

A Sutzkever Graphic Novel Exploration

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JUD 362: The Last Great Yiddish Poet

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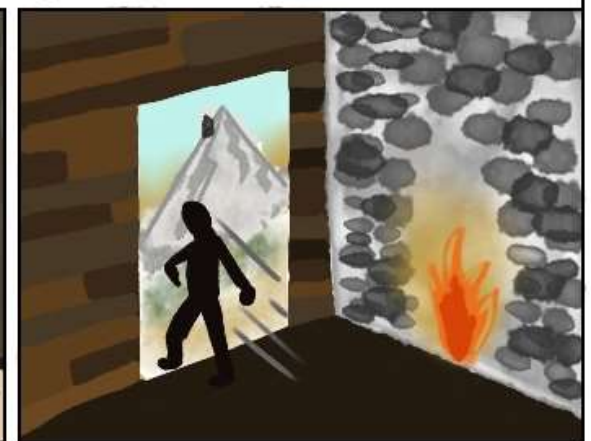
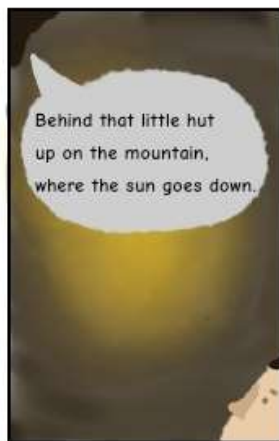
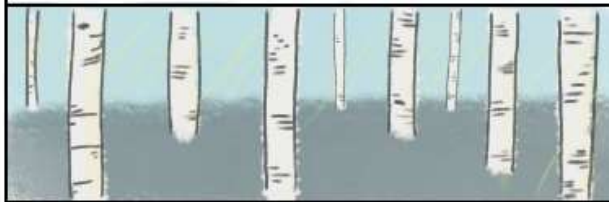
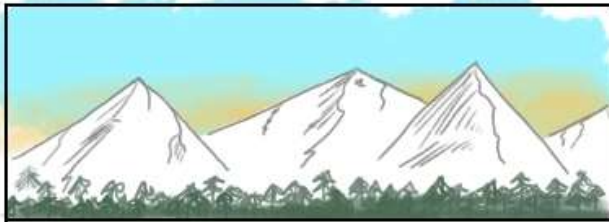
Introduction: What and Why is a Graphic Novel?

Loosely defined, graphic novels are collections of sequential art that juxtapose words and images to tell a story. While the genre is relatively modern, owing to advances in mass printing, comics - the base language of graphic novels - have been around for centuries. Comics have their own vocabulary, advantages, and challenges when it comes to representing stories. In this project, I hope to dive into some of these specific elements of comics and explore how they apply to the work of 20th century Yiddish Poet Avrom Sutzkever.

Sutzkever's work covers a range of topics from his childhood in Siberia, his time in the Vilna Ghetto under Nazi occupation, the natural world, and memory. He writes primarily in poetry, but also has a collection of short stories, and a memoir. His work is full of poetic reference, metaphor, rhythm, and rhyme, all of which make it difficult to translate into English, let alone into comic form. Despite this, Sutzkever's vivid imagery creates a vibrant landscape in the reader's mind, which was the inspiration for exploring a comic adaptation.

The biggest hurdle in presenting this interpretation was the use of text. There are many ways to include words when translating writing into graphic novels. Especially in interpreting poetry, I wanted to make sure that the meaning and imagery of the poems were seen, but also did not want the interpretation to be too tied to illustrating every word. In comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud's book, *Understanding Comics*, he says that "In comics at it's best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance" (McCloud, 156). By blending words and pictures together, the author is able to make them greater than the sum of their parts. This is tricky for poetry which relies so heavily on not only words, but also metaphors that cannot be illustrated or might lose their subtlety and beauty if made too explicit. The approaches that I explore in this project are: including every phrase, including selected lines, and including only diegetic text. I will discuss these decisions more in the reflections on each selection but also encourage the reader to come to their own conclusions about what they feel works and doesn't work in this format.

I see this project as a translation and given that I know there are not right and wrong answers for how to interpret Sutzkever's work. Differing from a translation though, the choices that I make fundamentally change the interpretation of the source material, and substantially alter a reader's interpretation. What I am providing is not a full novel, but instead an exploration of possibilities. I have selected four works to interpret that span Sutzkever's life and style, and from them I have made four pages of comics. Each comic will be followed by context and commentary on the artistic decisions through a critical lens. I will then conclude with what I felt interpreted Sutzkever's work best. Appendix I contains inspiration images for each page to hopefully provide the reader with an idea of what a more artistically skilled artist could come up with, and Appendix II contains the full text of the selections I have drawn.



