

Outer and Inner Space in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*: A Visual Representation Perspective

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Abstract

Written in 2003, Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets* manages to arouse readers' attention through its complex emotional background that entwines the protagonist's constant attempts to live a normal, happy life with his psychological instability, as well as his personal coming-of-age and first love with strict religious education and a detachment from his childhood memories. This paper, however, attempts to analyse the concepts of space and time from the point of view of visual representation. I argue that the artist succeeds in creating the idea of temporal development through constant flashbacks, and inner space representations in a graphic narrative that is retrospectively narrated; at the same time, I identify a series of artfully coined images that symbolise winter's purity and cleanliness which come to oppose the ugliness of the social context (unspoiled versus ravaged outer space) that traps the hero in an impossible universe that annihilates any outbursts of creativity, ingenuity and love.

Keywords: inner space, outer space, time, visual representation, emotional interpretation

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to revisit theoretical problems related to the concept of space, defining terms and applying them to Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets*. The study examines different facets of space, such as inner and outer space, proximal and distant space, factual and counterfactual space, as well as social space in order to underline their importance in shaping the identity and life trajectory of Craig Thompson's main protagonist. The current analysis registers and distinguishes different types of space representations, from physical space (family home, school, public space)

to social space (all the characters that influenced the hero's future evolution and character development) and inner space (the realm of the self, the only refuge one might take when the adversities of outer space become unbearable) in order to emphasize their role in influencing one's life and identity formation.

***Blankets*—Some General Considerations**

Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets* written in 2003 is a book that manages to linger in readers' minds long after they have read it, not because of the message or the painful and troubling experiences the artist goes through, not even because of the atmosphere of melancholy and solitude that seems to envelop the hero's life journey from the first to the last page, but due to a perfect mixture of words and images. It is a visual poem, as one can easily claim, a 'blanket' that covers the readers' artistic experience as they advance through the narrative. It is a real masterpiece of the genre, as far as *Time* magazine states, "a rarity: a first-love story so well remembered and honest that it reminds you what falling in love feels like. ... achingly beautiful" (Thompson, 2003, cover page). Jules Feiffer, Pulitzer Prize winner, manages to explain this perfect mixture of words and images in Craig Thompson's book: "his expert blending of words and pictures and resonant silences makes for a transcendent kind of story-telling that grabs you as you read it and stays with you after you put it down. I'd call that literature" (as cited in Thompson, 2003, cover page).

And indeed, this is the effect that great stories have on readers. This book can be interpreted in various ways. In terms of its content, it is a coming-of-age narrative that describes the constrictive and cold atmosphere of an extremely religious family in which no outbursts of happiness are allowed or accepted. Art is seen as something frivolous, not enjoyed by God and in total dissonance with the percepts of a religious life dedicated to the Almighty Creator. Love seems to be the only rescuing solution, but the two protagonists (Craig and Raina) are too dedicated to their problematic, dysfunctional families to be able to follow their dreams and desires. A short episode of pure love capable of erasing the ugliness of the main characters' life is enough to throw a short instance of hope into an ocean of despair.

However, the greatness of this work of art resides not in its content or the subject tackled but in its format. As a subgenre of graphic novels,¹ *Blankets* can be simply defined as a "book-length narrative utilizing sequential images and text" (Gardner, 2011, p. 374),

¹ Somnath Sarkar speaks about five main types of graphic novels, i.e. superhero stories, non-superhero stories, personal narratives, mangas and non-fiction. Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets* can be included in the category of personal narratives.

