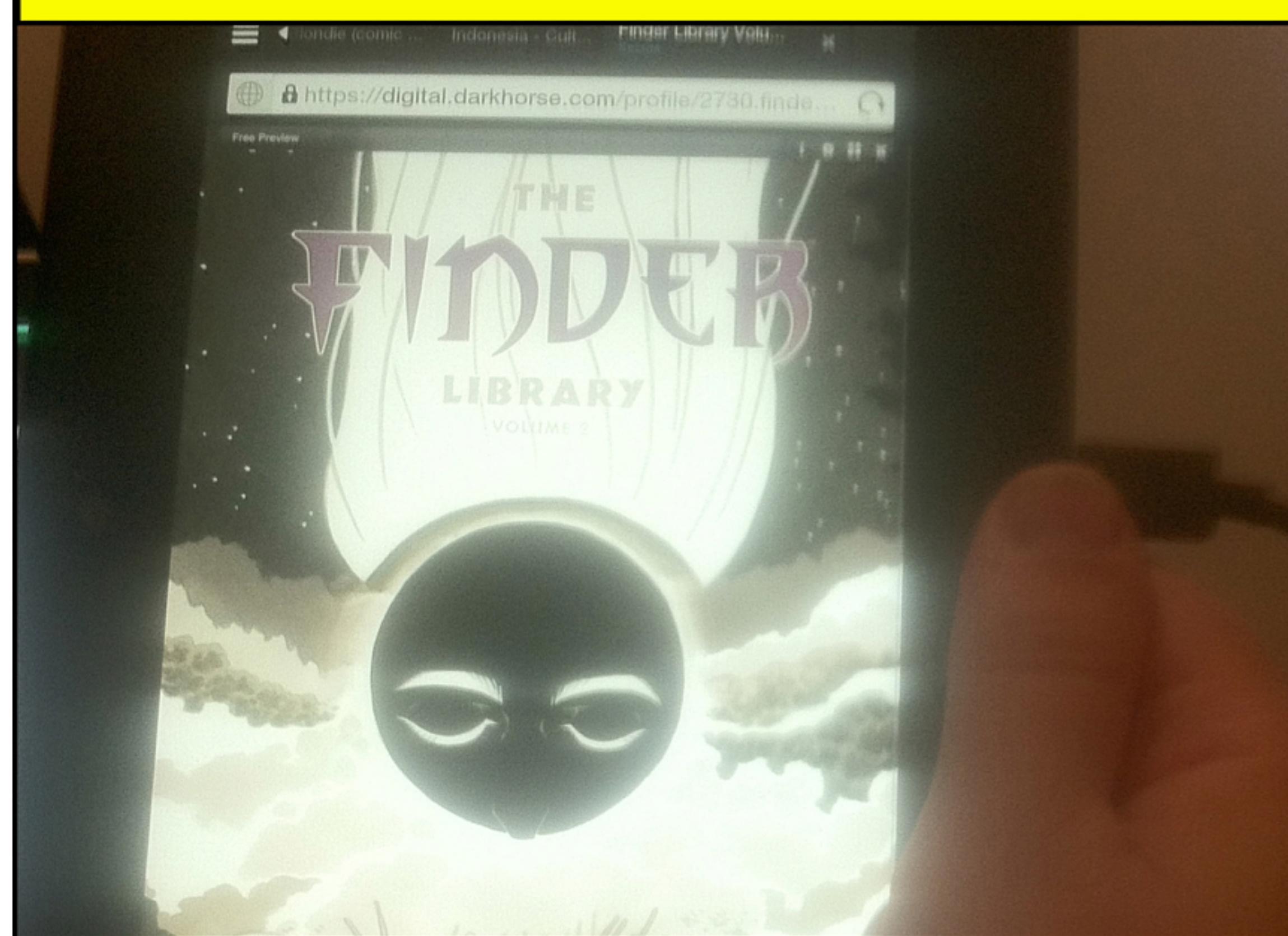
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