

# A functional fusion of literacies: The graphic adaptation of Bessie Head's short story, 'The collector of treasures'

**A B S T R A C T** In promoting literacy, English educators should be concerned with the whole range of cultural products, since simple texts can reveal as much about culture, power, society and identity as many other seemingly more "elevated" texts. It is clear that graphic texts, which include comics and other narratives, fall within this range. They have a widely accessible representational mode in which words and pictures are interdependent, conveying an idea that neither could convey alone. In the graphic adaptation of African short stories such as 'The Collector of Treasures', the oral mode of storytelling is reinvented and reinforced by visual and written modes of communication conveyed in the medium of a printed text. This type of graphic narrative promotes a functional fusion of visual, written, oral, cultural and critical literacies and advances a popular reading culture by facilitating a multiplicity of interactive responses. It may therefore serve as an authentic signpost for the feasibility of broadening the scope of literary studies in a wide variety of cultural and educational contexts.

**Keywords:** literacies, oral narratives, graphic texts

## 1. Introduction

Graphic narratives have the potential to play a vital role in mainstream literary studies, as they facilitate a functional fusion of visual, written, oral, cultural and critical literacies. It is becoming clear that traditional definitions of literacy are no longer adequate as texts in English are becoming increasingly multimodal: they use devices from more than one semiotic mode of communication simultaneously, communicating through graphics, pictures, layout techniques, as well as through words (Goodman & Graddol, 1996: 39). Postmodern culture is diverse and creative in its blurring of the boundaries between "high" and popular culture. Kress (1995: 55) contends that simple texts can reveal as much about culture, power, society and identity as

many other seemingly more "elevated" texts. In promoting literacy, English educators should be concerned with the whole range of cultural products, from Shakespeare plays to hamburger advertisements (Buckingham & Sefton-Greene, 1994:5). Graphic texts, which include comics and other narratives, have a widely accessible representational mode in which words and pictures are interdependent. These texts assist in promoting a popular reading culture, since, according to McCloud (1994: 212) they offer range and versatility, with the potential imagery of film and painting combined with the intimacy of the spoken word.

Eisner (1974: 2704), one of the earlier proponents of this medium of communication, contends that they are a form of narrative art that has been relegated to serving the masses and are therefore considered "vulgar" by the intellectual elite, who often try to preserve literary form at the expense of substance. Nonetheless, graphic texts have increasingly become a part of popular culture and research continues to indicate their efficacy in a variety of educational contexts. Krashen (cited in Crawford, 2004: 26) believes that these narratives are linguistically appropriate reading material, bear no negative impact on language acquisition and can assist in improving language competence in second-language readers, since the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meanings of the written elements. Graphic adaptations of short stories such as 'The Collector of Treasures' embody an effective integration of visual and verbal artistry. These elements add a valuable dimension to the readers' response to the aesthetic, affective and cultural values that are ingrained in the narratives.

## **2. Multiple capacities for meaning-making in the study of graphic narratives**

In research carried out on African modes of leadership, Ferreira (cited in Rolls, 2005: 54) found that organizations which avoided a focus on areas such as lengthy mission statements and instead chose to incorporate a large amount of storytelling and visual aspects in their communication strategies experienced a high success rate. As Kress (1995: 84) points out, "Representational resources are the product of histories of cultural practices in cultural and social domains, and shape those who use them in very different ways". Research studies conducted in South Africa have found that developing communities with oral traditions that do not include picture-rich environments may experience some difficulty in "reading" and using pictures meaningfully (De Lange, 1999: 101). This concurs with Wilmot's (1998: 165) findings in an urban community that communication skills associated with graphicacy on its own may sometimes need to be taught in the lower grades at school.

In contrast, texts that combine both pictures and words in order to communicate a particular message yield more positive results, since the medium does seem to enhance an insight into the underlying message. If the reader of the graphic adaptation of a text is surprised by a particular physical depiction, s/he will go back and re-examine the original text. In this way, there is often interplay between graphics and the "real" text. Kress (1995: 81-82) confirms that the reading of any textual element always draws on and depends on a simultaneous consideration of the co-text of the text being read, whether this co-text is part of the same text or a text in another medium of communication.

