CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Existentialcomics.com is comics strip created by a software engineer in Portland, Oregon named Corel Mohler. These comics is presented in digital form and publication with website media. What is unique about this comic is the theme of philosophy it contains as explained earlier. There are various topics of philosophy discussion in it that will be very popular with philosophy readers in general. With a humorous style, the themes of philosophy with its characters made into a caricature make philosophy readers or even those who are new to philosophy become entertained. In addition, this comic is also in the form of a containing hundreds of titles in it. Reading *existentialcomics.com* will be like a weekly philosophy newspaper with different topics every day.

As strip comics presented in the form of a website with a philosophy theme served with humour, existentialcomics.com creates new vibes in the development of comics. The new vibes in question are the use of comic humour plots in the form of strips that seem very simple but weighty. The weight in question is the content of philosophical thought with its criticisms. In addition to the plot, there are also characters represented with funny caricatures that make the charisma of the real character change as a result of comic characterization. The two main elements, namely plot and character has built humour using comic narrative, dialogism, and characterization. In other side, the content of philosophy has been formed with the characters and plots. There are more than one hundred characters in it, and all of characters have their philosophical thought based on the philosopher in history.

Historically, strip comics have been closely associated with critic towards politicians, philosopher with certain ideologies that contradict with society, or artists with opposing communities or fans with them. In essence, strip comics are often used as a joke or a satire that contains criticism of a criticism of a character or someone's thoughts. The laughter that arises from strip comics is the laughter of certain groups against other groups. And these strip comics are spread in

mainstream or even independent media such as zines. The development of technology makes strip comics become very accessible, many strip comics are spread on the internet using websites and also spread on various platforms such as *Instagram* or *X*. Like *existentialcomics.com* which has its own website, but its philosophy-themed strip comics are trending on social media in several accounts of the philosophy community or the X thread from accounts of philosophy fans. They make philosophy like everyday joke. Their laughter, of course, is the laughter of a group against another group, which in this case is a group of people who take philosophy too seriously.

Since digital technology was developed, the advantages were not only for the readers with their access against the comics but also for the comic creator. The comics creator can make comics so easily and publish it actively and efficiently. But in this ecosystem of comics strip between the readers and the creators does not have any researcher to articulate the value of strip comics with the narrative or the discourse of ideology in it. That is the reason why the literary critic needed to analysing the value of comics strip since this artwork can define as literary work. Then the creator can make another comics strip with new forms or contents or with another perspective in satire towards some community especially towards oppression from the political power.

The narrative in digital strip comics is served with digital picture narrative and combined with the balloons of text narrative. Making new form in delivering plot and different style with the conventional comics. The panels in digital strip comics has influenced by the frame, like PC or gadget. It makes the plot of digital strip comics does not start from right to left as usual like in the book but start from up to bottom which named scrolling. It makes digital strips comics different than conventional strip comics, but for the form of plot itself there is a big difference which more significant. The form of humour in the plot usually identic with conventional strip comics like making caricature or using four to six panels, but in webcomics, the creator of strip comics has their authority to making any others forms that developing the form of humour plot in strip comics.

The picture narrative of character in strip comics usually depicting the real characters or making a fictional character. For the real character the process of depicting the real character to strip comics, character named the caricature include the process of hyperball or metaphor. In this case, the characters with their attribute become the mode of critic towards their thought in real world or fictional world. Because the creator does not change their thought because their thought is the object of humour criticism. The purpose of this is to make the characters inferior as what Aristoteles was said in *Poetic*.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The character in comics was not using the text, comics use picture to draw a character. In comics, characterisation must be expressing by picture if the readers want to know the concept of character in the object of strip comics. And the picture source will must be different with the text source then it makes the storytelling technique to express the idea through character must be different.

The characterisation in comics not only expressed with the picture, there are the balloons of comics which using text. Usually the balloons of comics used to make a dialog or narrating story, but in comics the balloons will linked to character cartoon or panels. It makes us to not only read the text when reading comics, the readers must read both. Then the characterisation of character also using text to expressing another character or the character itself.

The character in this comics is philosopher characters. The characteristic of philosophers in reality or in the common views are serious, stiff, confusing, even annoying. As a function of literature which can depicting or recreating the reality, the character of philosophers in common views will be inversely proportional to the purpose of humour which is unserious, funny, and make people laughing. The media of delivering this humour would be served with picture narrative which contain the picture (visual) and narrative (text). The purpose of humour also has a critical value, in this case the critic of humour towards philosophy will be investigate use the characters as modes. Then the readers will be known the problems in philosophy.