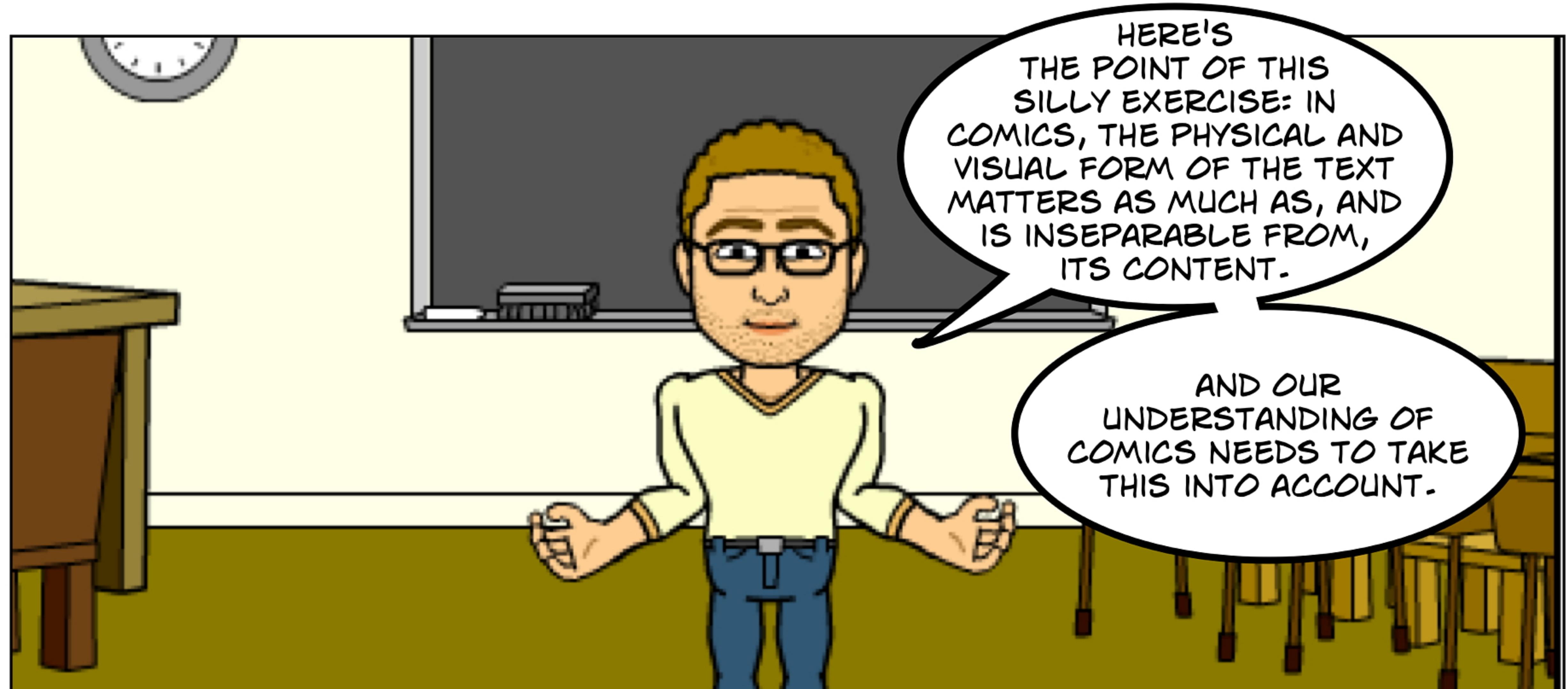


