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Manga: Just Japanese Comic Books?

The first manga I bought was *Hellsing, Vol. 1*, which was a new experience for me. I picked up the book after taking it home, and the first thing I noticed was that the front cover had nothing but the title at the top and a paragraph of text about the book, along with the bar code and ISBN number. I shrugged and opened the cover to find a blaring message saying, "Stop! This is the back of the book!" I continued reading to find that the manga had been translated into English but the visuals had been left in their original formats. This meant that I would read it in English, but I had to read it from right to left and top to bottom, starting from the back of the book. Reading this manga was disorienting at first, but now that I have gotten used to it, I have trouble reading American comics without getting confused.

The English translation of the Japanese word *manga* is "comic." *Manga*, however, has a much deeper meaning when compared to standard American comic books. Mangas are typically sold in book form with around two hundred pages to a book. These books are usually one hundred to three hundred pages long, and a manga's story can take up anywhere from ten to thirty books. Furthermore, each volume is usually just one piece of the main story, unlike comics, in which the series can contain many subplots with many issues straying from the main storyline. Also, manga is drawn in the same fashion as Japanese anime, which is completely different from American cartoons and comics.

Another popular word that most people think of when they hear the word *manga* is

anime, and some people don't even know the difference between the two. *Anime* is the term for how the Japanese draw their animated shows. Manga is drawn in the same way that anime is, except for the obvious difference of manga having only still images. The look of anime is quite different from the American comic books, with the general difference being that anime isn't really meant to be realistic-looking. Most American comic book artists attempt to create living characters by giving their two-dimensional figures three-dimensional characteristics. Such devices as shadows and lighting are used extensively to accentuate their characters. In manga, however, most of the three-dimensional characteristics of its characters come from the level of detail in the characters' bodies, but most importantly, the three-dimensional aspects are seen in their facial expressions and stances. Also, mangas usually stick to the multiple-boxes-to-one-page idea, only occasionally having the full-page drawing to support a particular idea. In today's American comic books, the drawings rarely stay within their own boxes and must seem very chaotic to someone who has read only manga and is used to the uniformity of its structure.

Mangas generally have very deep and intricate storylines, which span upwards of ten to thirty volumes in one central storyline. Interestingly enough, the storylines to these mangas are often completely planned before the drawing begins. This is very unlike American comic books, as their storylines are usually created slowly as each edition is published. This lets the creation of the manga's book form be based completely on design, artwork, and layout, instead of where the creators want the storyline to go. For example, in *Hellsing*, a vampire who goes by the name Alucard works for an organization named Hellsing, killing ghouls and other lesser undead as his master wills it. This particular manga is very violent and bloody, but it focuses more on the cool factor of the morbidity rather than the violent bloodiness of it. The main characters of action mangas are usually people with immensely powerful abilities, high above the people around

them. A good example of this is Alucard, who is always challenging enemy vampires to “call out their inner demons” and have a real battle with him. This is a prime example of how action mangas typically focus on a collection of powerful people and the drama that is created when they feel like hitting each other.

After having read many mangas and comic books, I can say that there are some important similarities. Both are written and drawn by complete devotees to their series. Manga may have deeper storylines and characters, but both are written with the same amount of compassion and complexity. I, however, am not devoted to just one form of graphic novel, but to both. I find intelligent ideas and inspirations in both manga and comic books, and both are equally entertaining to read. I hope that some day I will have an extensive library of manga so that my understanding of its background will be more complete and so that I will have many great stories if the power goes out and I need something to read.