

The Art of Violence: Artistic Representations of Violence in *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond*

As a form of media that combines visual art and language, manga is dependent upon the relationship created by this combination. The depth of this relationship differs from manga to manga, but its importance remains the same across the board. As a result, artists and writers have to work closely with one another to produce comics that combine these two elements into a cohesive and effective whole. In spite of the collaborative nature of manga production, some readers have questioned the importance of the artistic aspect. For readers without a background in art, an understanding of the influence of stylistic elements on the overall appeal and impact of a manga can be difficult to achieve. Thus a comparative study conducted between *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond* can be used to illustrate the importance of artistic style to the construction of a comic's plot-line.

The examples of *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond* are ideal in light of questions concerning the role of stylistic representation in manga. The plot-lines of the two stories are vaguely similar; both manga are structured around the adventures of renegade samurai who engage in multiple fights throughout the course of each story. As a result of the numerous depictions of violence that occur in these manga, analyses of the violent scenes alone can offer an understanding of the similarities and differences created through stylistic visual trends. Even though the plots of *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond* have similarities, the artistic styles used by the artists responsible for these manga are very different and they augment and emphasize certain aspects of each story-line.

Lone Wolf and Cub was first published in Japan in 1970. Since its release, the manga has gained a wide fan base both in Japan and abroad. Its popularity is due to the engaging plot established by writer Goseki Kojima, and to the stunning visuals created by artist Kazuo Koike. The story follows the events that occur in the life of Ogami Itto: the Shogun's executioner. After his wife is murdered by

the leader of a rival clan, the murderers frame Ogami for dissent and conspiracy against the Shogun. Swearing revenge, he takes to the road with his infant son Daigoro. Together, the two embark on “The Road to Meifumado,” or the metaphorical road of vengeance. They form an assassination team and eventually exact revenge on the murderer of their wife and mother. The intensity and frequency of battle scenes in this manga are key elements of its construction; in this way, it is very similar to *Vagabond*.

Vagabond, like *Lone Wolf and Cub*, follows the life of a renegade samurai. This manga, which is both written and drawn by Takehiko Inoue, is loosely based on the life of the legendary Japanese samurai Miyamoto Musashi. The story follows Musashi's progression from an enraged and violent youth, known as Shinmen Takezo, to the calmly centered and exquisitely skilled samurai who was famous throughout Japan during the Tokugawa period. The main character's driving inspiration, in the early volumes of the manga, is to fight and kill other warriors. In this way, he expects to learn from their techniques and to further develop his own fighting prowess. Thus, as in *Lone Wolf and Cub*, the majority of action scenes in this manga depict extreme violence. Another similarity between these two stories is that they are both set (approximately) during the Tokugawa period.

The similarities between *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond*, in both plot and action, make these manga ideal for comparison and subsequent analysis. Both manga are extremely violent, and the battles scenes in each are roughly equivalent. Nonetheless, the violent scenes in each manga offer very different tones and impressions. This is due to the difference in visual representations of violence in each manga. Koike and Inoue use very different visual stylistic techniques. As a result, two manga that could have ended up as very similar works, maintain their individuality and offer different effects and impressions to their readers.

The violent scenes in *Lone Wolf and Cub* create an overwhelming impression of the frenzy and confusion of battle. Koike utilizes stylistic techniques that create a cohesive environment across entire

pages of the manga. These scenes are not meant to be read as individual panels, but rather, they are supposed to impact the reader simultaneously, so as to create an instantaneous impression of the action occurring. *Vagabond* on the other hand, establishes a clear progression that travels from panel to panel. This results in a visually comprehensible artistic style which, in turn, allows for a focus on the individual characters within the manga. Inoue increases this emphasis through his juxtaposition of close-ups of the character's facial expressions and eyes, with panels depicting removed views of violent fight scenes. This technique allows the reader to identify with the emotional experiences of the characters.

Vagabond's fight scenes are much more focused on the personal, internal struggles of the individual characters, while *Lone Wolf and Cub* presents Ogami as a force of nature that sweeps across entire environments and leaves destruction and ruin in his wake. *Lone Wolf and Cub* focuses on the establishment of a sensory experience of the entire scene, rather than a personal communication between the viewer and the main characters. In *Lone Wolf and Cub*, the viewer is supposed to experience the action from an external viewpoint, while *Vagabond* allows the viewer into the characters' heads. These effects are achieved primarily through the use of stylistic conventions that serve to either distance the viewer from identification with the characters or to increase the viewer's perception of proximity.

The main devices used by Koike and Inoue can be grouped into two sections: compositional elements and treatments of the visual surfaces. These categories encapsulate both artists' visual methodologies, and they present a further understanding of the artistic processes used in visual representation. Koike and Inoue used very different methods in each arena and the differences in their presentation affect the entire body of each manga.