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1.3 Research Questions

1. How characterisation of the character was expressed by picture?

2. How charaterisation of the character was expressed by text?

3. How philosopher characters become a mode of humour criticism in web comics *Existentialcomics.com?*

1.4 Research Objectives

1. The concept of characters through picture

2. The concept of characters through text

3. To know how philosopher characters become a mode of humour criticism in strip comics *Existentialcomics.com.*

1.5 Research Significance

The significance of this research will provide an overview of how the world of comics as literature develops, is studied scientifically, and can provide knowledge as data that becomes an asset for the future development of the comics industry. The future development of comics will be oriented towards values as the essence of literature itself, to depict the external life of comics. This research can be used as a reference on what to create in comics to search and find new ideas in the form of comics so that comics readers rediscover their pleasure in comics which certainly creates a new critic in the cultural industry, especially in this case comics.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

In popular culture, there are various definitions that state what exactly is meant by popular culture. In (Storey, 2009)states that there are various approaches to understanding what popular culture is. The first approach in understanding the definition of popular culture is a culture that is widely and highly liked by everyone. Take for an example the songs which peoples often listen on *spotify*, the videos the people can watch on *Youtube*, the items people usually buy at the supermarket, or the books people usually buy such as magazines or comics. So, people can conclude that popular culture is actually so close to us. In this approach, popular culture will be seen from its quantity dimension. How then a cultural product is mass-produced and can reach all elements of society without exception.

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The second approach to understanding popular culture is in terms of its value (Storey, 2009).Popular culture will be used as a standard to judge high culture. In other words, popular culture is inferior culture. As something that is inferior, then the community here divides culture into two classes to find out which one is superior to the other. The first is high culture where the cultural products tend to be enjoyed only by certain people. The second is inferior culture where cultural products are consumed by society as a whole so that they can be said to be cheap cultural products.

The third approach to looking popular culture in his mass production (Storey, 2009). The products of popular culture are produced by industrial capitalism. Which the main purposes of the production are money then how to widespread in society. As a result of this mass production, popular cultural products are considered inferior because they can be easily bought and found. In contrast, cultural products that emerge from the upper class are not mass-produced and maintain their authenticity so that they are of high value.

The fourth approach in defining popular culture is that the cultural production of popular culture comes purely out of society (Storey, 2009). This means that the emergence of popular culture products truly reflects society itself and often popular culture products romanticize the culture of workers. Basically, popular culture is the same as folk culture, it's just that the popular culture industry has a wider reach than folk culture.

A fifth approach to defining popular culture is that it is political and hegemonic (Storey, 2009). This view emerged from Gramsci who used the term hegemony to refer to the domination of power by means of culture. The process of hegemony then occurs unconsciously by influencing people's mindsets and habits. Popular culture can then be used to perpetuate a certain power structure by brainwashing the public through its cultural products. In this view, popular culture products are no longer products that purely come out of society but are deliberately created by the owners of power to perpetuate their power. However, Gramsci also

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argued that to counter the hegemony of the dominance of the power structure, it is necessary to counter the hegemony of power itself.

The sixth definition of popular culture is the result of a debate between modern and postmodern thinkers (Storey, 2009). In the view of modern thinkers, a cultural product must have a noble and authentic value, characterized by the Romantic era where literary works were only written and enjoyed by people from the Kingdom. When England entered the Victorian era, literature was then taught to labourers, which at that time the world had entered the industrial phase with the invention of the steam engine. Then literature was introduced to the lower class of society, namely factory workers. But whereas literature was initially used as an escapism for the lower classes, capitalism later turned it into a cultural industry which again benefited the upper classes. The upper class, referred to by Karl Marx as the Bourgeois, consisting of the owners of the means of production and the holders of power, eventually made the cultural industry their field to make profits and perpetuate power, which in the end was known as popular culture.

After understanding various definitions related to popular culture, the next is to recognize what is produced by popular culture. The popular culture industry actually produces a variety of cultural products, especially popular literature. Popular literature is a cultural product that is closely related to the industry because basically popular literature is written as an entertainer for the general public without regard to how high the value contained in it is and is intended to reap as much profit as possible (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). There are various types of popular literary products such as pop songs, movies as a new form of drama, and some prose such as romance, adventure, detective, and thriller genre novels. In addition, there is another form of novel that contains picture elements in it, namely comics. Will Eisner stated that "There are different ways of telling a story" and that is the picture storytelling (Eisner, 2008). Technology provides new medium of transmission, but fundamentally there are only two major ways: words (oral or written) and images. Sometimes the two are combined (Eisner, 2008).

