

# The use of black and white in persepolis essay



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As people age, changes in perception naturally occur. The experiences we go through, the people we meet, and the ideas we learn as we grow up help us to develop our own unique points of view. Most people would say that perception could be represented by the gradation between black and white; black representing the dark, the wrong, the negative, white representing the pure, the right, the positive, and the different shades of gray in between representing the middle ground of perception. In childhood, most of us learn what is right and what is wrong, hence our perception as children is mostly (and rigidly) in black and white. For some of us though, openness to new experiences and different people would allow us to see alternatives, to see the grays that are neither right nor wrong and entirely subjective, while still retaining the sense that there is a black and white, a right and wrong, when it comes to perception. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is like a bildungsroman or formation novel; a story that shows the development of a central character from childhood to adulthood. Divided into two volumes, the reader sees the changes that go through the character Marjane as a child growing up in an Iran rapidly changing politically in *The Story of Childhood* and the changes that occur to her in Europe and the effects these changes had on her when she came back to her country in *The Story of a Return*.

The reader witnesses all these through Marjane's point of view, which changes as the story progresses and is reflected and reinforced through the usage of black and white in the visuals. In *Persepolis One*, 'The Story of a Childhood,' Marjane, as a young girl, is building the foundations of her identity. One example is found throughout the first part of *Persepolis One*. Her faith as a Muslim is strong, as could be seen in her conversations with

God, but while continually faced with the harsh realities caused by the Islamic regime, she eventually loses touch with her faith. Another example is her (mostly negative) opinion regarding the political establishment in Iran, as influenced by her parents, her grandmother, and her Uncle Anoosh. Marjane, the child, is often presented or involved in situations that she sees through black and white, but also widen her perception of the world around her. This binary point of view is reflected in the visuals as sometimes, the darker, black shades convey something foreboding, sinister, or unjust while the lighter, white shades create pure, clean, and even holy images. Sometimes, the technique of black and white is used in order to show the oppositions in idea.

One example is when there are demonstrations on the streets for and against the veils (page 5). The women for the veil are in black (which could be traced to Satrapi's negative perception of the veil and also how most chadors are black in real life) while the women supporting freedom are in white. The panels showing the integration of the poor boys, given keys that promise a paradise in the afterlife, into the army and their eventual deaths was another significant scene where the technique was used (pages 101-102). This tragedy is further emphasized by the juxtaposition provided by the panel below it, of Marjane and her friends jumping and dancing in a house party. Probably one of the strongest images for this is Marjane's reaction to the execution of her Uncle Anoosh (page 71). After rejecting God, whom she felt betrayed her, she seemingly gets lost in her depressed thoughts, represented by her floating alone in space. The darkness in the picture shows her despair about her situation, and also appropriately introduces the

beginning of the war. As for the whiter side of things, both God and Uncle Anoosh always dressed in light-colored clothes, which undoubtedly shows that Marjane viewed both of them in a truly positive light, especially her uncle who was her childhood hero.

In *Persepolis Two*, 'The Story of a Return,' we see Marjane growing up and discovering who she is becoming as a young Iranian woman living in Europe, as she goes through experiences she didn't and most likely couldn't have back home, such as experimenting with casual drug use, sex, having and losing love, and so on. After some very eventful years in Europe, she returns to Iran where the readers see how she manages to fit (or not fit) in the Islamic fundamentalist context of her country given everything she had already gone through in Europe. Back in Iran, she manages to alienate herself from old friends, connect with new people, anger the Islamic authorities, and find out more about who she is. Satrapi uses the same technique from *Persepolis One* in the second volume of her book, utilizing darker shades to convey darker situations, while using lighter shades to show more light-hearted ones. One example is the first time Marjane attends a party in Vienna (page 31). It was a relatively new experience, one that she was noticeably uncomfortable with, and the entire atmosphere in the party was shown to be very dark and full of young debauchery. Another example is in the panel that shows Marjane surviving in the tramway after her break-up from Markus and her fight with Frau Dr. Heller (page 84).

It was a traumatic experience that even took its toll on her health, and the beginning of her descent into despair is further emphasized by the convoluted route of the tramway with the starless night sky as the

background. When she finally went back to Iran and strolled around post-war Tehran, the dark images of the destroyed buildings, menacing religious murals, and streets named after war martyrs haunted Marjane enough that she went home right after (pages 96-97). There were also positive moments. One example is the first time she went inside a well-stocked European grocery (page 6). Her excitement in that situation was evident. Another example is her visit to her childhood friend Kia who had become handicapped after the war (pages 108-112). Although his condition should have made him feel bad, he was still laughing and somehow enjoying his life. White and black as binary oppositions functions literally and metaphorically.

The two can represent other binary oppositions such as right and wrong, good and evil, positive and negative, and so on. Because it can be taken literally as well, it can serve as symbols for these other binary oppositions such as a dark sky meaning something ominous or a white dress on a woman to symbolize innocence. Satrapi was able to utilize both functions in her work, and she was able to strengthen the story that she was trying to tell through the ways that she used black and white to reflect and reinforce the events or the characters in her story. As a reader, the use of black and white by Satrapi conveyed a more critical impression for me and increased my appreciation of her work.