in other words, a long work of fiction in pictures which tells a complete story gathered between the covers of a book. According to Francisca Goldsmith (2010), a graphic narrative “presents itself through the combined forces of image and word” (p. 4). However, images are not mere “illustrations that simply repeat or amplify text, but rather carry information not revealed verbally” (Goldsmith, 2010, p. 4). Correspondingly, the verbal content “provides information not present in the image” (Goldsmith, 2010, p. 4). As Jared Gardner (2011) states, in graphic novels (graphic memoirs included) “image and text are always in an uneasy collaboration, sometimes even working at cross-purposes in terms of the narrative information they convey” (p. 375). Traditionally, in comic books, image and text are brought together within panels, but the author of *Blankets* chooses to distance himself from the normal, classic format of juxtaposed pictures displayed in a grid that is so defining for this genre, giving his personal twist to the format of the story. The book exhibits plenty of panels that change their shape; sometimes, there are no panels at all, being replaced by bleeds that offer the feeling of timelessness and eternity; there are flower patterns that surround the image of the two lovers, as if they were meant to create a sense of protection, a distinct universe; there are pages in which there are no words, so the feeling of silence and solitude is complete. There are white, pure pages emphasizing winter, the role of the snow blanket being that of covering the ugliness of the world around. And definitely, words could not have said it better than a blank page. The well-known adage ‘a picture is sometimes worth a thousand words’ is perfect in Thompson’s case.

Autobiography, Place, Identity Reconstruction

To clarify the terms, one should first start from the distinction between memoirs and autobiographies. Are they similar? For Rita Reali (2018), memoirs are actually a subset of autobiographies: “An autobiography is the story of the author’s life, while a memoir is a *sliver* of that life” (p. 48). According to the same author, there are three basic factors that distinguish memoirs from autobiographies. The first is the scope and progression of the work: autobiographies present an author’s entire life, while memoirs focus on a particular period in the author’s life—a specific time period or type of experience. The second factor contrasts documentation with dramatization. Autobiographies contain more documented facts and detailed information, whereas memoirs seem to focus on “underlying themes” or “emotional revelations.” The last element distinguishes between famous and ordinary people, with the former usually being the subject of autobiographies while the latter seem to predominate in memoirs.

Brooke Warner (2020) speaks about “voice” as an essential element of a memoir. It represents a mixture of writing style and message, an instance of self-expression, the memoirist’s need to be heard and seen: “Memoir can help with healing, providing the opportunity to reclaim a story, especially for writers who had no voice as children or who had parts of their lives stolen by abusers or perpetrators.” The same idea of healing, or “catharsis,” is echoed by Ian Williams (2011) in his article “Autography as Auto-Therapy: Psychic Pain and the Graphic Memoir” (p. 353). Because of the unique presentation of information in a graphic memoir compared to other forms of autobiography or memoir, “the autographic and non-propositional nature of the medium” lends itself to a very powerful narrative that creates “empathic bonds between the author and the reader” (p. 354).

Graphic memoirs, also known as graphic nonfiction, give voice to personal stories and ultimately reveal the truth about the world we live in, but they do so in a more complex way. What makes a graphic memoir special is the “double perspective” that represents “the voice of the experiential past and the now-more-knowledgeable voice of the present, the one who can synthesize experience for the reader into an alchemical mix of wisdom, teaching, and art” (Jones, 2018, p. 177). The graphic memoir thus creates two distinct voices of the narrator, which also interact with the unique effect of the graphic format, causing the reader to shift “back and forth between image, storytelling, and action” (p. 178).

As a graphic memoir, *Blankets* presents itself as an intimate story. It focuses on the author’s evangelical upbringing, his childhood and adolescence, sexual appeal and loss of faith in an orthodox Christian environment, in a small town in the American Midwest. From this point of view, the relationship between the autobiographic material in itself and the narrator’s spatial or geographic existence is of great importance. According to Gerri Reaves (2001), place or geography is not something neutral, discrete or invisible having no influence at all on someone’s life and identity formation. On the contrary,

one’s places [...] are undeniably components of both identity and the autobiographical text. [...] All writing, especially autobiography, involves placing the textual / in a physical context, whether real or invented. The intersection of place and identity is the obvious starting point for reconceiving the autobiographical subject. (p. 15)

What an autobiography/memoir offers is

the illusion of ideological certitude, a historical, verifiable narrative that coincides with or reinforces an image of a reality outside the text. The narrative is all the more seductive because it ‘really happened,’ the reader believes—how else could it be sold as autobiography? Thus, autobiography, as a subgenre of history, comforts the reader by offering illusory truth, both in terms of objective fact and in the promised profound understanding of a human being’s inner life. (Reaves, 2001, pp. 12–13)