Comic One: Revelation

“Revelation” comes in the middle of Sutzkever’s *Siberia*, a cycle of poems about his childhood and the nature of Siberia. This volume is unique among Sutzkever’s works in that it has already been famously interpreted graphically - in a volume illustrated by Marc Chagall. This volume received mixed reviews. Some critics praised Chagall’s interpretations, and others claimed that Chagall “appropriates Sibir into (his) ever-expanding artistic world” (Yudkoff), instead of delivering a more Sutzkeverian artistic response. When I went to illustrate “Revelation” I chose to set it in a different version of Siberia from Chagall’s. I wanted to emphasize the color and feel of a Siberian landscape, away from Chagall’s black and white. I did, however, attempt to include some of the ephemerality and soft edges that Chagall uses.

For words, I chose to include only diegetic text, that is, the conversation between the boy and his father, leaving out descriptions I felt were represented by the images. Had I continued the comic beyond the first stanza I would have had to include more text, or perhaps turn some of the non explicitly spoken lines into speech bubbles. In the first four panels, I use an aspect-to-aspect transition (McCloud 74) to set the scene to situate this comic firmly in a Siberian landscape. For McCloud, textless establishing panels will “linger in the reader’s mind. And its presence may be felt in the panels which follow it” (McCloud 102). I felt this was important given that “Revelation” comes in the middle of *Siberia* when the reader has already been introduced to the landscape and atmosphere of Sutzkever’s poetry, an introduction that isn’t able to happen when just reading this comic adaptation.



Comic Two: The Green Aquarium

Published in 1953, *The Green Aquarium* is a collection of prose by Sutzkever, with the titular work vividly describing a green aquarium full of the living dead. Death and memory are often subjects of Sutzkever's work, and they are especially explored in *The Green Aquarium*.

I chose to adapt this section as the image of the aquarium full of the dead, so close and yet unreachable, has stuck with me since first reading it. Additionally, being prose, "The Green Aquarium" is one of the most obvious choices for a graphic novel interpretation as the exact rhythm and rhyme of the writing is less intrinsic.

For this adaptation, I chose to select key phrases to include in the panels, with an emphasis on descriptive text that was necessary for the story. I combined and slightly rearranged lines to make for more economical captions. In the art, I wanted to emphasize the otherworldly aquarium and overwhelming green. I used black panel borders for the topmost panel, set still on earth, then used a green background wash and panel borders as the aquarium is revealed. I had the background leak into the space between panels, also known as the gutter, to have visual distinction between these two realms. I also wanted the green to indicate a timeless and spaceless world that the aquarium exists in. The panel borders and gutter are used as a "general indicator that space and time are being divided", and so by uniting them under this green I showed that space and time were not the same as they were before (McCloud 99). Additionally, I chose more modern looking buildings for the "cities" mentioned in the story, as another indication of the timelessness and disconnect from a corporeal world.

