

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP THROUGH LINES AND COLORS: AN ANALYSIS OF *ASTERIOS POLYP*

Construindo um relacionamento a partir de linhas e cores: Uma análise de Asterios Polyp

Luana Hastenteufel Vogel¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9043-2314> 

¹Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil. 91540-000 – ppglet@ufrgs.br

Abstract: In this article, we present a reading of the comic book *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli, focusing on the analysis of the lines and colors used to symbolize the relationship between the main characters, Asterios and Hana. In *Asterios Polyp* (2009), the author emphasizes the differences between the characters not only through the actions they take, but also through the way they are portrayed. While Asterios is outlined with straight geometrical lines colored in blue, Hana's hatching is less linear and filled in pink. This visual contrast is, at times, accentuated, and, others, attenuated. In this study, we take a look at the effects these stylistic choices create on the reader. In order to do that, we resort to McCloud's (1993) study of comic books and the symbolic use of colors in literature.

Keywords: *Asterios Polyp*; comic books; relationship.

Resumo: Neste artigo, apresentamos uma leitura da história em quadrinhos *Asterios Polyp*, de David Mazzucchelli, a partir da análise de linhas e cores utilizada para simbolizar o relacionamento entre os personagens principais, Asterios e Hana. Em *Asterios Polyp* (2009), o autor enfatiza as diferenças entre os personagens, não apenas pelas ações que eles tomam, mas também do modo que eles são retratados. Enquanto Asterios é desenhado por linhas retas e geométricas coloridas de azul, Hana é tracejada com traços menos lineares e sua imagem é preenchida de rosa. Este contraste visual é, por vezes, acentuado, e em outras, atenuado. Neste trabalho, olhamos para os efeitos que estas escolhas estilísticas criam no leitor. Para isso, utilizamos o estudo de histórias em quadrinhos de McCloud (1993) e a simbologia que as cores utilizadas possuem na literatura.

Palavras-chave: *Asterios Polyp*; histórias em quadrinhos; relacionamento.

Introduction

Comic books have historically been marginalized in literary studies. This might stem from the perception of the medium as mere children's entertainment, or as lacking sufficient literary merit. While academic interest has notably increased in recent years, the field remains under-explored when compared to the medium's expanding relevance in contemporary society. The comic book market continues to expand and more than ever

before it has become a powerful industry¹. This massive cultural and economic presence is still met with a surprisingly scarce academic literature about the subject.

When looking at sequential arts, as Eisner (1985) calls it, we must keep in mind that it is a medium that employs both words and images. It is through the artist's skillful usage of the two forms of communication that the message is disclosed. Therefore, one should not look only at one of the forms used. Instead, "the reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (Eisner, 1985, p. 8).

Based on this principle, in this work, we are going to focus on how Mazzucchelli uses language and image to convey the idea of the story, and how image seems to "amplify" or "elaborate" the characters of the story, as well as set the mood and time of the narrative (Mccloud, 1993, p. 159).

Because a comic book is such a complex medium, in which every piece of information adds meaning to the narrative, it would be a tremendous task to look at all the aspects that make *Asterios Polyp* the masterpiece that it is. Instead, we have decided to investigate two major components of this comic book: the choice of colors, an unexpected palette primarily composed of only three hues; and the drawing style of the characters, which, unlike other comic books, varies based on those being featured.

In order to do that, first, we briefly present the characters and the romantic (sub)plot of the narrative. Later, we inspect the stylistic choices made to present Asterios and Hana to the reader and what they may make us feel when reading. We also examine the color palette used, resorting back to the symbolism those colors hold in literature and, most likely, the feelings they evoke from readers. Finally, we confirm how each of those elements stimulate the reader into building the personalities of the main characters.