Marc Brosseau (2017) emphasizes the same undeniable relationship that exists between space, author and narrator in the case of autobiographical writings, by stating that “autobiographies, more specifically in their novelistic forms (autobiographical novels, autofiction, etc.), maybe more so than other literary genres, provide opportunities to deepen our understanding of the dynamic links between place, narrative writing and author (or subject)” (p. 18). They are not only a “form in which to ‘write life’”; much more than this, they offer the possibility to “write oneself in place, or place oneself in writing” (Brosseau, 2017, p. 19).

However, the relationship between an individual and his or her lived space is not a simple one. By incorporating all the characteristics derived from the idea of belonging to a certain place, and being part of a certain social context, identity realizes a personal reconstruction of reality, this actually leading to the conclusion that human beings, in general, use and live in a personalized space. Ego-ecology, as the meeting point of psychology and sociology (Iacob, 2003) attempts to identify the way in which the objective reality is gradually becoming subjective, the accent being placed not on the dimensions, or on the dynamics of various social relationships, but on their perception and inner transformation. What matters is not necessarily the environment in which one is conditioned to live (this is not to claim that it is less important in the economy of an individual’s future personal and social development), but the way in which this reality is internalized, felt and perceived by each and every person apart. Everything seems to be filtered through the individual’s emotional experience.

In the case of a graphic narrative, the subjectivity expressed verbally is accompanied by its visual counterpart. Images are expected to contribute to the making of the story, not necessarily independently but in a “creative tension with it. [...] Whatever it represents and however it is made, an image is always capable of provoking a narrative response in the mind of the reader” (Baetens, 2008, p. 81). According to Mercedes Peñalba García (2015), “graphic narratives inscribe autobiographical experience, mediate identity, and ‘perform’ authenticity through visual and verbal combinations” (p. 157). However, they are not expected to provide a “mimetic representation of the world,” but rather an “interpretation of the events as they are subjectively perceived by the artist” (García, 2015, p. 159). The idea of “truth” and authenticity gains new valences in a graphic autobiography, the reality recreated through words being enhanced by the graphic representation of the same universe, the artist’s drawing style and iconic resemblance of the lived time and inhabited place offering new insights into the entire microcosm that is to be displayed in front of the readers:

In a medium where the textual self is represented visually, however, the notion of physical resemblance is an important signal of authenticity: the comics reader is likely to judge an author’s sincerity from his or her spoken words and actions, and seek further evidence of identity in the form of a visual equivalence. (García, 2015, p. 160)

The Graphic Representation of Time

No matter how important the idea of spatial or geographic existence is in shaping the identity of the narrator in the case of an autobiographic book, 'time' cannot be ignored, as the evolution and development of the protagonist happens in time, and the events to be narrated unfold likewise. However, the normal chronological flowing of events cannot be followed in Craig Thompson's book, as different flashbacks of important episodes in the protagonist's childhood are triggered by different objects or thoughts, this fact instilling a certain kind of temporal fluidity to the entire story. Memory is the one that dictates which events and experiences are to be activated, so as "the reverberation of one character's solitary experience within another solitary experience produces a kind of network of temporal experience" (Currie, 2007, p. 77).

The main character's instant moment of happiness triggered by his spending some time with his girlfriend Raina (the protagonists simply lying on the bed, in each other's arms—see Figures 1 and 2 below) offers the reader the possibility to become witness to one of the hero's childhood episodes in which he shared the bed with his brother: "So when I was a kid, and my brother and I shared a bed, We loved to pretend the bed was a boat, and the floor was endless stretches of ocean..." (Thompson, 2003, p. 406).



406

Figure 1

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 406



408

Figure 2

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 408

Another similar instance might be the one in which the narrator recalls an earlier memory of his abusive babysitter while going through the experience of being humiliated in class by his teacher for writing “an eight page poem about people eating ... excrement” (Thompson, 2003, pp. 27–28). “This is filth!” says the teacher, while the rest of the children laugh and make fun of him (see Figure 3), “I know your mother and she’s a good CHRISTIAN lady and she would be DISGUSTED with this. She would be disgusted with you” (Thompson, 2003, pp. 28–29).