A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:
THE YIDDISH WORD HAS
SEVERED ITSELF FROM THE
GLOBE,



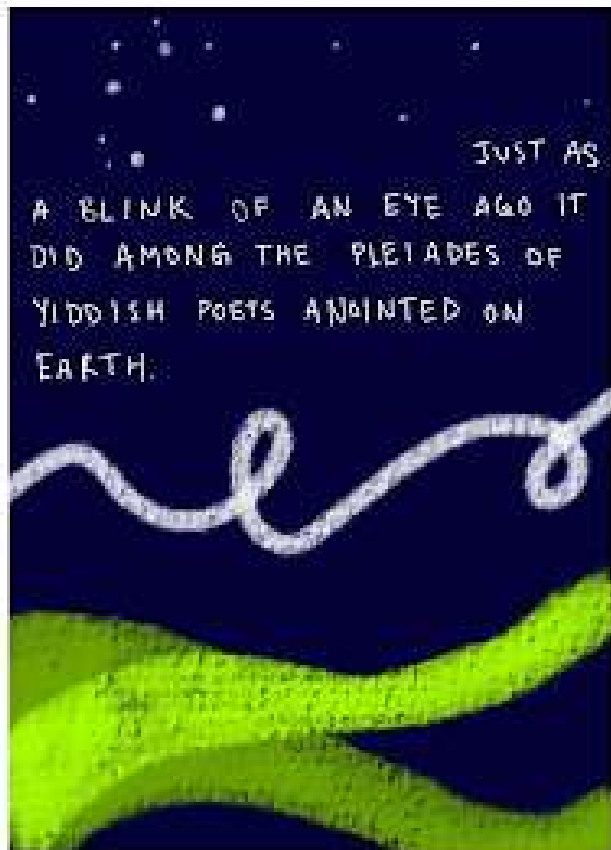
FROM THE POWER TO
ATTRACT EVEN MORE VICTIMS
TO ITS SACRIFICIAL ALTER



THE YIDDISH WORD NOW MOVES
AMONG THE PLANETS



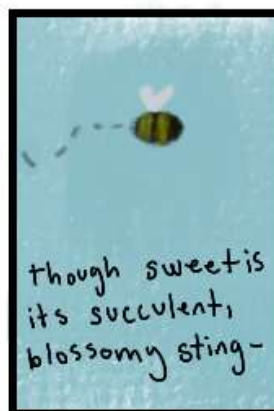
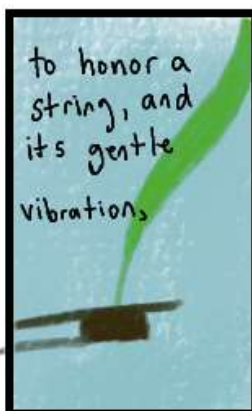
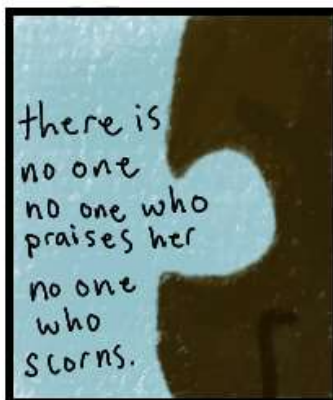
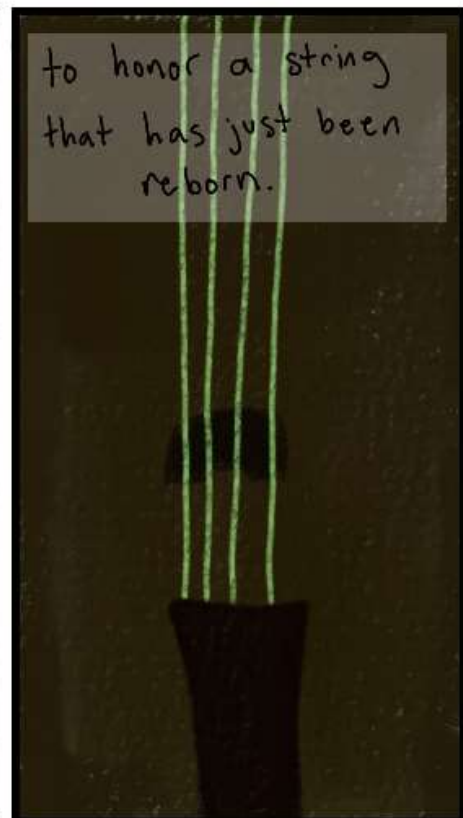
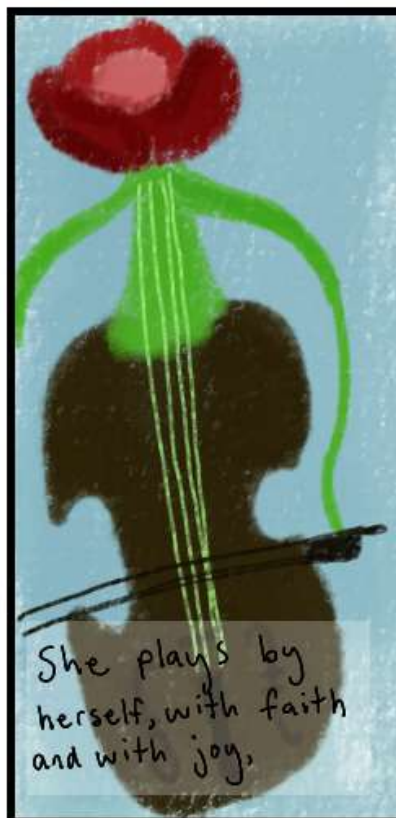
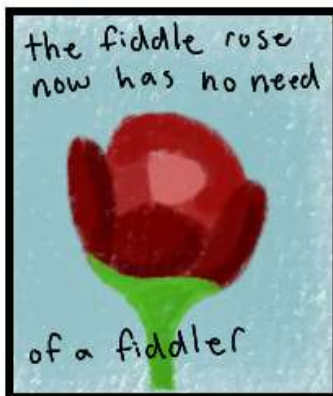
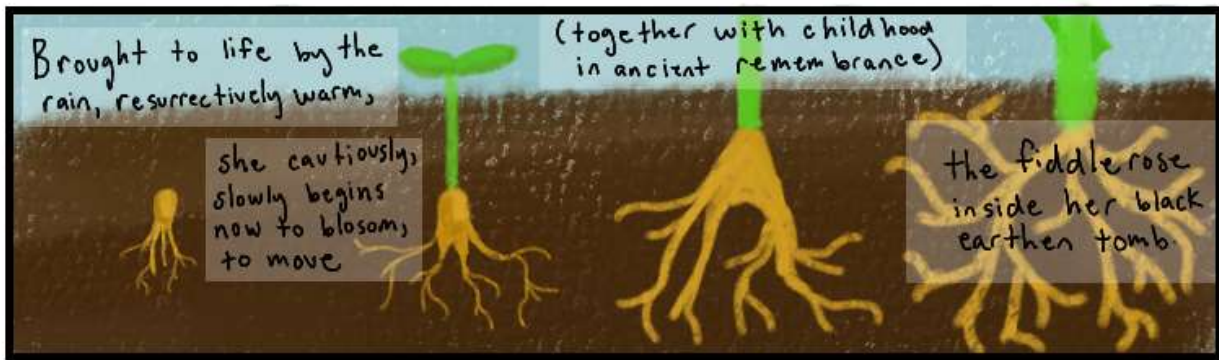
JUST AS
A BLINK OF AN EYE AGO IT
DID AMONG THE PLEIADES OF
YIDDISH POETS ANJOINTED ON
EARTH.