In the digital media, comics have changed from being read on pages like conventional comics, in digital comics people read comics by scrolling from top to bottom (McCloud, Understanding Comic, 2022). And that is one of the many changes that occur from the transition of conventional comics to digital comics. Not only in terms of media presentation but in terms of the formula in it also has novelty, especially in comics strips. Comics strips are usually presented in newspapers after entering into digital form comics strips become very exclusive for readers to enjoy without being disturbed by other writings outside the comics. In terms of genre, it has also changed, comics strips that usually discuss politics can now discuss anything such as philosophy. *Existentialcomics.com* (Mohler, 2023) itself is a humour comics strip in the form of a website that discusses philosophy. These comics is very unique because it contains philosophical theories that should be very rigid and heavy to discuss and present, but with such a form, the discussion of philosophy in these comics becomes so fun and easy to understand.

Changes in form and novelty that occur in popular literature, especially in this case digital comics, is a phenomenon that occurs in the popular culture industry. This phenomenon is referred to as convention and invention in formula studies within the scope of cultural studies. Convention is repetition as a characteristic of popular culture products that recycle every form of previous literary works. This recycling is oriented towards mass production and ultimately financial gain. Meanwhile, invention is the novelty that emerges in popular culture products which can be considered as a testing ground (Cawelty, n.d.). Every novelty that appears in popular culture products can be profitable and sell well in the cultural industry market or, on the contrary, be abandoned. The formula study will see how both work in every production of popular literary works, in this case is the structure narrative of digital comics. Digital comics are an evolution of the comics themselves as a result of the digitization that occurred after the industrial revolution today (McCloud, 2022). Conventional books are gradually being abandoned, including comics, which were originally in the form of books or newspapers, now have digital images that can be seen from a computer or smartphone screen (McCloud, 2022).

Discussing formula means the research will be start from structure of narrative. The study about structure of narrative firstly studied by Gerard Genette in Narrative Discourse and then known widely as narratology or the studies about narrative structure (Eagleton, 2007). After Genette, Chatman classifying the narrative as the technique to convey the discourse and the discourse itself is the content or the idea of story. Narrative dived at two categories, event and existents. Event is the plot or the aspect of time in narrative and existents is the character and setting in story or the aspect of space in narrative (Chatman, 1993). Chatman also stated that story not only conveyed with the text like prose but also conveyed with picture like comics and films (Chatman, 1993). Picture narrative as Chatman stated is picture narrative what Eisner stated, picture narrative use picture to create the structure of narrative in plot and characters. The plot and character in every medium are interdependent elements, to identify the characters with characterisation the readers have to identify the plot and to know the order story the creators need characters as an actor that do an action so the plot will possible (Mikkonen, 2017).

The characters in *existentialcomics.com* contain humour criticism in it. According to (Morreall, 1998) that humour occurs as a result of psychological shift. This situation occurs because there are shifting in the cognitive or affective realm. Shifting in cognitive means like incongruity theory, shifting cognitive in incongruity theory based on the basic idea of the world where people have the expectation of certain patterns of things or event. The laugh come when our experience it does not fit in these patterns. The other side, shifting in affective comes in superiority and relief theory. Superiority itself comes from Plato, he stated that "pain in the soul" means in laughing there are the laughable person as the object of laugh. The laughable person is the object of someone who thinks himself good, wealth, more virtous, or wiser rather than this person. Then relief theory using a nervous energy which released by the laughter situations. These two theories primarily affective for the reason both of that accompanied with a boost of positive feelings like confident, a cessation of negative feelings like pity or disgust, and release of supressed feelings like "peek a boo"(Morreall, 1998).