Building characters: Asterios and Hana and their journey

Asterios Polyp follows the story of its protagonist, who, after leaving his apartment because of a fire that consumes his building, starts reminiscing about his life, more specifically, about his failed relationship with Hana. It is through these memories that haunt him, and the actions that take place in the present, that the narrator (who happens to be his stillborn twin Ignazio) builds the image we should have of him: a man who is brilliant, and highly regarded by his peers at the university where he works but is incredibly arrogant and obnoxious. Despite his view of his architectural work as brilliant, none of his buildings have ever been created; thus, he is considered a paper architect. Asterios sees himself as the owner of the truth: he knows what is best and what is important. Anything he dismisses as irrelevant is, by default, irrelevant.

His relationships with women are futile, meaningless and misogynistic. It is curious to think that a man, who only favors rationality and holds himself in such high regard, that would like to be seen and heard by everyone in the room, would be interested in Hana, his

¹ It has been reported that comic book sales more than doubled in 2021 and it is expected to continue to rise. (Source: Fortune Business Insights, 2022)



complete opposite. While he wishes to be seen, she remains in the sidelines; he has drawn many buildings but none of them have been built, while she is an artist who creates multiple sculptures throughout the story; while he thinks too much of himself, she thinks too little and is often concerned that her best is not good enough. In short, while he sees the world with certainty, she travels through it with doubts.

The unlikely relationship develops and we discover that, no matter how cliché it is, those differences are what make them special and unique: learning how to navigate each other's personality allows them to better understand their partner and, in turn, change themselves. However, at times, this challenge proves to be too difficult, which ultimately leads to their break up. It is following that separation that we meet Asterios.

While we accompany Asterios' memories, we also follow his adventures in the present time, with a random family he found after the fire that consumed his apartment: he took a bus as far as the money in his pocket would allow it, and started working in a car shop in exchange for a place to stay. The family, formed by an esoteric woman, a mechanic and a young child, puts Asterios' life into perspective. It is through them that he can see how people who may have different beliefs can still live a happy life and how the power of compromise allows people to grow.

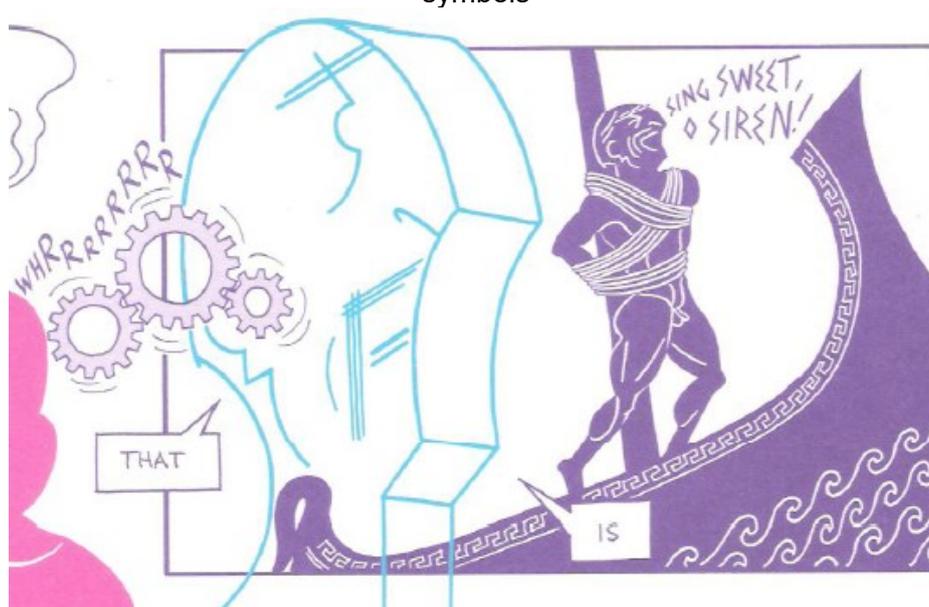
At the end of the story, Asterios realizes that he misses Hana enough to go after her again. He seems to have changed his dualistic view of the world, and is therefore able to embark on this relationship with a new perspective. When he meets her, he finds a woman who is, at her core, the same, but has matured through her experiences. He sees her for who she has become and recognizes a part of him in her and, especially, in her art.