In *Lone Wolf and Cub* Koike utilized compositional elements that serve to unify the action occurring across the pages. He interspersed long panels that occupy two pages, with a series of short,

disjointed images in smaller panels [fig. 1]. These smaller panels do not display any clear progression. If they were rearranged on the page they would have the same effect. The long panels serve to situate the viewer within the action, while the short panels function as visual “punches” that hit the viewer's eyes and force them to experience the fight scene as a cohesive whole rather than as an easily measured progression from image to image. Although this type of composition is slightly confusing on a visual level, the sense of chaos and speed it imparts is vital to the progression of the story and to the establishment of the characters. It is Ogami's carelessness and effortlessness in battle that define his character and the visual compositional elements used by Koike reinforce that perception.

Koike also has a tendency to superimpose the image of Ogami's body across several panels. Again, this serves to unify the panels on the page and it offers a complete environment to the viewer. Additionally, the angle of sight from which the viewer perceives the action remains fairly uniform throughout each scene. This angle tends to be eye-level and this also serves as a situating device that places the viewer directly into the continuous and instantaneous environment created by the panel construction and the other unifying elements employed by Koike throughout the manga.

Vagabond, unlike *Lone Wolf and Cub*, reveals less of a concern with the sensory impact of the violent action occurring within each scene. Instead, Inoue aims to create images that are psychologically engaging and that allow the viewer to identify with the emotional and mental processes of each character. This is achieved by interspersing close visuals of the characters' faces, and especially their eyes, with removed scenes of the battles and the physical action taking place [fig. 2]. By emphasizing their facial expressions and highlighting their eyes, Inoue invites the viewer to share in the emotional and mental struggles experienced by each character.

Additionally, the battle scenes in *Vagabond* are longer than those in *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Where Koike attempts to deliver a swift visual kick, Inoue draws the scenes out across several pages. This simulates the length of actual battle and allows the viewer to agonize with the characters over the

outcome of each fight. Inoue's pages also contain fewer panels than Koike's. Not only does this mean that the panels themselves are larger and more easy to follow, but it also emphasizes the structured way in which the viewer is meant to perceive the action. Where Koike offers a confusing mass of images that combine to simulate the roiling action that takes place on a battlefield, Inoue focuses on the clear progression of action established and experienced by each character. He also offers camera angles that vary widely from panel to panel; one image will be shown from a birds-eye view, and the next from eye-level. This differentiation in view-angles keeps the art engaging and visually stimulating. The clear progression, which might otherwise have become boring, is saved from predictability by the changes in view-angle.

Compositional elements combine to instruct the viewer's interpretation of the visual function of each manga, but the artists' treatments of the surfaces of their drawings are also important factors that inform the impact of the art. Here again, Koike and Inoue differ dramatically from one another. Koike uses traditional hatching methods with little tonal variation, while Inoue experiments with different tonal elements and other interesting patterns to create depth in his drawings.

Koike's use of hatching – a parallel line drawing technique – is especially prevalent in his depictions of battle scenes. Koike is known for his use of traditional rendering techniques; he uses an ink brush as well as pens to achieve the flowing visual effects evident in many of his panels. However, the disorganized yet compelling battle scenes created by Koike are enhanced by his use of heavy hatching rather than ink lines. In place of the flowing visuals achieved in many of his other scenes, Koike's hatching lines establish rough visual elements and unify the action occurring across each page depicting violence. These lines also serve to emphasize the abrupt sense of motion and chaos achieved by Koike's compositions. These lines establish Ogami as separate from the other characters. In fight scenes, the strong hatching lines generally radiate from Ogami's body alone [fig. 3]. Thus, they portray the speed at which he is moving, but the lines also visually differentiate Ogami from the other

characters by establishing him as the progenitor of the action and movement within each scene.

Inoue's art in *Vagabond* also makes use of hatching lines. The hatching in *Vagabond* is used primarily to connote speed and movement, but Inoue's art is not nearly as heavily rendered as the scenes in *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Instead, Inoue appears to prefer using tonal variations to achieve effects of depth. His characters have heavily shaded eyes and faces, and they sometimes wear patterned clothing that is achieved through digital imaging [fig. 4]. This tonal emphasis serves to focus the viewer's eye on the faces of the characters, rather than solely on the physical motions enacted by their bodies. Inoue's artistic style is more delicate than that employed by Koike and, as a result, it focuses the eye on different parts of the action occurring within each panel. Furthermore, Inoue plays with line variation in the outlines of his drawings. His rendering of the characters often displays deliberately thickened or thinned outlines. Varying line thickness is a classic technique used by artists to trick the eye. When a line is thicker in some spots and thinner (or absent) in others, the eye sees movement and 3 dimensionality. Thus, in places where a line is thicker and more definite, the eye perceives that section of the drawing as advancing out of the picture plane. A section of the line that is thinner retreats back into the picture plane and is perceived as further away and less concrete. In places where Inoue wants to convey a sense of motion, he often abandons outlines completely. He substitutes parallel hatching marks that trick the eye into seeing speed and movement.