Society in popular culture was dependent on digital media that it will eventually create a new habit that becomes the initial form of the tradition of modern society. In this case, of course, mass media is one of the most important factors in changing people's habits (Adhiarso et al., 2019). In order to adapt to these changing habits, comics should not be presented just like that. With the renewal of presentation and genre in comics, comics are not outdated so that they still exist today. As the consequences of humour which alienate the object humour (Morreall, 1998), in the structure of comics there must be a subject of humour and the object of humour. The object of humour of this strip comics is philosophy, then the structure of comics using character as the focaliser to critic the philosophy. With the digital medium, the comics has an ideal media to serve his jokes to the people. The mass media make the comics become a commodity without understand the purposes of the comics (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).
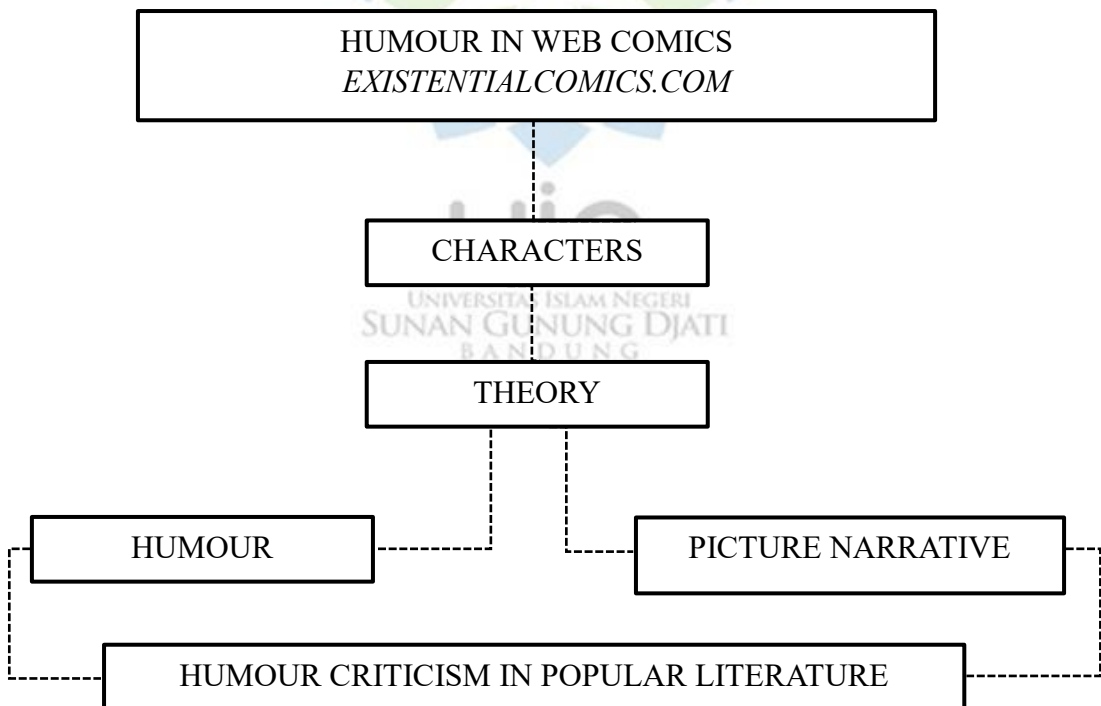

Table 1. 1: Conceptual Framwork

1.7 Previous Research

The dissertation thesis which talked about *Panji Tengkorak* comic created by Hans Jalahadra, Seno Gumira Ajidarma analysed the remake of this comics at 1968, 1985, and 1996 versions (Ajidarma, 2011). He compared three versions of the comics in his simultaneous and chronology with Barthes and Saussurean theory. By comic theory and cultural studies approaches, this research used same theory to analyse the visual aspects specificly in comics. From this research, there five topics of findings. First is the visual abstraction of comics which used realism with imitation discourse and equivalence discourse opposed between objectivity and subjectivity ideology. Second is the simulation of cultural codes which were srious code, humour code, merchant code in collection code 1 and artistic code, *silat* code, or violence code. The third is the simulation of identity which were origin identity, disered identity, and non-identity in the personal identity collection, and factual identity and non-factual identity in cultural identity collection. The fourth topic is the resistance against gender bias. And the five topic is inability in dialectic discourses because of the narrative.

The other reseach with the same object which are strip comics comes from (Khatai & Ladsaria, 2025), he studied about how strip comics represented the multispecies impact of oil spills from Rohan Chakravarty comics. This research objective is to know how strip comics grow awarnesss about animal walfare. Using the element of visual narrative structure theory by Neil Cohn and Heitkemperd-Yates theory about graphic code, visual grammar, and graphic syntax. With the multimodal narrative style, the research examined how the readers aware about sustainable energy consumption practice.