Comic Three: A Special Announcement

“A Special Announcement” was published in 1996 and deals with the Yiddish Language. Like many of Sutzkever’s other poems, it features vivid imagery and beautiful figurative language. Especially in Sutzkever’s later years, his poetry became more abstract and reflective. This means that a literal translation into a graphic novel is much harder to conceive. I wanted to choose this poem because so many of my favorite Sutzkever poems do not have clear or concrete plots, and instead are more focused on concepts, such as the Yiddish language in “A Special Announcement”.

For this poem I chose to include the full text of the first two stanzas, but also to not tie the images as closely to the ‘plot’ of the poem. Instead, I focused more on one or two central images and my impression of the feel of the poem. By having a less clear subject, I hope to draw the reader in and allow them to interpret the poem themselves, this ambiguity can “foster greater participation by the reader and a sense of involvement” (McCloud 133). These choices made this comic closer to an artistic interpretation of the text than a comic or graphic novel, but still by using panels and other elements of comic symbolism the art is received differently by the reader than a purely artistic reaction or illustration. For example, I used uniform panel sizes to mirror the even line lengths in the poem. Like in “The Green Aquarium” and “Realization” I wanted to detach this comic from time, instead of focusing on the feeling of it.



Comic Four: The Fiddle Rose

For “The Fiddle Rose” I wanted to illustrate each line - like in “A Special Announcement”- but I also attempted to represent the images in the poem more literally. I used what McCloud calls “aspect - to - aspect transitions” to create a contemplative scene (McCloud 74). These highlight small details in a story and “establish a mood or sense of place, time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations” (McCloud 79).

I wanted to give “The Fiddle Rose” a very different feel from “The Green Aquarium”, one of internal action rather than an external plot. I did this by using words and images in a different way. In “The Fiddle Rose” I used what McCloud describes as “word specific combinations” where the images add to the text but are not necessary (McCloud 153). In contrast in “The Green Aquarium” the images convey a lot more of the meaning and work in an “additive” style where “words amplify or elaborate on an image”, that is, the text included in “The Green Aquarium” would have been insufficient to tell the story without the images (McCloud 153). Using words and images differently changes the reading experience, and can be used to emphasize different elements.

Throughout this project, I was confronted with how even more than in translation when interpreting text for a graphic novel the illustrator’s choices impact the resulting work. My Fiddle Rose might look completely different from another reader, but by illustrating it in this context I am declaring my version as concrete, at least to someone who only reads the graphic novel.

Conclusions

Of the four selections, I think that “A Special Announcement” was my favorite to make and read, but I see the most potential for “The Green Aquarium”. Sutzkever’s prose is often dense and full of layers that can make it difficult to get through. Because of this, I would love to see it adapted into a full graphic novel. I think it would be wonderful to make the text more approachable, and that the stories would lend themselves well to a visual medium.

I think that for Sutzkever’s poetry, the best method was to include all of the text. Especially with a poet who cared so much about rhythm, rhyme, and language mastery, every word is important and makes the poem what it is. By including the full text, the images are not beholden to conveying every part of the poem, this is because “the more is said with words the more pictures are free to go exploring” (McCloud 155). This freedom of pictures can pull out key images and examine them closely, as well as creating new ones for the reader.