Research in many countries suggests that the marriage of images and words can make the essence of a story understandable with relative ease not shared by the more conventional forms of literary expression (Esterhuysen & Napper, 1989). Positive results have been reported by Esterhuysen and

the Storyteller Group on the use of this type of text to deliver social and health care messages to communities with varied levels and types of literacy (in De Lange, 1999: 110). De Lange cites additional South African research reports (Bahr & Rifkin, 1992; Matthews, Everett, Reddy & Lombard, 1994; Matthews, Everett, Binedell & Steinberg, 1995) which have noted that even subjects who had little experience with the medium were able to comprehend these visual narratives actively. The reports concluded that the material proved to be popular, was accepted by the community, and that readers had a sense of identification with the story (De Lange, 1999: 2-3). The graphic adaptations of short stories and other narratives are usually created by a team comprising a scriptwriter, an artist, as well as people responsible for the storyboard and lettering. This enables the written, critical, visual, oral and cultural literacies of readers to be enhanced as they examine the distinctive features in the styles of representation utilized by the team, which include paralinguistic clues in the form of facial expressions, bodily gestures, viewing angles as well as verbal intonations that are denoted by particularized uses of typography.

Essentially, a graphic narrative comprises discrete units that combine in sequence to form a storyline. Between each unit and the one that follows it, there is an interruption during which something is left out. McCloud (1994: 67) states that these interruptions are not only metaphorical but also physical, represented by the gap, called "gutter", between one panel and the next, so that the mental process of filling in missing pieces of information (known as closure) is constantly active. Thus, closure between panels allows for the creative participation of the reader, as it enables him/her to construct a continuous reality despite panels that "fracture" time as well as space. Although Harvey (1996: 246) places emphasis on this type of closure, McCloud (2000: 34) clarifies that narrative density within panels as well as between them is a vital component of closure in the reader's interaction with a graphic text. Closure thus contributes to an insight into the intertextual relationship of visual, oral, spoken and written elements between particular frames or panels as well as within them. Saraceni (2001: 175) confirms that the process of closure enables readers to engage meaningfully and interactively with this type of text by relying not on what is overtly present in the text, but on what it does not say. This process may be associated with Wolfgang Iser's Reception Theory, which states that literary texts form an organic unity and that the coherence of a text emerges from the harmonious connections of its constituent parts, so that the reader is required to form mental images and to make stable, coherent meaning out of apparent gaps or blanks (Iser, 1978: 111). However, Thomson (1992:13) argues that this emphasis on the internal consistency of the text ignores the possibility that its meanings may be multiple, incomplete and contradictory, since reading is a product of the dominant culture in which it takes place. I believe that the study of graphic narratives alleviates the problem of fixed cultural positionings by expanding the imaginative possibilities available to the reader and by encouraging the creation of a multiplicity of meanings in a variety of cultural contexts.

### **3. The interrelationship of oral, written and visual modes in an African graphic narrative**

Oyegoke (2000:42) states that African literature comprises the cultural, textual and intertextual and reiterates the postmodernist suggestion that the world of literature is open and dynamic, involving the interplay of texts. Lusweti confirms that oral literature now includes material in written form (as long as it was originally expressed orally) and feels that the immediacy of the spoken word contributes to the richness and beauty of the written language (cited in Cloete &

Madadzhe, 2004: 30). Although Oluwole (1999: 14) is critical of the general practice of using Western lineal conventions to transcribe oral texts into written literature, Alidou (2002: 137) asserts that orality, as a legacy of tradition, and writing, symbolizing the modern, do manage to coexist meaningfully in many parts of Africa, and believes that tradition and modernity are compatible modes of reinventing and re-interpreting culture within a given space. Larrier (cited in Alidou, 2002: 151) reiterates that the continuity between orality (especially of the female imagination) and writing, is characteristic of the African novel virtually throughout the continent. Thus, it would seem that graphic adaptations of African narratives embody these processes through the dynamic interrelationship of traditional oral narrative elements and the relatively modern medium of writing.