Drawing style: through lines and curves

Beyond the narrator's descriptions and the character's actions, the core differences between Asterios and Hana are visually manifested in the comic book's style. This section will explore how the distinct drawing style used for each character further reinforces their opposing worldviews.

Everything involving Asterios is rendered using geometrical, straight shapes. Whenever we are invited to pay attention to some of his character traits, he is presented as a group of pointy cylinders, and his head resembles a cog in a machine (Figure 1). This similarity invites us to connect him to an inanimate object: if he is visually portrayed as a machine, his behavior must align with that logic. In fact, many of his actions appear cold and detached, leading readers to associate him to something inhuman.

Figure 1 – Visual representation of Asterios's rational mind through mechanical and geometric symbols



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

[Image description] Image of a panel from page 40 of the book. It features stylized artwork in shades of pink, dark blue and light blue. On the left, a light blue profile of a head contains mechanical gears turning with the sound effect "WHRRRRRRR" written above them. To the right, a silhouette depicts a classical figure, likely Odysseus, tied to the mast of a ship with Greek fret patterns (meander) and wave motifs. The figure is shouting "SING SWEET, O SIREN!" into the air. Two speech bubbles at the bottom contain the words "THAT" and "IS" respectively. [End of description].

His apartment is also primarily represented through straight lines, reflecting his rigid personality. As McCloud (1993, p. 125) states, the use of square lines transmits a sense of rationality and conservativeness, which encapsulates the way we feel about Asterios. This aesthetic reflects Asterios' core design philosophy, which prioritizes utility. In his view, everything must have a practical purpose, since "anything that is not functional is merely decorative" (McCloud, 1993, p. 110) and straight lines the clearest means of achieving that. Even his speech bubble and lettering follow the same pattern, solidifying the readers' inflexible view of Asterios.

When Hana moves in with him, she brings her own coffee table to the place, with the excuse that "there are so many straight lines in [there]" (Mazzucchelli, 2009, p. 149). That is one of the instances in which we see their worlds merging: the apartment, from that moment on, becomes a visual fusion of the characters.

In contrast to Asterios' rigid, rectangular lines, Hana's portrayal is much more fluid, using lines that McCloud (1993, p. 125) describes as "warm and gentle". Her figure is rendered using hatchings, which makes her appear *complete*, opposing Asterios who looks *empty*.

Her speech bubble follows this fluid format, featuring a rounded design and gentle lettering. This consistent presentation encourages the reader to empathize with her. Ultimately, we see humanity in Hana, not only in her actions, but also through her visual depiction.

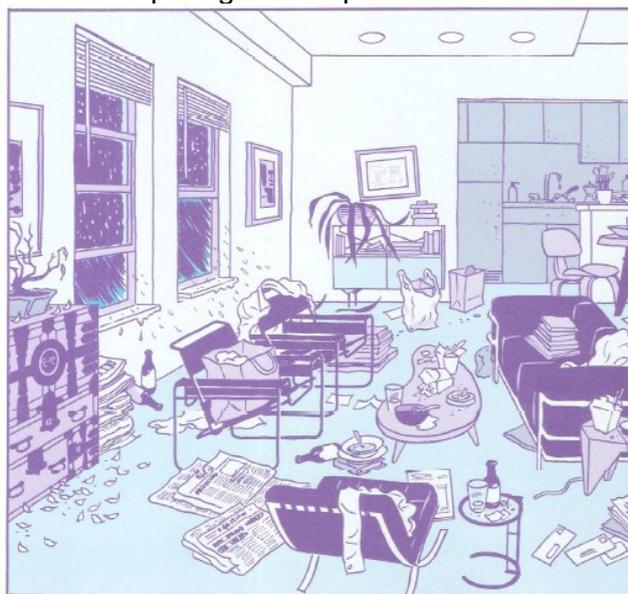
Colors and what they mean

Another feature central to the comic book's aesthetic is its restricted color palette. Throughout the story, three primary colors dominate: blue, mainly for scenes and objects that are related to Asterios (including the man himself); pink, for the people and things related to the women in Asterios' life (primarily his love interest, Hana); and yellow, for the actions occurring in the present narrative time. In this section, we dive into these choices for colors and what feelings they evoke in readers, drawing upon the symbology these hues have acquired in literature.