WITH DIGITAL COMICS, THE EFFECTS OF  
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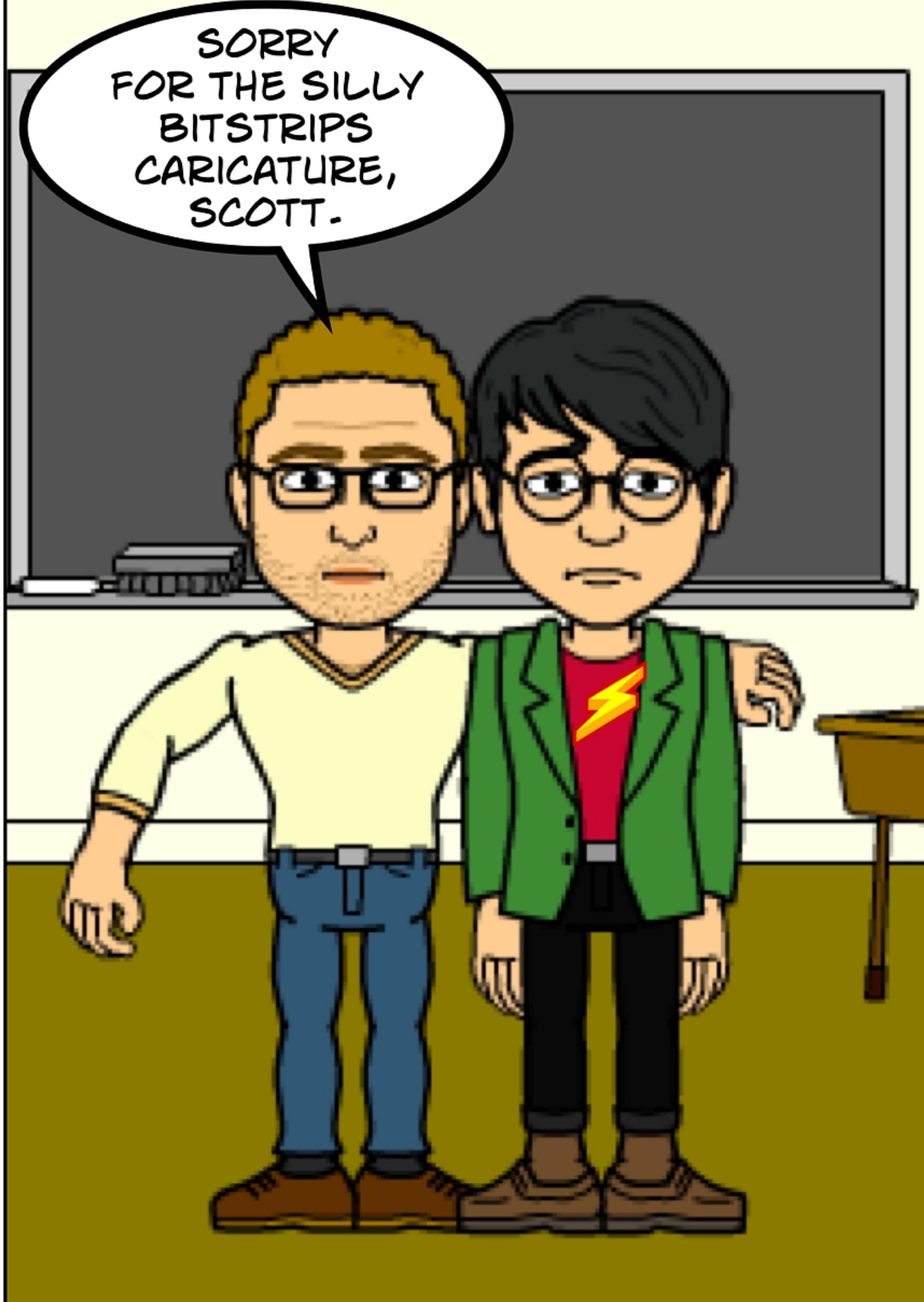