When drawing “Revelation” I captured the plot, but the lack of figurative language meant that it lacked depth. I also think that both “Revelation” and “The Green Aquarium” would have benefited from the same material on two or more pages. As written, “Revelation” especially feels like it happens quickly, and giving the images more space to breathe and expand could have lent it more of the reflective feel of the original poem.

While I have not proven that Sutzkever’s poetry and prose “work” in graphic format, I have explored some of the challenges in adaptation. I have shown some possibilities of what a Sutzkever graphic novel might look like, and more broadly explored some differences in artistic choices when interpreting poetry versus prose into a comic format.

Works Cited

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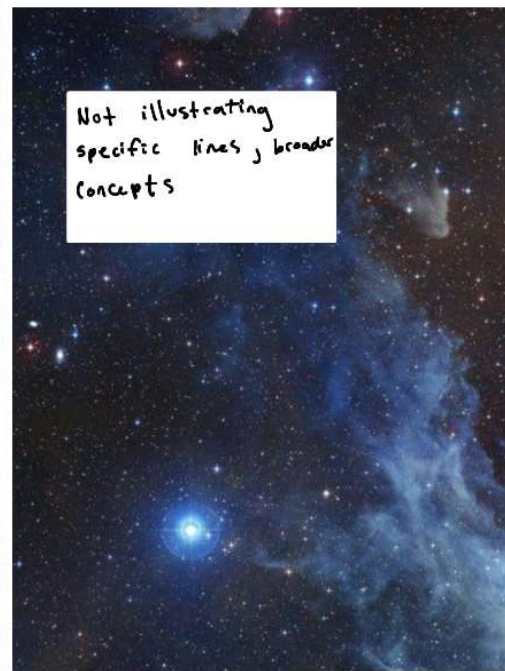
Appendix I: Inspiration Images

As a passionate graphic novel reader, but not a particularly talented artist, I wanted to include some works that inspired my artwork, in hopes of providing a clearer picture of the concepts.





Evan Palmer Sillamillion
comic
- dark background
- abstract/conceptual art



Not illustrating
specific lines, broader
concepts



Disney Hercules



Underwater
city



large over-
arching panel



Appendix II: Referenced Works

Realization (Valencia 59)

1.

“Tell me, father, where does the world end?!”

Like a philosopher, I demand to know.

He answers” “Behind that little hut

Up on the mountain, where the sun goes down.”

Is this the truth? If so, don’t think,

But hunt the sunset! And I run

Upwards, through a silver net of tears,

To where the world ends, towards the mountain top.

To the Siberian God my eyes are pleading,

Let not all my longing be in vain.

All the millennia which came before me

Rise quivering to green me from the snows.

The Green Aquarium (Harshav 358)

A green knife split the earth.

And it was green.

Green.

Green.

The green of dark fir trees through a mist;

The green of a cloud with a burst gallbladder;

The green of mossy stones in a rain;

The green revealed through a hoop, rolled by a seven-year-old;

The green of cabbage leaves in splinters of dew, that can bloody your fingers;

The fresh green under melting snow, in a ring around a blue flower;
The green of the crescent moon seen by green eyes under a wave;
And the solemn green of grass making seams on a grave.
Green streaming into green. Body into body. The earth transformed into a green aquarium.
Closer, closer to the green eddy.

I look inside: Humans swim around like fish. Myriads of phosphorus faces. Young. Old. And
young-old in one. Those I saw throughout my life, death has crowned them with a green
existence; all swimming about in the green aquarium, in a silky, airy music.

Here, the dead live!

Beneath them, rivers, forests, cities - one enormous, palpable map; above, the sun swims in the
guise of a man of fire.

I recognize acquaintances, friends, neighbors, I tip my straw hat to them.

“ Good morning.”

[A special announcement...] (Fein 246)

A special announcement: The Yiddish Word
has severed itself from the globe, from the power
to attract even more victims to its sacrificial altar.

The Yiddish Word now moves
among the planets
just as a blink of an eye ago
it did among the Pleiades
of Yiddish poets anointed on earth.

The Fiddle Rose (Valencia 161)

Brought to life by the rain, resurrectively warm,
She cautiously, slowly begins now to blossom, to move
(together with childhood in ancient remembrance)
The fiddle rose inside her black earthen tomb.
The fiddle rose now has no need of a fiddler,
There is no one who praises her, no one who scorns.
She plays by herself, with faith and with joy,
To honor a string that has just been reborn.

To honor a string, and its gentle vibration,
To honor a bee whose honey is butter
Though sweet is its succulent, blossomy sting -
To honor a pain that has just been reborn.