*Deep Cuts*, an anthology created and compiled by The Storyteller Group, comprises three graphic adaptations of African short stories by Can Themba, Alex la Guma and Bessie Head. These symbolize the co-existence of modern and traditional literary legacies and create a powerful medium to promote reading for pleasure as well as knowledge of the African literary tradition. In his introduction to *Deep Cuts*, Peter Esterhuysen states that the economy of form in the short story genre makes it ideally suited to translation into this graphic medium (in Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 7). The objective of the Storyteller Group is to enhance the experience for those who already know the written versions of the stories, as well as act as a starting point for those who come to these tales for the first time. The three stories are represented in the form of compelling visual artistry and typography as well as challenging scripts and storyboards. Since De Lange (1999: 83) quotes a number of studies in which realism is the most cited factor that assists picture recognition and picture-text comprehension, the focus in this article will be on the third short story in *Deep Cuts*, a true-to-life adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures'. This is derived from the written text which forms part of an anthology by Bessie Head entitled, *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*.

Bessie Head has written from within a culture with no written history, where storytelling and the oral tradition generally are the means whereby the community explains itself (Mackenzie, 1989:17). In this context, the storyteller is usually at liberty to focus spontaneously on particular events and themes, inventively retelling the story to include experiences relevant to the present, provided she keeps to the essence of the original tale and the didactic message about community values often embodied in it. In his discussion of /Hang/kas'o's/Kaggen oral narratives (1986: 56) Hewitt states that the narrator often interprets the central character in a special light and puts his/her own stamp on communal values. Both the written and graphic versions of Bessie Head's village tale mirror oral culture by employing the guiding voice and tone of the narrator to promote empathy for the protagonist. However, narrative devices in the graphic adaptation that include specific artistic interpretations as well as lettering and fonts that reveal particular moods and speech intonations signify the dynamic interweaving of oral, visual and written modes of communication, thus lending a unique impact to the representation of Dikeledi's unusual ability to collect emotional treasure despite very adverse circumstances. The elements of selection, omission and improvisation in the dialogue and the narrative inserts reinforce this effect and are allied to the immediacy and fluidity that characterize oral narratives. Harvey (1996: 108) clarifies that the inclusion of speech balloons in the frame of a graphic text contributes to the lifelike illusion that the characters we see are speaking even as we see them, just as we

simultaneously hear and see people in real life. Since the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' not only embodies these features, but also enhances and develops many of them, it may be perceived as a medium that regenerates the African oral narrative mode.

#### **4. Aspects of representation in the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures'**

Although both the written and graphic versions of 'The Collector of Treasures' reflect African oral traditions such as the promotion of memorization through repetition, the authentic visual representations of both the rural setting and traditional modes of dressing and behaviour in the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' have a definite impact as these highlight the cultural validity of this village tale. As Goodman and Graddol (1996: 69) state, the creation of meaning from what we see in a graphic text involves a complex interaction of visual elements and verbal English presented to the eye, as well as contextual and background knowledge. In *Deep Cuts*, this type of interaction and awareness is promoted by a picture of Bessie Head, a brief biography of her, as well as a collage consisting of poems and newspaper articles that are linked to aspects of her life and the themes of her short story, which begins with a mother being arrested in a rural village and being transported to a prison in the city. She is identified as Dikeledi, a woman who has killed her abusive husband Garesego. After Dikeledi is locked in a cell with four other women who have chosen a similar form of retaliation against their abusive spouses, a flashback technique is used to probe the circumstances which have led to the murder of her estranged husband, who had not bothered about granting her a divorce. According to the narrative, the impoverished but hardworking protagonist was solely responsible for maintaining her three children in post-independence Botswana. Unlike Garesego, her new neighbour, Paul Thebolo, embodied all the positive qualities of manhood. Dikeledi's relationship with Paul and his wife Kanalepe was characterized by the true spirit of African *ubuntu* and the two women became very close friends. After eight years of a relatively harmonious existence, Dikeledi was forced to seek out Garesego to ask for help with the payment of an amount of school fees for their eldest son, Banabothe. Despite his protracted desertion of his family and his public affairs with women who rejected traditional values, he responded by falsely accusing Dikeledi of committing adultery with Paul. He then decided to visit her hut at night to assert his marital rights, made no attempt to carry out his emotional and financial obligations to his children, and demanded traditional servitude from her. Realizing that she could not endure being harassed by a man whom she had come to regard as being evil, she castrated him whilst he lay sprawled on her bed and thereby ended his life.