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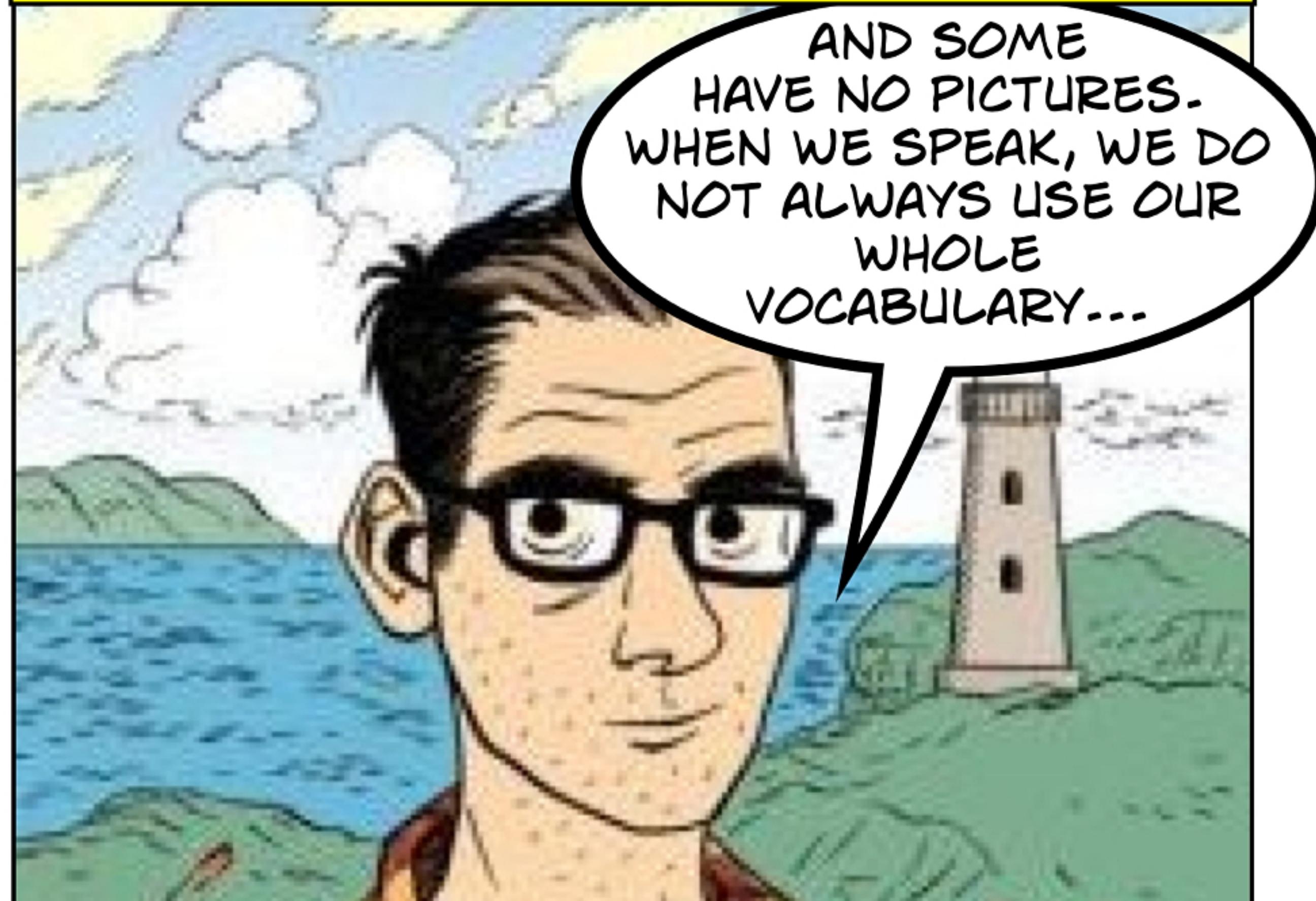
STANDARD DEFINITIONS OF COMICS, LIKE MCLOUD'S "JUXTAPOSED AND OTHER IMAGES IN DELIBERATE SEQUENCE" OR GROENSTEEN'S "RELATIONAL PLAY OF A PLURALITY OF INDEPENDENT IMAGES," TEND TO PRIVILEGE IMAGES OVER WORDS.