Koike and Inoue both utilize styles of representation that convey effects in keeping with the plot-lines of their separate manga. Where Koike is more concerned with establishing the mystery of his characters through an emphasis on their fighting prowess rather than their inner monologues, Inoue's art strives to reveal the inner workings of the minds of his characters. Each manga employs a different method in its temptation of the viewer. *Lone Wolf and Cub* entices the viewer with heavy and dramatic battle scenes that establish a cohesive perception of the world of feudal Tokugawa Japan, while *Vagabond* focuses on the viewer's relationship with the characters in the story and emphasizes

the humanity of these characters through visual representations that emphasize the psychological make-up of each figure. The different goal of each manga is apparent in the character designs created by Koike and Inoue. The artists created characters that would further the plots of the stories, and this is reflected in the visual representations of the figures.

The main characters of *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond* are Ogami Itto and Shinmen Takezo. These characters possess very different motivating factors and the art in each manga reveals these differences. The plot of *Lone Wolf and Cub* centers around Ogami's quest for revenge. However, when the reader is introduced to Ogami in the first volume of the manga, he is a firmly established character. His personality has been formed and cemented by the tragedy he suffers before the reader encounters him. In fact, the manga portrays Ogami as almost inhuman. He is so consumed by his desire for revenge that all the soft personality traits that endear characters to readers are absent from his psychological make-up. If anything, the artistic emphasis is on Ogami's *lack* of normal human emotion. This absence makes the manga more compelling because the reader is constantly searching for some betrayal of feeling. Occasionally, Ogami's attitude towards his son Daigoro reveals a tenderness that is otherwise missing from the character, but for the most part, Ogami is stoic to the point of complete detachment.

The visual design of the character of Ogami corroborates the literary portrayal of the character's lack of human emotion. The eyes of the character are small and hidden beneath thick, dark eyebrows. Additionally, the mouth is a mere inexpressive combination of two horizontal lines and the nose is drawn as a aquiline hook. Although this face has the potential to convey emotion, it never does. Throughout the manga Ogami remains impassive. The only time his facial expression reveals any animation is when he is fighting, and in those cases the emotion expressed is mere unwavering triumph. The design of the character, with its small, inexpressive eyes and heavy brows, is not conducive to visual displays of extreme emotion. Thus, the emphasis on the environment of the manga

and on the large-scale battle scenes is reinforced by a lack of emphasis on the emotional processes of the main character.

Vagabond's main character, Takezo, is drawn in an almost opposite style. The plot of this story centers around Takezo's transformation from a violent and cold-hearted youth into the legendary "sword-saint" Miyamoto Musashi. This attainment of enlightenment is enacted by his violent early years and by the emotional impact these years have on his psychological formation. Inoue draws the character of Takezo in such a way as to emphasize the emotional aspects of the figure. Takezo has large, slanted eyes with thick eyelashes that serve to emphasize them. His eyebrows are narrow and arching and his lips are full enough to be expressive. The design of the character of Takezo emphasizes his emotional development throughout the manga. During battle scenes, Inoue emphasizes Takezo's facial expressions and thus, is able to portray not only the joy he receives from fighting but also the momentary flashes of panic, satisfaction, and fear that the character experiences during the course of a fight. This allows the viewer to identify with the character of Takezo and to be drawn into the action as a result of this identification.

Although the plots of *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Vagabond* have a number of similarities, the central themes that each manga address are different. This difference is highlighted by the artistic styles utilized by each artist. Koike and Inoue articulate the important themes of their respective manga through clever design and visual elements. The differences between these manga illustrate the importance of artistic representation to the formation of manga. It is not story alone that drives the development of a manga's plot, and without good use of the artistic element, the expressive ability of manga decreases. In *Lone Wolf and Cub* the art highlights the inaccessibility of the main character and establishes a cohesive environment within scenes of violence that elicits a visceral reaction from the viewer. *Vagabond* on the other hand, displays art that emphasizes the emotional and psychological formation of the main characters. This manga is character-driven and the art augments the story's

emphasis on emotion. This is illustrated by the violent scenes in which the art allows the viewer to identify with the characters' emotions and reactions. These examples show that art is an integral part of the formation of manga. Not only does it illustrate the story-lines of manga, but it also serves to further plot developments through the use of stylistic conventions.