In her critical study on representations by postcolonial women writers, Lionnet (1995: 127) examines their search for a universality that does not negate the specificities of the experiences of their protagonists. In her discussion of the strong message underlying the written version of Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures', she asks, "What degree of specificity can be translated into a universal language when the specificity in question is that of grave physical and emotional pain which generally planet wide remains invisible because its victims are only women?" Although Head's vivid, evocative prose does contribute to this visibility, the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' reinforces and strengthens the impact of Dikeledi's deep pain, not only through the utilization of visual art, but also by an individualized interpretation

that is evident from the outset. The innovative first panel is designed to be the largest and introduces a new scenario, vividly depicting Dikeledi's overwhelming grief as she is led away from her three young sons by two burly police officers. As her children run behind her, their single, agonized exclamation, "Mama!" is represented in very big; bold capital letters contained in an enlarged speech bubble with a thick, dark, jagged edge (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 43). This technique not only conveys the vocal intonation of the children's cry, it also eloquently illustrates the specificity of the trauma experienced by them. The artist's representation of the grief – stricken expressions on the faces of her best friends and the consternation of some of the other villagers – serves to highlight the depth of emotion in this scene. The opening panel thus reflects the flexible African oral storytelling tradition that encompasses the addition of minor details as well as the occasional re-sequencing of events to enhance dramatic effects. As Harvey (1996: 108) comments, the sequencing of panels in a graphic text determines the amount and order of information divulged as well as the order and duration of events; and the manipulation of these aspects of a story creates suspense and mood.

McCloud's (2000: 34) contention that a single panel, even a silent one, may sometimes speak volumes in a graphic text whilst whole pages of a written text may tell us very little, is validated by the fact that the sole utterance in the opening panel is followed by a powerful silence in the next nine panels, with the visuals which depict the setting and the strong emotions experienced by Dikeledi and her loved ones being accompanied by only minor contextualization by the omniscient narrator in two caption boxes (Figure 1). The eleventh panel appears on the next page and depicts a torch being shone directly onto the disconsolate Dikeledi's face by the policemen, as she is abruptly informed that the police van has reached the prison. After two additional silent panels, a line from the dialogue in the written text is foregrounded when, once again, a male official demonstrates the dehumanization of the prison system by looking at her and asking, "*What* have we here?" (my emphasis).

This mode of artfully sequencing panels and combining visual, oral and written elements in a manner that heightens their dramatic effect is especially evident towards the conclusion. In one of the panels, Dikeledi is portrayed kneeling silently before her errant husband to serve him the meal she has cooked for him. Despite his protracted absence, he ignores his children completely and gloats in his wife's traditional subservience. The illustration of him looking towards Paul Thebelo's yard is contextualized by the narrator in a caption box that underscores his triumphant desire to break "the mettle of the other cock and force[d] him into angry abuse" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 57). This is followed by a panel in which he replies indifferently to her polite request for assistance with Banabotho's school fees. In the next panel, which is silent, Dikeledi's brooding facial expression eloquently encapsulates the narrative comment in the written text, "Any tenderness he offered the children might have broken her and swerved her mind away from the deed she had so carefully planned all that afternoon" (Head, 1977: 102). In the next two panels, the marital bed is depicted looming in the background as Dikeledi indicates her intention of visiting the adjoining hut to say goodnight to the children. In startling contrast to this seemingly harmonious scenario, Garesego's massive bellow of agony cuts sharply into the five surrounding silent panels. The "AAAAAHHHHH" is indicated by very large white fonts designed to appear in a rising slant above his face, with a smaller version in slanting black letters below it, to represent its echo. This intense sound appears dramatically in an unframed



Figure 1: 'The Collector of Treasures' in Deep Cuts, page 43.  
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panel with dark, large, sharp points which pierce into other panels. After this climactic event, Banabotho's tremulous question, "Mother, was that father's cry?" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 58) is conveyed in a standard-sized balloon that has a light, jagged edge, akin to the other speech balloons in this text that convey emotions such as anxiety, imperiousness or excitement. The final scenes (in which Paul and Kanalepe offer to look after the children, and Dikeledi communicates with Kebonye and other victims of male abuse in prison) are all in normal sized fonts that are enclosed by regular, rounded speech balloons, thereby contributing to the spirit of supportive sisterhood and patient resignation that characterize the conclusion of the graphic adaptation of this village tale.