With the same approaches research which used humour to analysed strip comics was be researched by (Dutta & Mohanty, 2024) to analysed cartoons make the readers recognised with the climate change issue as the important issue. The paper was analysed three strip comics which were *Green Humour* by Rohan Chakravarty, *Ecotism* by Ashivini Menon, and *The Wildscapes* by Deborshee Gogoi, all of them published in reputed newspapers in India. The paper used the

iconicity theory of comic cartoons with humour self-criticism to grow the awareness about climate change issue.

About the webcomics medium issues, in (Reingold, 2024) the paper analysed Israeli webcomics with Barlev's comics of anthropomorphism issue and Nachmany's comics about superhero parody issue. This research has been introduced new modes of graphic communication in Israeli comics as the objective. The paper explained that webcomics giving an expansion of range and scope of the Israeli comics in the marketplace.

Meanwhile, the paper from (Classon Frangos, 2024) focused on the verbal-visual strategies to represent multiple scales of space and time in speculative comics. The speculative comics had been visualise the antropocene through comics. The paper had been contextualised the representation of space and time in earl superhero comics in Anglophonic comics like *Nameless* by Grant Morrison and Chris Burnams (2015), *Trees* by Warren Ellis and Jason Howard's (2014-2016, 2020), and *The Many Death's of Laila Starr* by Filipe Andrade (2021).

The elements of characters in comics had been analysed in the research paper from (Santos & Jürgens, 2024). The paper analysed DC comics character 'Harley Quinn' to know the representations of women scientists in comics. The paper analysed the identity of Harley Quinn in her relationship with the Joker and the gender based on dynamic dimensions. Because her identity dimensions often to be judged as unnecessarily, unfairly, reducionist, and narrow of our understanding of her complex character. The identity identification of Harly Quinn character approached through her transformation from Harleen Quinzel to Harley Quinn. The paper try to understand and examine the complexity of Harly Quinn character in the DC universe.

In the research from (Cook & Frey, 2017) focused on how to analyse superheroes comics in terms of literary sociology. For example, in the formation of a hero character, a comic creator takes reference from several mythical characters available in various races and ethnicities. Of course, this is in line with the myth

criticism method as a method for researching comics. However, this research positions comics more as a learning tool for students using picture learning described by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. The students are then given the space to express misconceptions that occur in comic characters related to race and ethnicity.

In addition to the above studies that position comics more as a learning medium, some comics try to go deeper into unpacking the elements in the comics themselves and their impact on society. Like the research conducted by (Mathur, 2021) which analyses political caricatures as a form of picture satire using exaggerated physiognomic distortion techniques, a combination of text and images that produce symbolism and humour, and visual metaphors to comment on socio-political issues. The object used in this research is a series of political caricatures or single-panel editorial cartoons that make satire of classic literary texts. There is a similar concept in this study where the object used is a comic with the theme of satire on thought, it's just different in theme where this study uses classic literary texts while the researcher uses the object of philosophy-themed comics. In this study, it is considered that the cartoons pay attention to aesthetically ambitious works of art by questioning form, meaning, and interpretation as well as redefining the idea of political art and the ontological meaning of literature. The research also uses the theory of post-literary criticism to understand the cartoons.

Other research (Rys et al., 2021) uses the theory of precarity representation in visual culture. By making an EP (Extended Play) of British trip-hop music *Massive Attack¸* in the form of #//Eutopia (2020) with multimedia brings the topic of academic debate, aesthetics, and socio-economic activism in precarity. Based on this research, there are several characteristics of precarity aesthetics which are the main sites of precarity discourse. This discourse is nuanced as an object of critical reflection in line with gender assumptions, historical presuppositions, and questions of aesthetics. The visual representation used in this research is in line with the analysis conducted by the researcher in the comics strip object.

Unlike the previous research, this research uses the theory of environmental representation. The object of the research is a comic titled *Mayah's Lot* (2012) by Rebecca Bratpies and Charlie La Greca, which tells the story of a black girl named Mayah who discovers a company that will turn an empty lot in an urban neighbourhood into a toxic waste repository. With the issue of global climate crisis and environmental disasters, the comic aims to show that ecological disasters play an important role in the lives of today's children, many of whom come from poor or marginalised families. Unfortunately, the literature read by children has failed to educate them about environmental issues and equip them to solve pressing ecological problems. The comic also strongly illustrates the relationship between environmental issues and racial discrimination by presenting the struggles of activists and communities. In this study, it is stated that the comic *Mayah's lot* (2012) succeeded in making readers, especially young people, to participate in environmental activism (Anderson, 2022).