

Springtime Showers and Flowers
Julia Fields's American Manga, April Rain

Julia Fields's twelve-page comic April Rain could best be categorized as an example of American *manga*, emulating the style of popular Japanese comic books. Best falling under the genre of *shōjo*, or girls' *manga*, April Rain focuses the attention of the reader on the unnamed female protagonist, effectively placing the reader in the perspective of the girl and her failed romantic relationship with her English professor. With line work and a calculated use of visual symbolism, Fields's illustrations communicate an emotional situation as it plays out for the characters. In review of the comic, Christina Newhall stated, "The artwork is heart-wrenchingly symbolic." The use of visual rhetoric plays into the comic as a whole.

From the first view of the *manga* on the front cover, Fields has presented the type of visual wit that will play throughout the short story. The cover depicts the professor standing beneath a bright, red umbrella as the female protagonist, unphased by the rain, stands under the showering droplets offering him an enticing, vibrantly coloured apple. Jessica Lanan noted, "The dichotomy of the biblical reading intertwined with the concept of giving the apple to the teacher is nice. It's very symbolic but not too obvious." The seductive notion of the attractive young student offering her professor an apple sets up the theme of temptation that pervades the narrative. Much of the story centers itself on the idea of the appropriateness of the professor accepting the girl's advances and his ultimate refusal of her; the fact that the cover depicts her offering this forbidden fruit is reflective of the plotline of the *manga*.

A male reader, Richard Feng, commented, "That professor needs to loosen up a bit. Take those glasses off. Give in!" The teacher, Aaron Richards, is a core element of the story because of his reactions to the girl's advances; however, despite the focus of this character's motivations to

accept the invitation to the dorm room and then to later flee because of the sudden awareness of the situation brought about by the interruption of the teddy bear, the emotions of the professor are deliberately obscured by his near-lack of facial expressions. Julia Fields's renderings are clearly intended to keep the reader from immediately identifying with the professor, forcing the audience into the perspective of the unnamed female protagonist for most of the *manga*. Derek Wilarait noted, "The professor is a problem character until the last panel. And then you understand him." Only once the character removes his glasses on the final page is the audience allowed to identify with him. Even though his face is still obscured by his hands, his feelings are communicated through the contrast that arises from this single moment when his glasses are removed and his loneliness. This feeling is identical to that of the girl, yet self-imposed by his sudden moral judgment that, although the situation may be one of love, it is still not "right." The last page of the *manga* highlights the idea that both characters feel the same emotions of failure and lost love.

The *manga*'s plot is propelled by the actions and reactions of the two characters. In her critique of the story, Ariana Littauer found that the story was notably character driven,

"The characters in the story are very real. They are subtly but well developed." It is set up to be a spring romance tale, propelled by lust and love, but something goes wrong, and the characters are left to cope with the consequences. Andrew Lytle commented, "I have to say, I really like the last page because within the girl's panel there is a lot of white, open space, and it is very linear. Then, in the male's panel, it seems there are blocks of colour and space with more angular lines. It shows a good contrast between the sexes." The reader is left to interpret the decisions of each character. Although it is clear that the two are unhappy and that they have lost out on the romance promised by the beginning of the *manga*, the author/artist does not textually elaborate on the inner workings of their minds and hearts; rather, the reader is left to interpret the illustrations in order to divine a sense of characters. Wilarait noted, "The professor's a problem character until the

last panel. And then you understand him.” Only once Aaron takes off his glasses in despair is he given an emotional voice. The girl, who is consistently expressive in her numerous thought bubbles, is clearly the focus of the comic, but once the two are set against each other on the final page, the reader is able to intuit the relationship which had remained unclear at the introduction of the story.

The first page offers little explanation of a prior relationship between the two characters. Rather than spending several pages on exposition, Fields jumps directly into the girl’s proposition of the professor. Mage Macchione critiqued of April Rain, “I don’t see that there’s any reason why the girl is so in love with the teacher.... I guess because there is no build up. And I think that the first encounter between the two that we see is a bit abrupt.” One can naturally assume that the two speak before the girl invites her professor to her dorm room. There is merely an implication of conversation between the two in the top right panel of the second page, but Fields does not write any of the exchange. David Ayala added, “There was no build up. The story between them was assumed to be known; it was a little... [Ayala made vague hand gestures of uncertainty] But after that it got steamy.” Julia Fields allows the illustrations to propel the story and convey the emotions that she intended to express throughout the *manga*.

Most of their relationship is wordless, but the expression comes out in Fields’s use of illustration. Largely, this comes from Julia Fields’s background in comic book illustration and sequential illustration from her studies at the Kansas City Art Institute. Her earlier work primarily features three-panel strips that convey a story using solely pictures, without any text. Andrew Lytle stated, “At certain pages I found it was interesting that there was very little dialogue yet so much action in the plot with so few words.” The *mangaka* uses the visual elements of the storytelling medium to communicate the actions and emotions of the plot.

Symbolism plays an important role in the visual elements of the April Rain. In addition to presenting an action-by-action depiction of the events of the story, Julia Fields favors a use of visual

rhetoric common to *shōjo manga*. For example, in the last panel of the fifth page through all of the sixth, cherry blossoms and bubbles adorn the illustrations, emphasizing the subtext of flowery romance and the idea of spring. Many of the repeated visual elements play into the emotional tones of the story. The compositions of the panels with rain and the use of black-spotting to indicate feelings of isolation and loneliness convey all of the emotion of a descriptive passage of text with the simple structure of line and shape. Laurel McFadden commented, “The artwork is extremely impressive, especially in its detail. I particularly like the scenes with the rain. The emotions in the story are very real.” Fields’s artistic style relies on a use of line and cross-hatching which at first seems simplified and uncommunicative but, under scrutiny, reveals an attention to human emotions that could not be relayed to the reader by text or by photorealistic representations in the same way that it can through her *manga*-style.

April Rain is scheduled to become a part of a larger collection of Julia Fields’s illustrated short stories that will be published in a spring themed comic book. April Rain was deemed “poignantly evocative” by Christina Newhall, and although female readers stated that the *manga* was “generally depressing,” the tone of the story was well received and understood by the select audience surveyed to critique the work. April Rain is not *manga* in the strict definition of the term as “Japanese comics,” but the work clearly draws from the conventions of Japanese *manga* as an American incarnation. Despite the criticisms that stem from the very short length of the story, Julia Fields’s April Rain has been accepted as a worthwhile addition to the comic book medium, and this writer looks forward to seeing it within the context of Fields’s upcoming collection of sequentially illustrated short stories.