The fusion of oral, verbal and visual elements in these scenes thus serves to focus the reader's attention on the issues of gender inequity emphasized by Lionnet (1995:127), as the situation of the protagonist is "translated" into a "universal language" that encapsulates "the depth of Dikeledi's grave physical and emotional pain" and rescues it from remaining "invisible". Significantly, the visual representation of her enforced (and sometimes) chosen silences during particular episodes of this graphic narrative is an intrinsic element of this universal language.

## **5. Exploring values in the graphic adaptation of the 'The Collector of Treasures'**

Kress (1995: 22) states that graphic texts which play with narrative and draw attention to its fabricating devices can be used in the classroom to help readers to stand back and evaluate texts as authors' productions embodying particular worldviews and to consider the background information on the values and ethos of the society being portrayed. It is interesting to note that both the written and the graphic versions of 'The Collector of Treasures' encompass cultural values in the themes, characterization and dialogue that are sometimes more attuned to the wider urban socio-political context in which Bessie Head received her formal education. This is evident in the inclusion of frank and empathetic discussions by women of their own sexuality in both versions. In the graphic adaptation, this is reinforced by a piece of dialogue which represents Dikeledi frowning bitterly and expressing her thoughts unambiguously in the words, "He is an evil man. He just wants sex" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 56). However, the profanities about sexual relations uttered by Garesego have been excluded in this version, although revealing narrative comments about him have been deliberately selected for inclusion. The assertion, "He was a broken wreck with no inner resources at all" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 47; Head, 1977: 92) forms part of a lengthy caption containing an analysis by Bessie Head's narrator of the contrasting types of men in Botswana's new post-colonial society. A portion of dialogue that has the potential to advance readers' visual, written, oral, cultural and critical literacies is part of the production of a distinctive scenario in the graphic version in which a village woman with a modest dress and head-scarf beseechingly asks, "Garesego, why aren't you home with your wife?" and he replies, "I've left her. I'm tired of traditional women" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 47). It is notable that the visuals in this panel depict him not only with a beer bottle in his hand and an open shirt exposing a huge belly, but also with his arms draped around two women wearing suggestive, Westernized dresses. This highlights one of the dominant themes in African short stories, namely the contrast and conflict between traditional ways and the new values of the modern world.

Garesego's cynical, self-serving exploitation of both modernity and traditionalism in his



encounters with women is depicted as being in direct contrast to Paul's enlightened and respectful attitudes. The customary practice of courteous modes of communication between the sexes is underscored when Dikeledi, wearing a headscarf, uses the Setswana greeting for men, "Dumela, rra" during her first meeting with Paul, and he replies, "Dumela, mma" (ibid: 48). When Paul returns from visiting his wife in hospital one evening and finds Dikeledi generously tending to his home and children, he politely refers to her as the mother of her eldest son by asking, "What are you doing now, Mma Banebothe?" (ibid: 52). In addition to multilingualism, both cultural and critical literacies are enhanced through the selection from the written text of lexical items such as these greeting conventions which are then graphically represented in their appropriate social and cultural contexts. Moreover, the repeated usage of the prefix "Mma" serves to indicate the pivotal role played by mothers in African societies. Motherhood is a strong attribute of African feminism, which also looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women, points to social inequities and is directly involved in a struggle to reshape society (Latha, 2001: 28). This ideology is consolidated in the choice to re-sequence the details of the plot so that the graphic adaptation does not end at the scene of the murder, but instead, culminates in panels representing the bonds Dikeledi shares with the other women prisoners and in the concluding piece of dialogue by Kebonye, "We must help each other. This is a terrible world" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 59).