One of the ways Mazzucchelli signals his readers of the chronology of the story is through the color yellow. If we turn to the symbology of this color, "yellow is the hottest, the most expansive and the most burning of all colours in its intensity, violence and almost strident shrillness" (Chevalier, 1996, p. 1137). Therefore, it is fitting that this color is first used to announce a fire.

When we are first introduced to Asterios, the predominant color on the pages is blue (Figure 2). A different hue only appears when the fire alarm starts ringing, with yellow words flying across the page. The subsequent sequence presents the yellow color taking over his apartment in the shape of a fire, replacing its blue interior with a burning yellow (Figure 3). His present is quite literally overrunning his past life. As we later discuss, blue is intrinsic to Asterios' personality, often appearing when his character traits are most pronounced. It seems symbolic that this color is overtaken by yellow. The personality and values he once held dear are meaningless in the face of a consuming burning fire. The fire is the catalyst that awakens him to the lonely reality of his life.

Figure 2 – Monochrome blue interior of the protagonist's apartment



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009)

Figure 3 – Yellow palette depicting the apartment fire



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009)

[Image description] Figure 2: A monochrome illustration in shades of blue depicting a cluttered, messy apartment interior at night. On the left, two windows with partially closed blinds show a dark, rainy night outside. The room is filled with disarray: stacks of newspapers on the floor, empty bottles, discarded takeout containers, and scattered papers. In the center, two modern-style chairs face a kidney-shaped coffee table covered with bowls and leftovers. To the right, a sofa is piled with books and clothes, while a small kitchen area is visible in the background. The overall atmosphere conveys a sense of isolation or neglect, rendered in a clean, comic-book line art style.

Figure 3: A dramatic illustration of the same apartment interior, now rendered in a vibrant yellow palette to depict a fire. Large, billowing plumes of dark smoke swirl across the top of the frame, emerging from the windows and various parts of the room. High, jagged yellow flames engulf the furniture, including the chairs, the sofa, and the stacks of paper on the floor. Despite the intense fire, the silhouettes of the cluttered objects—like the bottles, the coffee table, and the kitchen in the background—remain visible through the heat. The high-contrast color scheme creates a sense of urgent, chaotic energy compared to the previous scene. [End of description]

The narrative is shaped by the story that follows this event. It is the fire that forces Asterios to reevaluate his life decisions and triggers his reminiscence about his life before that moment. After that, whenever we are presented with the version of Asterios that we were first introduced to, the scene's only color is exclusively yellow. As the color signaling the present time, it constantly reminds us that the life Asterios once knew is over. His blue past is no longer available. He must now inhabit an unfamiliar yellow world.

The shift is further demonstrated by Asterios' purposeless journey to the farthest point his money can carry him. There, he encounters a world entirely foreign to him: simple people who lack formal education and perform manual labor. This reality starkly contrasts his own life which has been lived with the assumption that ideas are more important than putting them into practice, which is why he is known as a paper architect (since none of his designs have ever been built). He also meets a loving family that, despite holding vastly different viewpoints, manage to set their differences aside and coexist harmoniously. Encountering these different people allows him to gain a new perspective. His sight is no longer restricted to a blue world; instead, everything has assumed a new, unfamiliar color.