Even if the narration moves then back to the English class and the events taking place there, Craig’s memory continues to dig up traumatic episodes in which he, as an elder brother, fails to protect his younger brother from the sexual abuses they were both subjected to (see Figure 4).



If only God could forgive me for all the times I pictured people eating their own excrement.



29

Figure 3

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 29



32

Figure 4

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 32

The very nature of a graphic medium makes it possible to “spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page” (Chute, 2008, p. 453). This structuring possibility produces a “tension between the chronology of events it describes and the anachronicity of their representation in the mind of a character, or the plot itself,” a certain kind of “dichotomy between clock time and mind time” (Currie, 2007, p. 92).

This visual technique offers the possibility of a graphic autobiographer to “capture the unique qualities of traumatic memory, which involves the intrusion of the past into the present in the form of repeated flashbacks, hallucinations, and dreams” (El Refaie, 2012, p. 129).

But can one speak about ‘traumatic memory’ in Craig Thompson’s graphic novel? In order to understand the background on which the author’s mind knits its episodes, one should first start from the idea of space, more precisely the lived space and the social relationships that worked together in order to shape the protagonist’s personal development and further reconstruction of reality.

Space as a Mark of Identity Creation

Julie O’Leary Green (2011) begins her discussion about ‘space’ by sketching the general picture of the evolution of the concept according to the interest it triggered among scholars in various fields. As such, she clearly distinguishes between the initial opinions (starting with Plato and Aristotle’s) which gave the term (i.e. space) a rather “ornamental” role,² and the subsequent evolution of the concept in time (from the 19th century onwards), which emphasized and strongly affirmed “the individual’s dependence on his or her environment” (p. 792). Taking into account Ruth Ronen’s criteria of spatial analysis (proximity and factuality), Green (2011) discriminates between proximal and distant spaces, the most immediate narrative space being the setting, “the place where characters in the narrative present interact and where the story-events take place” (p. 793). The setting in *Blankets* is the poor rural Wisconsin where Craig, the main protagonist of the novel and his brother, Phil, are brought up in a fundamentalist Christian family with an evangelical mother and an emotionally abusive father whose authority the boys are not allowed to question. Additionally, there is also a school environment full of bullies and teachers that do not accept any outbursts of creativity or interests that might diverge from the normal religious precepts that teach obedience and worship of God. Last, but not least, there is also a sexually abusive babysitter that Craig, as a child, could not confront and oppose and from whom he obviously did not manage to protect his younger brother.

One can also speak of secondary spaces, or “spaces near characters in the narrative present and accessible to them via their senses” (Green, 2011, p. 793), in other words, what they can hear, smell, or see in their proximity, while not being exactly in that place. These spaces can be easily identified throughout the novel and they contribute to the creation of the setting and the evolution of the events in the narrative. Imagine the two brothers,

² Any mention or relation to the concept of “space” in a narrative was considered unnecessary.

Craig and Phil, having the possibility of sleeping in different rooms for the first time after sharing the same bed for too long. They tried to listen to and imagine what was going on in each other's room by deciphering the silence and initiating short stretches of conversation (see Figures 5 and 6): "Phil? Can you hear me? Yeah? Oh, I was just wondering. How's your new bed? It's great. Good. This bed's nice and spacious. So? I mean there's just a lot of room. It's not TOO spacious, is it?" (Thompson, 2003, p. 454).



Figure 5

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 453



Figure 6

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 454

There are also the fictional or imagined spaces that might be either nearby (but inaccessible for the moment to the characters in the narrative present) or geographically or temporally distant, which due to the evolution of events in the narrative might become available. The inaccessibility in such cases is just provisional; there is always a possibility for them to become factual, the result being a "complete reorganization of the household and all of the relationships therein" (Green, 20011, p. 794), as they become physically attainable. Such an example might be Raina's home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and her family, which includes two adopted mentally disabled siblings, Ben and Laura, Raina's older biological sister Julie and her parents who are undergoing a divorce. This new space, which seems safer and more protective for Craig, in comparison with his own household, becomes the new setting of the narrative the moment the hero decides to visit his girlfriend.