The realistic mode of artwork in the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' differs significantly from the stylized artistic interpretations characterizing the other two short stories in *Deep Cuts* and this enables multiple literacies to be more easily augmented. Readers may focus on striking aspects of the visual symbolism, such as the recurring representation of Dikeledi with a lit candle which suggests that she is endowed with spiritual enlightenment and also draws attention to her ability to be a collector of the light of emotional treasure even in the darkest hours of her life. Dikeledi's hands form a central visual focus in a large number of the panels and in one instance, the visual of her knitting a garment is accompanied by the skilful selection of a line from the written text which appears in a boxed caption stating, "Dikeledi has soft, caressing, almost boneless hands of strange power" (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 46; Head, 1977: 90). As the story unfolds, the realization that these hands have the ability to wield a knife to kill a man adds another dimension to the readers' insight into this "strange power". McCloud (2000: 84) comments that the mere use of visual metaphors doesn't automatically draw out this subtext in fiction. However, when the symbols echo each other and relate directly to the story's central themes, the results can be "mesmerizing". This underscores the value of the multifaceted graphic version as an authentic literary creation that not only mirrors the storyline and themes of Bessie Head's story in many ways, but also introduces innovative elements that facilitate fresh perceptions and interpretations. As Umberto Eco (1981: 49) points out in *The Role of the Reader*, the form of a work of art gains its validity precisely in proportion to the number of perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood, resulting in a variety of resonances and echoes that do not impair their original essence.

## **6. Reading strategies promoted by the functional fusion of literacies in the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures'**

According to Johnston (1992: 171) one of the primary advantages of utilizing graphic texts is that these may not only help readers to expand their range of reading strategies, but also to

consciously monitor the strategies they habitually use to construct meanings from texts. Rose (2005: 81) points out that accounts of discourse should acknowledge their complexity and contradictions, since what is excluded or made invisible may be crucial to the effects of what is included and visible. In studying the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures', the pivotal process of closure helps to boost the reader's discernment of these aspects and reinforces the inferential comprehension of many significant details of the story, as readers utilize specific strategies to develop insights into the complex emotional nuances underlying the concerns and relationships of the characters in the tale.

The effectiveness of reading strategies based on an intertextual study of the written and graphic adaptations of 'A Collector of Treasures' became clear in research carried out by Tessa Welch (1991:3) at the Soweto College of Education, where it was found that reading the prose text after the graphic text enabled students to argue contentious issues in a more complex way and made the appreciation of the language of the prose version much deeper. One-hundred-and-thirty-two in-service primary school educators who did not use English as a medium of instruction in their schools, were asked to read both the graphic and written versions of 'The Collector of Treasures' and to complete a written exercise. The aims of the research were, firstly, to see to what extent the reading of the graphic version stimulated the readers to read the written version and secondly, to compare the responses gained from studying both versions.

In answer to the first question, "Where does the story take place and how do you know?" the results were that the educators who had read the graphic version had a stronger perception of the journey of Dikeledi from Puleng village to the prison in Gaborone, whereas the educators who read the written version only seemed to feel that the setting of the story was in Gaborone. The next question required them to describe the events in the first four pages of both the graphic and the written versions of the story. The fact that the in-service educators who had read the graphic version were able to answer in more detail attested to the fact that the pictures "spoke" to them. They were able to draw together pieces of information about the story from different pages much more meaningfully and to express what was happening in their own words. The responses to the third question were very interesting. The educators were asked, "On the first page of the story, what is Dikeledi's state of mind and how do you know?" Those who had read the written text were able to quote from relevant passages. However, they were unable to explain the meanings of a few unfamiliar phrases and the crime committed by Dikeledi offended many of them to such an extent that they were blinded to the suffering which drove her to the act. In contrast, the readers of the graphic version said things like, Dikeledi was "filled with despair", that she felt "a sense of hopelessness" and that she experienced "strong grief" (Welch, 1991:1).

