

“The Evolution of Understanding” follows a student in class who does not understand the material on the board. After a quick nap, he wakes up and the board to realize the previous material is now much simpler. “The Evolution of Understanding” leverages closure, masking, and the reality to abstraction spectrum as defined by Scott McCloud to enhance and complement the narrative humor and meaning.

Closure is present throughout the three panels, requiring the reader to visualize the timeline serving as compliment to the rapid change of the material. Just as sleep is implied to have skipped the steps of learning and studying, the reader must imply that some time has passed between each panel and the process of sleeping and waking up did not occur instantaneously. McCloud would refer to these types of transitions as “moment-to-moment” possibly mixed with “scene-to-scene” as there is a substantially more amount of time between panels than a traditional moment to moment. These moment-to-moment transitions illustrate the almost painfully slow universal experience of mathematics classes. Generally, in comics, these transitions slow down the scenes in between action, exploring some possible emotion or pensive moment in the character. Here, it illustrates the tiresome nature of a boring class leading to a student possibly taking a nap.

Speaking of illustration, there is a distinct lack of characterization in the student, servicing the universal nature of the experience depicted. McCloud mentions how characters are often more simplistic and allow for viewer self-insertion while the background of a panel is often more realistic, maintaining reader immersion. This effect reveals itself heavily in “The Evolution of Understanding” as the chalkboard and desk depict a realistic school classroom with real mathematics while the character is drawn as a stick figure with simplistic expressions. Everyone who has ever been a student has at one point been bored in a classroom and “The Evolution of Understanding” cartoonifies that experience for humorous purposes. Humor evolves from the relatability of a boring class and the taboo nature of sleeping in said class.

Finally, the reality to abstraction spectrum is illustrated through specifically the chalkboard, exploring both rhetorical and literal narratives. The transition of the mathematics on the board from complicated differential equations to simple algebra literally describes how the characters “understanding” of the math has evolved. However, the movement of the abstracted mathematics to the simple algebra mimics how a reader might have to spend time looking at the first and second panels chalkboard, like words, but

will instantly recognize the algebra in the last panel, like a picture. This is exactly how our character mimics the reader, not “recognizing” the words on the board but instantly understanding the simple algebra, flipping the switch like a picture.

The techniques of closure, masking, and abstraction work cohesively, enhancing the comics humor, relatability, and narrative. Comics in general should not only satisfy the mind as interesting works of art and creativity but rhetorically serve and echo the story to enhance a reader’s experience. I believe “The Evolution of Understanding” demonstrates the limitless creativity of the comic medium, enhancing the narrative through the art despite a possibly poor artistic expression.