Even if it is far from being the perfect place to be in, this potential home in which Craig spends two weeks represents a change of perspective, a breath of fresh air that helps him see life with different eyes.

In terms of the factuality of space (Green, 2011), the distinction is made between factual and counterfactual spaces. If the former can be all the above mentioned instances, the nonfactual or hypothetical universes are just present in the minds of the characters, tentative desires, imaginary, escapist fantasies that might provide shelter from the harsh surrounding reality (see Figures 7 and 8).

Every night I would scheme of running away. I'd go through the motions: sneaking some snacks from the kitchen cupboard, stuffing my backpack with clothes, and feigning a casual interest in geography as I consulted my parents' atlas. But even then, I knew I was powerless to enact such a maneuver, that the REAL WORLD could only deliver new threats. (Thompson, 2003, pp. 39–40)

Figure 7

Source: Thompson, C., *Blankets*, p. 39.



39

Figure 8

Source: Thompson, C., *Blankets*, p. 40.



40

There is also another way, another means through which the main protagonist managed to find comfort and protection against all evils, to find a way to get rid of the cold, threatening environment he was supposed to face each day of his childhood and teenage life. Drawing offered him the way out (see Figure 9):

My other get-away car was DRAWING, where my brother accompanied me at the wheel. He didn't share my ESCAPIST approach it seemed, but drew as a means of spending time with me, of CONNECTING with me. And INDEED when we drew together, often collaborating on the same page, I felt connected to Phil. An ENTIRE DAY would be consumed by drawing, interspersed with fits of running around outside expending our energy. These were the only WAKEFUL moments of my childhood that I can recall feeling life was sacred or worthwhile. (Thompson, 2003, p. 44)



Figure 9

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 44

In order to underline the importance of 'space' and the way it managed to find its way across the social sciences and humanities during the last 20 years or so, Nigel Thrift (2006) identifies four principles that Julie Mehretu, the Ethiopian–American artist uses in her analysis and interpretation of the concept, two of them being essential for what this paper attempts to demonstrate, i.e. the importance of an individual's social and cultural environment in his/her future development, identity formation and subsequent recreation of reality. The first principle states that

everything, but everything, is spatially distributed, down to the smallest monad: since the invention of the microscope, at least, even the head of a pin has been seen to have its own geography. Every space is shot through with other spaces in ways that are not just consequential outcomes of some other quality but live because they have that distribution. (Thrift, 2006, p. 140)

What this principle asserts is the idea that people cannot be separated from the spaces they inhabit. The reference here should be made not only to the physical, geographical space, but also to the people one can get into contact with while being part of a certain community or social environment, as these exert a great influence on the individuals' evolution in time, the way the latter address or relate to those around them. When Craig first meets Raina's father, the latter tries to explain to him what makes people living in those cold regions different from others.

Have you ever been to the U.P. before? Say "YAH" to the U.P., eh? They claim that the FOUR SEASONS in the Upper Peninsula are early winter, mid-winter, late winter, and NEXT winter.—HA! In fact, Marquette is the snowiest small city of the 48 states with something like 300 inches a season. You know... people that live outside the Midwest say we must be crazy to live in the snow and cold, but I think we gain a lot by ENDURING these winters. We experience a discomfort that may be foreign to others, but that pain opens up a world of beauty. (Thompson, 2003, pp. 175–176)

The second principle that Thrift (2006) focuses on states that 'space' can never be considered static or stable, being in constant motion. And this is true, again, in Thompson's graphic narrative. Nothing stays the same, the spaces people inhabit influence the residents and, following the same principle, the individuals act upon the places they belong to or are part of and subsequently subject them to a series of changes. Time plays its part in this game of forces that act upon and react against one another. Craig Thompson, the author of *Blankets* introduces the reader to his life's journey by presenting the two brothers, Phil and Craig, sleeping in the same bed. The very first pages of the book tell us that they are young and not happy about the circumstances of actually sleeping together.