Bibliography

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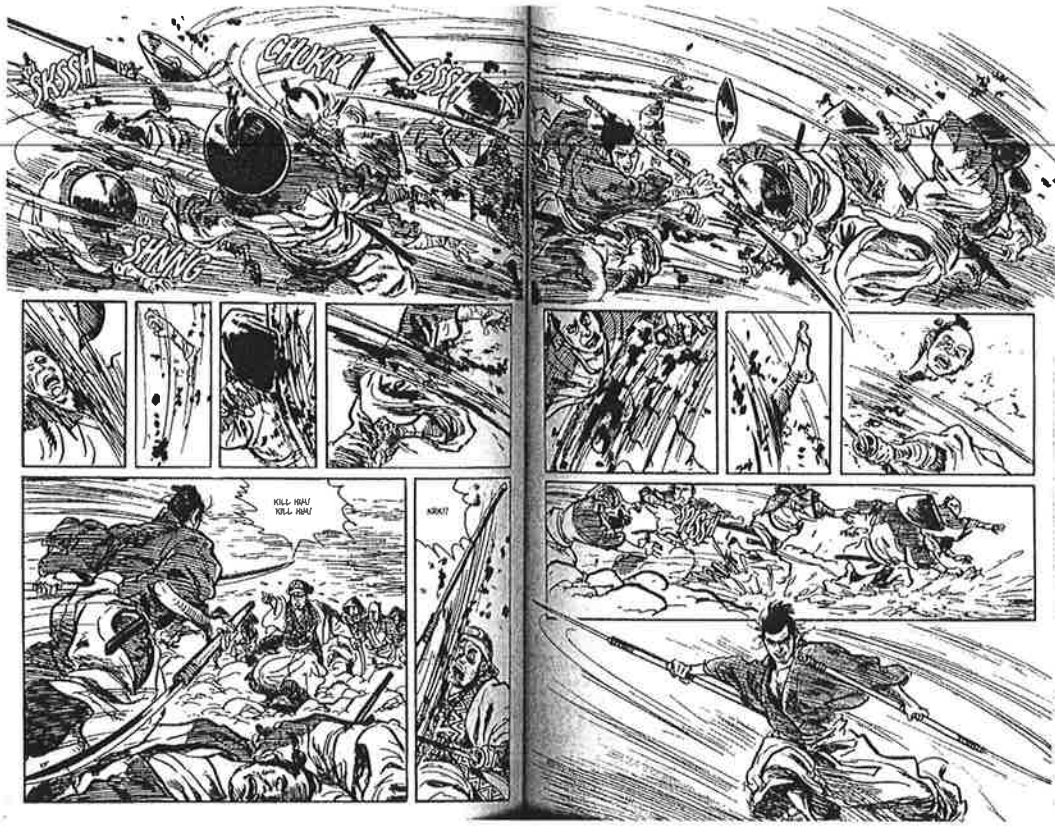


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

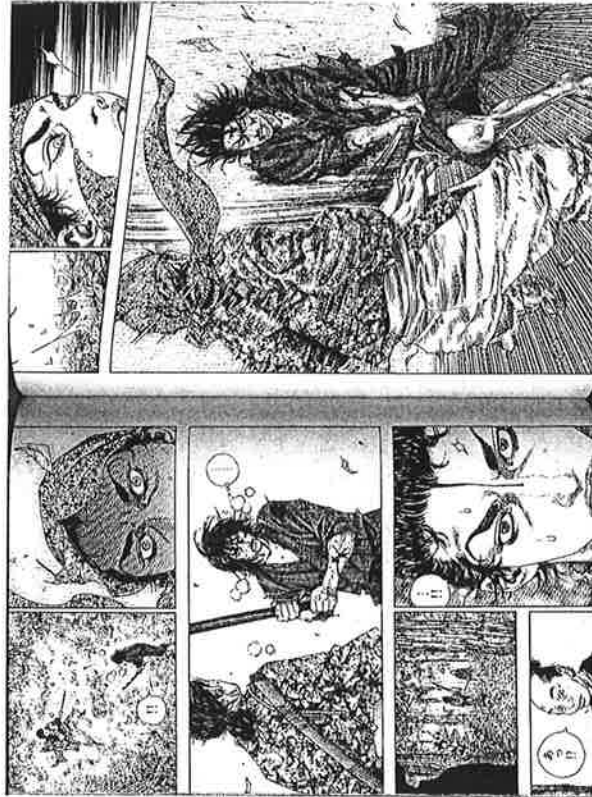


Fig. 4