BUT DYLAN HORROCKS, THROUGH THE MOUTH OF EMIL KOPEK, A CHARACTER IN HIS COMIC BOOK HICKSVILLE, OFFERS A RADICALLY DIFFERENT DEFINITION: COMICS ARE TEXTS THAT...



WHEN REMINDED THAT SOME COMICS HAVE NO WORDS, KOPEN REPLIES:



IS A COMIC WITH  
NO PICTURES  
EVEN POSSIBLE?  
IF SO, THEN WHAT  
MIGHT IT LOOK  
LIKE?

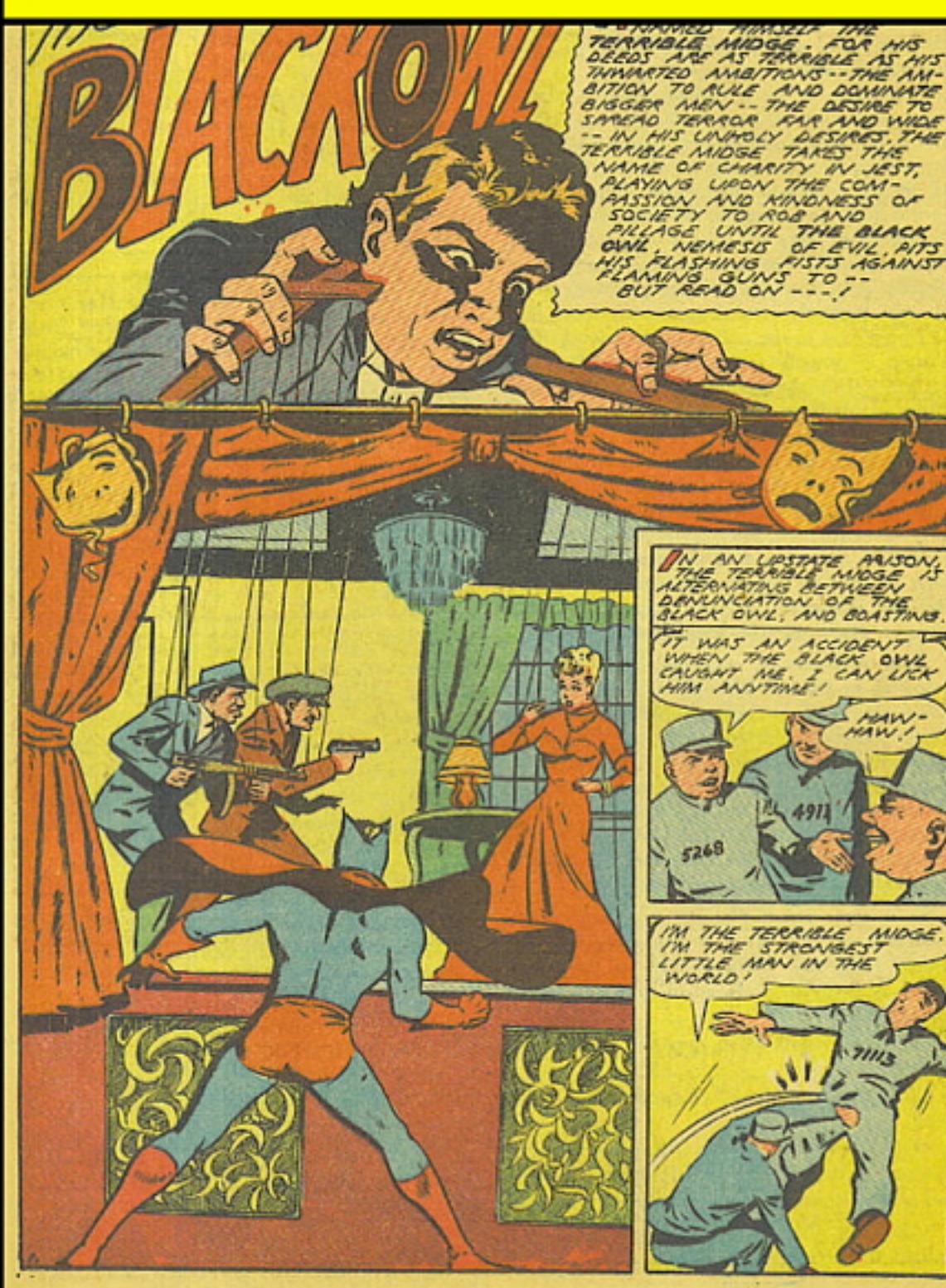
Maybe when we think of a comic without pictures, we might imagine a text which is composed solely of words, but in which the physical form and appearance of the words are as important as their semantic meaning.

A text which could not be remediated into a different format without significantly altering the reader's appearance.

Maybe that's ultimately what a comic *is*, whether or not it includes pictures.

AND I WANT TO CONCLUDE BY ARGUING THAT OUR WORKS OF COMICS SCHOLARSHIP SHOULD BE MORE LIKE COMICS, IN THIS SENSE.