As Craig states, “Shared is a sugar-coated way of saying we were trapped in the same bed, as we were children and had no say in the matter” (Thompson, 2003, p. 10). Even if the situation seems to be innocent, the boys continue living in this way until their parents decide to offer them a little bit of comfort and get them another bed and create a second bedroom. “We rearranged the playroom, Phil, so that you can have your very own bedroom” (Thompson, 2003, p. 451). Nevertheless, despite their parents’ effort, Craig and Phil miss their closure and find excuses to come back together. “If you are scared, you can sleep with me” (Thompson, 2003, p. 455). What this episode best exemplifies is the fact that not only spaces change to accommodate the new realities (boys becoming older and needing more space), but also people’s reactions and attitudes modify in various ways, sometimes expectedly, sometimes unexpectedly (instead of being satisfied with this new arrangement, the boys reject the change and remain somehow connected in a strange and unusual way).

According to Tim Cresswell (2004), ‘space’ seems to be an abstract concept, a “realm without meaning—as a ‘fact of life’ which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life” (p. 10). This abstract, lifeless concept becomes alive the moment human beings endow it with meaning, or as soon as they become attached to it in some way. That is the moment when space becomes ‘place.’ The human component is thus the one that matters and brings about a change of perspective. Adopting Yi-Fu Tuan’s view of space, Jivén and Larkham (2003) state relatively the same idea; space, as far as they are concerned, represents “the embodiment of feelings, images and thoughts of those who live, work or otherwise deal with that space” (p. 70). This view finds its correspondent in Lefebvre’s ‘social space’ that is the result or the product of social relations or interactions, incorporating

the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act. From the point of view of these subjects, the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions. (Lefebvre, 1905/1991, pp. 33–34)

A derivative concept worth mentioning in relation to the larger category of space is what Cresswell (2004) calls a “sense of place” (p. 8) or what it is like to be in a certain location, to inhabit a specific place. The concept seems to possess a certain amount of ambiguity, the opinions of those that attempted to define it and circumscribe its limits oscillating between “objective property and subjective experience” (Alexander, 2017, p. 41). In this sense, scholars define it as either a quality of the place itself, or an attribute of human beings that display a certain sensibility in relation to a certain environment that exerts an influence on them. As a consequence, where we come from, the places we currently inhabit and even our future destinations are important for who we are, for our identities. We are shaped or defined by our ‘places.’

In Craig Thompson's memoir, the place he grew up in marked his development as a social being and his relationships with those around him. Brought up in a dysfunctional family in which the mother had little to say and the father was portrayed as an intimidating, aggressive man, always shouting at the children, Craig begins his life journey as a troubled, insecure boy. Throughout the novel, Craig's recollections of his sad childhood revolve around his guilty consciousness, the result of him being unable to protect his younger brother and to be a better friend and confidant. Instead of helping, encouraging and supporting Phil, Craig paints his future in dark colours, his decision to do that being the very result of him having been constantly humiliated at school for his appearance (i.e. too skinny) and also for being of Spanish origin. He seems to have endured harsh moments on a regular basis, being verbally and physically abused by almost everyone. As a consequence, he projects the bleak atmosphere of the environment that shaped his childhood onto his brother:

I was a pathetic older brother. I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations. At other times, when Phil needed a play-companion, I demanded to be left alone. But perhaps, worst of all, I'd constantly threaten him with my discouraging discoveries of the "real world," as if my three years of seniority made me an expert. You just wait until you get to THIRD grade. Then you'll have HOMEWORK, and you won't have any friends at school... ..In fact, you'll probably get BEAT UP every day. (Thompson, 2003, p. 18–19)

Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994) was the first to introduce the concept of 'lived space' (i.e. 'espace vécu' [1958]) and to relate it to the architecture of the house, which, in the French philosopher's opinion, had positive connotations, being "our corner of the world," "our first universe" (p. 4). In his opinion, "memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home" (1958/1994, p. 6). Nevertheless, in Craig Thompson's case the reality is reversed. The parental home is no longer perceived as a securing environment, as a felicitous, intimate space, but a rather threatening universe. It is the place where the parents play no protective role and the babysitter, instead of taking care of the boys, sexually abuses them. As Klooster and Heirman (2013) state,

differences between inner and outer space, for instance, are no longer considered universal, but culturally dependent: in some cases the house can become a hostile and fearsome space, for example in the case of incest, while the public space can be experienced in terms of freedom and liberation. (p. 5)

In *Blankets*, the public space is also threatening; Craig's school experience is equally terrifying as it becomes synonymous with the place where the main character is constantly bullied. "As a child, I thought that life was the most horrible world anyone could

ever live in, and that there HAD to be something better" (Thompson, 2003, p. 38). Religion is of paramount importance for Craig's family and, apparently, for the whole community he belongs to. His family is extremely pious, the Bible playing an essential part in the main hero's life, the boy being raised to believe that it (i.e. the Bible) represented the word of God and he had no other option but to obey it. In comparison with the misery of human life that was transient and painful, heaven was depicted as a perfect painless and eternal universe, the poor, wretched child longing for that peaceful and tranquil space (see Figures 10 and 11): "At that moment, I knew what I wanted... I wanted Heaven. And I grew up STRIVING for that world--an ETERNAL world--that would wash away my TEMPORARY misery" (Thompson, 2003, pp. 51-52).



Figure 10

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 51



Figure 11

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets,
p. 52

No outbursts of creativity are accepted by the strict, religious context that was meant to shape the hero's first formative years. As he attempts to escape from his caged, constrictive life through drawing and dreaming, he is criticized by one of the teachers when she finds out that he wants to spend eternity in heaven drawing "I mean, 'come on, Craig,' how would you praise God with DRAWINGS? [...] But, Craig... He's already drawn it for us" (Thompson, 2003, pp. 137-138).

The experience of the church camp was similar to that in school, Craig remaining the same shy boy who did not manage to fit into the scenery. He is the prototype of the other, the odd one out who can hardly find common grounds with anyone. In comparison with the great majority of those who used to attend those gatherings, teenagers interested in having fun and initiating the first sexual experiences of their lives, while slyly pretending to worship God and dedicate their lives to the moral standards preached by their counselors, Craig performed the duty of attending those religious camp gatherings without any enthusiasm and definitely unwilling to take part in any of the activities proposed. It is, however, in one of these camps that he meets Raina, a beautiful 17-year-old girl from Michigan. The two protagonists' dramatic love story moves the centre of attention to Raina's place, as Craig decides to visit her and spend some time in her family. The reality Craig has to face in his girlfriend's house is still problematic as Raina's existential problems are not different from his. Her parents are on the point of getting divorced and the heroine is the one supposed to take care of her two brothers suffering from Down's syndrome and sometimes to be the babysitter of her young niece, Sarah. However, through Raina's recollections, we find out that her childhood, as opposed to Craig's, was a happy one, a safe, loving environment. She's portrayed as a contented little girl who was able to undertake the role of her brother's guardian in school, protecting him from the attacks of bullies, something that Craig had failed to do.

The happiness of the two lovers does not last long; Raina's problems at home prevent her from fully dedicating herself to their love story, so she puts an end to their relationship. Craig is heartbroken and tries to find strength in God but he ends up questioning his religion. However, he manages to move house and consequently makes efforts to sever his ties with his previous life. Unfortunately, his attempts to fully separate from a past that defined him and guided his steps in life are only tentative, the hero being unable to get rid of his childhood traumas (see Figure 12):

Strange how UNCOMFORTABLE these places can be despite all the time and distance.
I'll never have to relive third grade recess, So why does this give me the shivers?
It's only kids playing. Likewise, my parents can no longer control my curfew or ground
me in the corner, yet I feel so vulnerable around them. (Thompson, 2003, p. 559)