These reader responses confirm the efficacy of the graphic adaptation in producing insights into the emotional dilemmas experienced by the protagonist. McGregor (1998: 137) states that in classroom encounters with literature, one is looking, among other things, for the development of correspondences of feeling, and the ability to identify with another person by projecting oneself into his or her situation. He adds that if an activity based on literary texts can promote empathy with the protagonists in the dilemmas they face, the values of the participants in the activity may be implicitly explored, observed and clarified. One of the panels in 'The Collector of Treasures' that may also enable students to monitor their responses strategically depicts the usually courageous Dikeledi reduced to despair, with her forehead on her clasped hands and a

tear rolling down her cheek. This visual is accompanied by the scriptwriter's distillation of two lengthy narrative comments from the written version into the brief but potent statement by Dikeledi, "My life has become holy to me. He will defile it". (Thuynsma & Esterhuysen, 1993: 56). It is notable that the observation by the narrator in the written version that indicates pre-meditation, "But it was only a vague blur, a large kitchen knife used to cut meat and Dikeledi knelt at a grinding-stone and sharpened it slowly and methodically" (Head, 1977: 101-102) is replaced by four small panels in the graphic narrative that portray the protagonist's sorrowful face with this knife in view. The murder instrument is foregrounded in only two of these panels, which are devoid of narrative comment or dialogue. In the first of these, she is depicted gazing sadly at the knife and fingering its sharp edge with her thumb before the murder. The second panel occurs after the murder and presents a full view of Dikeledi holding the knife which is pointed downwards and conspicuously bathed in a ray of light. Her facial expression represents a sense of sorrowful finality which deepens into boundless grief in the next two panels as she tenderly embraces her distraught sons. Critical reading strategies may enable students to debate issues such as whether the empathy with the protagonist that is evoked by the style of representation in the written version is heightened to the level of active sympathy in the graphic adaptation by a strengthened focus on the African feminist ideology that underpins Bessie Head's short story. Rose (2005: 83) points out that visual methodologies should make "intertextual connections convincingly productive" and it would seem that the intertextual links that occur amongst the written, visual and oral elements (both within and between panels) in the graphic adaptation play a fruitful role in underscoring the values and central themes of the narrative.

Significantly, research carried out in the first language teaching context has also indicated that the discussions and written work that followed the reading of the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' can be very fruitful (Radus, 1994: 26). Students were enabled to think critically and imaginatively about the social, cultural and political background of Bessie Head's story when issues around race, language and class, male-female stereotypes, relationships, marriage and adultery were discussed in the classroom. To some extent, these responses are concomitant with those elicited by oral renditions of stories and poems, as well as drama performances in African socio-cultural contexts. As Daymond *et al* (2003: 8) point out; members of the audience generally interact with the composer-performer by signalling various emotions followed by discussions or an answering performance.

## 7. Conclusion

Since both the written version and the graphic adaptation of Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures' contain evidence of fresh interpretations and individualized representations, an intertextual study of the two promotes multiple possibilities of analysis, enhancing the process of making and negotiating meaning. Nonetheless, it is also evident that a graphic narrative on its own does have the potential to extend oral, critical, written, visual and cultural literacy skills as readers develop their multiple capacities to engage meaningfully with the text and to appraise their own values and assumptions. The intertextual links amongst the written, visual and oral elements within particular panels as well as between them stimulate readers to utilize textual clues as well as their imaginations to draw underlying inferences during the process of closure and are therefore a vital factor in the efficacy of this narrative. The condensed brevity that is facilitated by the element of selection and omission of details from the written version also

lends immediacy and impact to this representation of both specific and universal concerns. Moreover, the meticulous visual focus on the rural settings and the traditional ethos governing the lives of villagers testifies to the cultural authenticity of this text and strengthens intercultural understandings of customs such as oral and gestural greeting conventions in an African context. In combination with many other aspects of this graphic narrative, these factors provide an insight into the oral storytelling tradition and an introduction to the element of performance art that underlies many genres of African literature.

It is evident that the graphic adaptation of 'The Collector of Treasures' has the potential to promote a popular reading culture by expanding the range of interactions with the narrative, making the process both enjoyable and enriching for readers from a diversity of races, ages, classes and educational backgrounds. The functional fusion of literacies supported by this representation of Bessie Head's Botswana village tale may therefore serve as an authentic signpost for the feasibility of broadening the scope of literary studies in a wide variety of cultural and educational contexts.

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