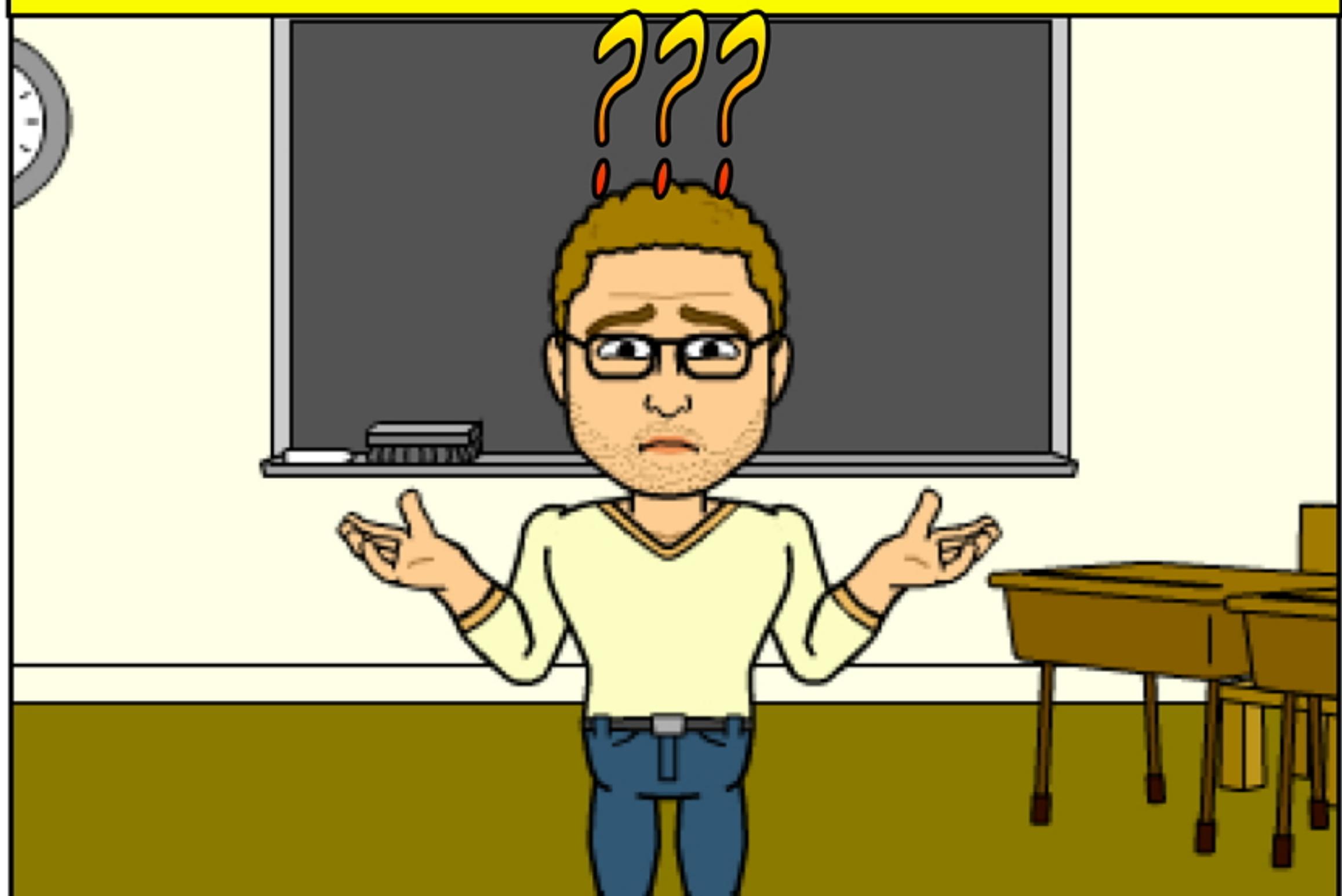
IT'S UNFORTUNATE WHEN THE VISUAL AND MATERIAL RICHNESS OF OUR SCHOLARSHIP DOES NOT MATCH THAT OF OUR OBJECTS OF STUDY.