As we have established, Asterios is often regarded as an arrogant rigid man. He disregards those around him because he perceives himself as superior. The fact that blue is the color that surrounds him perfectly fits this representation. Often associated with intellectuality and coolness, (Olderr, 2012, p. 32), its symbolic meaning runs deeper. Chevalier (1996, p. 102) notes that blue is seen as "the deepest color", "the most insubstantial of colours", "an accumulation of emptiness" which is "austere, pure and frosty". Chevalier continues, describing it as "the coldest of colours and, in its absolute quality, the purest, apart from the total void of matt white" and stating that because it is "insubstantial in itself, blue disembodies whatever becomes caught in it". This symbolism directly translates to the image readers get while reading the story: Asterios is cold towards others, disregarding their feelings and prioritizing his opinions. Besides the moments when he is seen *connecting* with Hana, only his outlines are drawn: he is empty, not only in colors, but also emotions.



Women, and Hana in particular, are portrayed using the color pink. Commonly associated with femininity, this hue represents emotions, sensuality, joy and youth (Olderr, 2012). In short, everything Asterios dismisses. While Hana is attuned with her own emotions and those of others, Asterios is solely concerned with his own opinions.

When Hana and Asterios first meet, their fundamental difference is immediately visualized by the separation of the panel and its coloring: while Asterios' side is blue, hers is pink (Figure 4). These colors do not merge on the page. This visual dichotomy creates the sense of two entirely separate worlds colliding, which directly reflects their opposing philosophies.

Figure 4 – Visual dichotomy: Asterios (blue geometric lines) meets Hana (pink cross-hatchings)



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

[Image description] A panel from a graphic novel featuring two characters rendered in contrasting artistic styles and colors. On the left, a man is drawn with clean, blue geometric lines; he has a speech bubble that reads: "I'M SORRY. MY NAME'S ASTERIOS POLYP." On the right, a woman is rendered with soft, pink cross-hatched shading, giving her a more organic and textured appearance. The two figures face each other as if in conversation, their distinct visual styles highlighting their differences. The background shows faint architectural details like a window and brickwork. [End of description]

This pattern reemerges throughout the narrative when the characters fail to understand one another. In these instances, the visual presentation clearly emphasizes their profound differences: they occupy opposing places within the frame, their drawing style revert to representing their inner selves, the colors become intensely vivid. Every element in the scene highlights their fundamental dissimilarities and the apparent impossibility of their relationship succeeding.

When the characters achieve a deeper connection, this bond is immediately visualized on the page. We can see their figures merging together and, as Figure 5 shows,

their individual drawing styles become complementary. While their core differences are still visible, it is clear that they have integrated some of the characteristics of the other. The final depiction is a blend: the figures are outlined with Asterios' sharp blue lines, but their interiors are rendered with Hana's textured pink hatchings.

Figure 5 – Blending of blue outlines and pink textures



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

[Image description] A wide panel from a graphic novel depicting a crowded social gathering or party, rendered in a palette of blue, and pink. The scene is stylistically complex, with different characters drawn in distinct artistic styles to represent their individual "natures." In the foreground on the left, a woman is rendered as a solid purple silhouette with a detailed, laughing mouth. In the center, two figures—a man and a woman—are composed of overlapping blue geometric outlines and pink cross-hatched textures, suggesting a blending or interaction of their two distinct styles. Other guests in the background appear as varied silhouettes: some are jagged and abstract, one is a soft purple shadow, and others are simple line drawings. The setting includes sketches of furniture, like a patterned sofa, and architectural lines, all contributing to a busy, multidisciplinary atmosphere. [End of description]

When the characters are shown to be in accordance, the hue of blue and pink are lighter; conversely when they argue or when it is clear that they have really opposing views on a topic, their colors get darker.