Figure 12

Source: Thompson, C., *Blankets*, p. 559



Figure 13

Source: Thompson, C., *Blankets*, p. 246



The only spatial freedom or liberation in Craig and Raina's case is the one brought about by nature. The sole moments of happiness that the boy experienced as a child were the ones spent outside with his brother, playing in the snow and competing against each other while trying to balance on top of thin layers of ice that normally form in winter, on partially melted snow. With Raina, they had their moments of happiness when lying next to each other in snow, the shapes of their bodies creating imaginary angels that sharply contrasted with the ugliness of Craig's childhood memories or the painful reality of Raina's broken family (see Figure 13). The visual aspect that the reader is provided with in a graphic narrative helps the author of this book create a perfect emotionally charged description of a landscape that manages to erase and cover the bleak atmosphere of the main characters' social space.

Silence plays an essential role towards the end of the book, being beautifully rendered through a series of wordless panels (see Figures 14, 15 and 16). The reader is thus invited to walk alongside the narrator/author in order to decipher the hidden meaning of the images.

Figure 14

Source: Thompson, C., *Blankets*, p. 578



578

Silence represents tranquility, peacefulness, a return to a state of well-being. Silence opposes the misery and cruelty of the social space that surrounds the protagonist to the unspoiled grandeur of icy winter scenery. The beauty of the deserted nature finds its counterpart in the hero's imaginary, escapist journeys that he takes or seeks refuge into in order to counterbalance the ugliness of the physical and social space that controls and conditions his life. Silence can be related to the protagonist's inner space, his unspoken fears, doubts and thought, his repressed feelings and anxieties.

The dark footsteps engraved on the white blanket of snow show the movement of the hero. He walks slowly at the beginning, looking around, somehow fixing the surroundings in his mind and then starts running.



579

Figure 15

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets, p. 579



580

Figure 16

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets, p. 580

If one might attempt to decode the hidden meaning of the images above, he should probably relate the implied message to the main character's tentative acknowledgement of the importance of living his life in the present, of uttering his worries, dissatisfaction and angst, of speaking up. He seems to enjoy the surroundings, ignoring the freezing atmosphere of a winter night. The last image can suggest his struggle to get rid of his old being, while the leap might symbolize a step forward, his distancing from a world full of prejudices and obedience. The possibility of losing himself on the way could also be symbolically rendered by the discontinuation of his footprints. Nevertheless, the last pages seem to bring old Craig in front of the reader once again by portraying the same indecisive young adult incapable of getting over his beliefs (see Figures 17 and 18): "How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface. To make a map of my movement—no matter how temporary" (Thompson, 2003, pp. 581–582).



Figure 17

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets, p. 581



581



582

Figure 18

Source:
Thompson, C.,
Blankets, p. 582

He is still the same insecure boy who balances or rather opposes the evanescent character of human life to the eternal heaven promised to all worthy Christians by the holy book. Yet, the open ending of the narrative offers readers the possibility to envisage different scenarios for the main character. One might only hope that he will finally find the necessary resources to get rid of that ravaged social space that trapped him throughout his childhood and young adult life.

Conclusion

What this paper has tried to demonstrate was the fact that people and places cannot be separated when talking about identity creation and development. People are who they are just because they belong to a certain place and that place influences them in various ways, either positively or negatively. The relationships individuals develop with other fellow beings are dictated by the environments that shaped their personalities/identities. One cannot escape his original place in this world, but can attempt to shape his or her future location.

Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets* seems to demonstrate the aforementioned hypotheses. Growing up in a small town in the American Midwest in a strictly religious family that worships God to the point of fanaticism, being sexually abused by a male babysitter and terrorized by an abusive father, and constantly bullied at school, Craig finds refuge in drawing and his nighttime dreams. The physical and social environment in which the hero is forced to live shapes his future development and influences his subsequent life decisions. Despite the fact that the premises on which his young adult's life is based are not ideal, he manages to move away from home and make a life for himself; he even appears to come to terms with his spirituality, becoming an independent young man. Nonetheless, the journey he embarks on is harsh and difficult, serving as a constant reminder of the impact one's environment has on each and every individual.

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