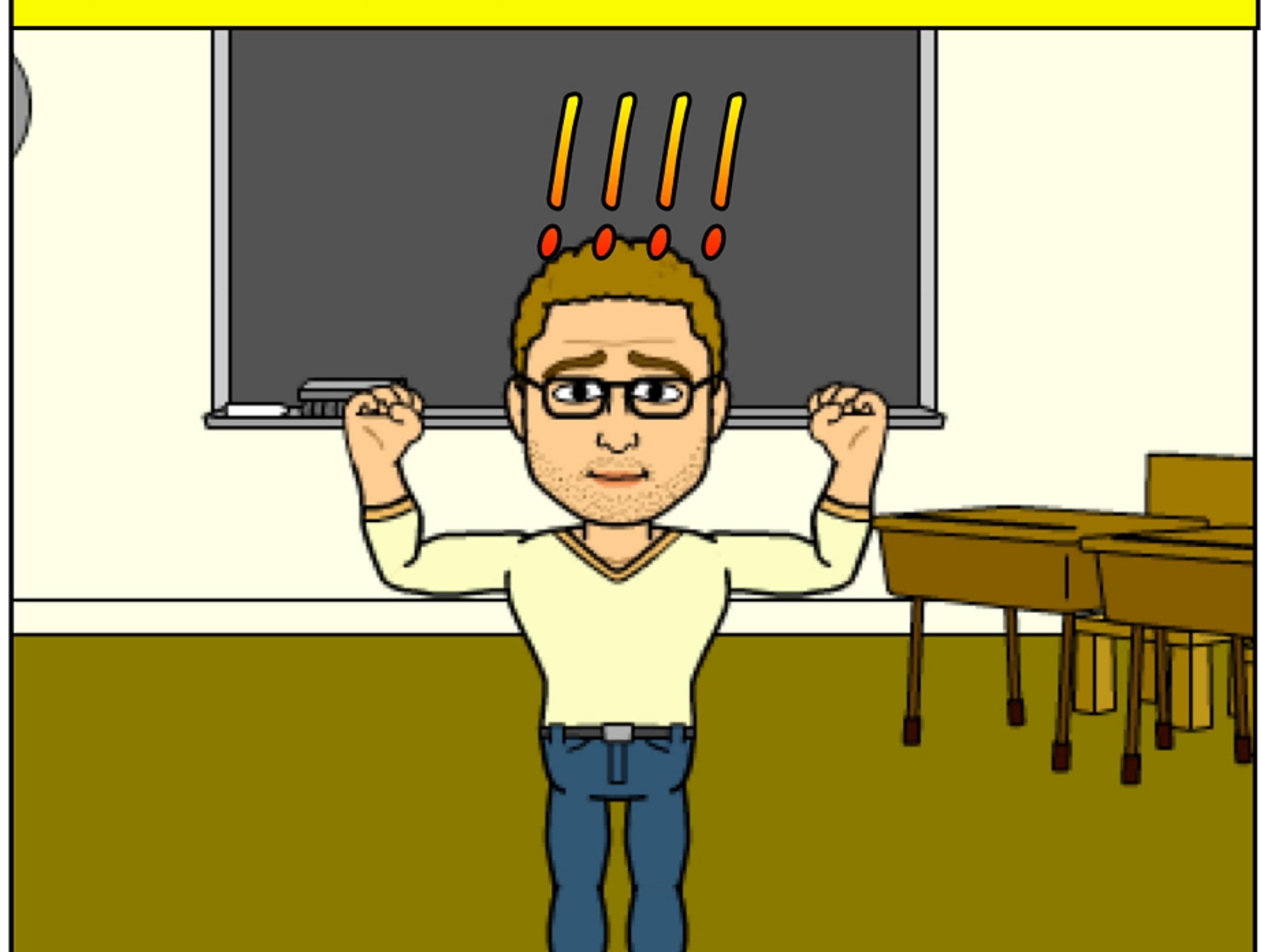
WHEN TEACHING COMICS, I ASK MY STUDENTS TO FORMAT THEIR PAPERS AS COMICS, BECAUSE I FEEL THAT THEY LEARN MORE EFFECTIVELY BY WRITING WITH THE MEDIA THEY WRITE ABOUT.



THAT IS JUST AS TRUE FOR ME AS IT IS FOR THEM. HOWEVER, I RESISTED DOING THIS SORT OF WORK MYSELF, LARGELY DUE TO A LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN MY DRAWING AND CODING ABILITY.



BUT I'VE DONE MY BEST TO CIRCUMVENT THESE LIMITATIONS.



IN SUMMARY: IF WE, AS COMICS SCHOLARS, WRITE WITH AS WELL AS ABOUT COMICS, OUR WORK WILL HAVE GREATER MATERIAL AND VISUAL RICHNESS. AND IF WE DO SO, WE WILL ALSO DEVELOP A LEVEL OF FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF COMICS WHICH IS UNAVAILABLE OTHERWISE.

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IS AN EXCITING DEVELOPMENT IN MANY AREAS OF THE HUMANITIES, BUT IT'S PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO OUR FIELD. AND IT DOESN'T REQUIRE ARTISTIC ABILITY, JUST A WILLINGNESS TO EXPERIMENT.



*The End*