In some instances of the story, we see Asterios in a light shade of pink and Hana in blue. That usually happens when they are shown in accordance with each other. Consider Figures 6-9. In this sequence, Hana and Asterios have gone out with Hana's boss to meet a famous composer. Hana wears a blue sweater and Asterios, a pink shirt and tie. While there, tension escalates as their contrasting views on Calvin emerge: Hana sympathizes with him, while Asterios remains judgmental. After arriving home, their opposing views clash leading to an argument. In Figures 7 and 8, we see the colors they had been drawn in slowly revert to their "original" selves. Hana becomes completely filled in by the pink hatching, while Asterios' blue contour returns, reestablishing his geometrical shapes. As the fight intensifies,

they move further apart on the frame, and their distinctively drawing styles become increasingly pronounced (Figure 9).

Figure 6 – Visual separation through silhouettes and cold hues



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009)

Figure 7 – Reversion of character hues and textures



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009)

Figure 8 – Stylistic unmixing and the smoke barrier



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

Figure 9 – Complete separation into distinct visual realities



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

[Image description] Figure 6: A panel from the graphic novel depicting a tense domestic moment, rendered in a cold palette of deep purple, lavender, and light blue. The drawing style uses a sharp contrast between character techniques: on the left, a woman is depicted as a solid, flat purple silhouette. On the right, a man is drawn with precise, rigid purple outlines and minimal pink detailing on his tie, leaning over to light a cigarette. The background maintains a clean, architectural style with thin lines defining the bookshelves and furniture, while the windows show a dark blue night with falling snow.

Figure 7: A two-panel excerpt where the characters' drawing styles begin to revert to their original, separate forms. In the first panel on the left, the woman is shown from the chest up with a frustrated expression; her face and hair have returned to a solid, flat purple, while only the side of her neck and cheek remain textured with pink cross-hatching. In the second panel on the right, the man is shown in profile with thin purple outlines and a faint blue highlight. He exhales a swirling cloud of purple-outlined smoke as his geometric style reestablishes itself.

Figure 8: A panel depicting the characters as the argument intensifies and their visual "unmixing" continues. On the left, the woman stands with her arms crossed, her entire figure now composed of dense, organic pink cross-hatching. A large speech bubble above her reads: "Suddenly you're an expert on music? Couldn't it be

possible that maybe — **maybe** — Calvin knows more about it than you?". On the right, the man is rendered in profile with rigid blue and purple outlines, holding a cigarette. A large, billowing white cloud of smoke acts as a visual barrier, separating the pink textured style from the blue linear style.

Figure 9: A full-body shot in a sparsely detailed room where the "unmixing" of styles is complete. The woman, standing in the foreground, is a mass of pink cross-hatched lines that bleed slightly onto the floor beneath her. The man, standing further back with his back partially turned, is constructed entirely of hollow cyan-blue geometric shapes and outlines. There is no overlapping color or shared texture between them, making it appear as if they belong to two different physical realities. A speech bubble from the woman at the bottom reads: "What makes you think you're always right?" [End of description]

At the end of the story, once Asterios decides to seek out Hana, the frames begin to feature hues beyond the previously restricted palette. The background now includes some shades of red, green, orange and even purple. Upon reaching Hana's home, Asterios is met with a snowstorm, leaving the whole background in vibrant blue color. Her house, seen from the outside, is also tinted in this shade. However, once he enters her house, he is welcomed by the sight of a pink cup of tea. Her house is vibrant and colorful and Hana herself is not restricted to only wearing pink. She is now seen in green clothes (Figure 10).

Figure 10 – Diverse color palette and the introduction of green



Source: Mazzucchelli (2009).

[Image description] A high-angle panel depicting Hana and Asterios in a colorful living room. Hana stands on the left wearing a green turtleneck and checkered trousers, holding a purple teapot. Asterios sits hunched on a sofa in the center, wrapped in a light blue blanket and holding a pink mug. The scene breaks from the previous limited palette, incorporating shades of green, red, orange, and purple throughout the furniture and decor. A yellow coffee table in the foreground holds a purple vase with white flowers. Hana's speech bubble at the top asks about Asterios's eye and his presence in the snowstorm; he responds with stuttered text bubbles: "L-L-LONG" and "S-STORY". [End of description]

Returning to the dictionary of symbols, green is "a colour combination of blue and yellow, but takes part with red in the symbolic interplay of alternations" (Chevalier, 1996, p. 451); it mediates between "heat and cold and high and low"; it is the "colour of the awakening

of life". (Chevalier, 1996, p. 451). Like the color she is seen with, Hana has become a synthesis of different essences: while she remains sentimental and artistic, she has been irrevocably changed by the man she loves. Her art now reflects this transformation, portraying her new worldview. She can no longer return to making sculptures the way she used to, having fundamentally changed the way she perceives the world. Her yellow present has fused with his blue essence, thereby creating her balanced, green approach to life. It is therefore fitting that the color often associated with life and new beginnings (Olderr, 2012, p. 100) is the hue that Hana wears when her relationship with Asterios is reborn.

Final considerations

Despite *Asterios Polyp* being a relatively recent work (it was published only in 2009), it has already garnered much recognition for the masterful piece of literature that it is, winning the Eisner award in 2010 and many others. Because the themes explored in the story are so universally known and understood, it is easy to connect with the doubts and uncertainties displayed by the characters.

Maximizing the storytelling possibilities unique to the comic book medium, this analysis has focused on the use of drawing style and colors and how they further construct the readers' image of the characters.

In the story's artwork, Mazzucchelli employed varying styles to embody the characters' distinct personalities. By using straight lines, he effectively demonstrated how fixated Asterios really was in his own ideas and how difficult it would be for him to change and grow. This rigidity is later confirmed, as only after a fire and a period of self-reflection, is he able to realize the flaws in his actions that drove Hana away (a reconciliation the story ultimately suggests). By contrast, Hana's portrayal in curved lines reveals a sensible woman, who is in touch with her feelings and unrestricted in her thinking (a perspective that her relationship with Asterios eventually alters). When their images merge, we realize that their differences do not mean the impossibility of a shared life, but their potential to complement each other.

The strategic use of colors provides the reader a visual indication of the characters' behavior, emphasizing their virtues and faults, as well as establishing the temporal setting through the color yellow. Despite viewing the world through different chromatic lenses, the couple finds a common ground, as is often shown when they are depicted wearing clothes with the opposing color of their characterization, while remaining true to themselves. Finally, the introduction of a full spectrum of colors at the end of the narrative signifies Asterios' realization that the world does not have to be viewed in rigid black and white only (or, in this case, blue and pink) but encompasses an array of possibilities.

These stylistic choices are what make *Asterios Polyp* such a singular piece of literature. Even though the thematic material are not groundbreaking – a coming-of-age story in which the hero must face the preconceptions to achieve growth – the unique way these themes are visually and narratively presented is refreshing. As we follow Asterios, we



are compelled to confront our own assumptions about life and, in turn, begin seeing the world in different colors.

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NOTAS DE AUTORIA

Luana Hastenteufel Vogel (luanahvogel@gmail.com) is PhD student in the Literature graduate course at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Participates in the research line “Society, literary (inter)texts and translation in Modern Foreign Languages”. Interested in English literature, literature by women and 19th century literature.

Agradecimentos

Não se aplica.

Como citar esse artigo de acordo com as normas da ABNT

VOGEL, Luana Hastenteufel. Construindo um relacionamento a partir de linhas e cores: uma análise de Asterios Polyp. *Anuário de Literatura*, Florianópolis, v. 31, p. 01-13, 2026.

Contribuição de autoria

Não se aplica.

Financiamento

O presente trabalho foi realizado com apoio da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Código de Financiamento 001.

Consentimento de uso de imagem

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Aprovação de comitê de ética em pesquisa

Não se aplica.



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Publisher

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Histórico

Recebido em: 23/02/2025

Revisões requeridas em: 21/10/2025

Aprovado em: 23/01/2026

Publicado em: 16/03/2026

