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**To cite this article:** Lenczowska, I. (2024). Hiromu Arakawa's Fullmetal Alchemist: Stylistic Nuances of the Comic Book. *Social Communication. Online Journal*, 1(25), 64-74.

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.57656/sc-2024-0007>



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Social Communication



Published online: 2 Dec 2024



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UNIVERSITY of INFORMATION  
TECHNOLOGY and MANAGEMENT  
in Rzeszow, POLAND

## Hiromu Arakawa's Fullmetal Alchemist: Stylistic Nuances of the Comic Book

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comics, manga, media, Fullmetal Alchemist, analysis, art, drawing, Hiromu Arakawa

### ABSTRACT

Nowadays, manga is a very popular medium, especially among young people from different areas of the world. The following article analyzes selected volumes of the manga "Fullmetal Alchemist" by Hiromu Arakawa in terms of style and visuals. This manga is one of the better-known titles and has many admirers around the world. In the analysis, the text and illustrations were examined separately. The research made it possible to determine Arakawa's style of drawing, world creation, characters, and dialogues, to mention a few, and to draw conclusions from them.

### Introduction

Manga is one of the most common and beloved types of comics around the world. Japanese comics are characterized by reading from right to left, appearing in black and white, and distorted character proportions. Readers of manga are both adults and children. The word manga comes from the Chinese word 'manhua', which can be translated as improvised sketches. The first artist to use the term manga was Katsushika Hokkusaï, who used the word to name his volumes with caricatured drawings of people (Petersen, 2010, pp. 40-41). Osamu Tezuka is considered the creator of manga as we know it today. He published such titles as "New Treasure Island", "Astroboy", and "Jungle Emperor" (Petersen, 2010, pp. 174-176). This article aims to present the results of a stylistic and visual analysis of selected volumes of the "Fullmetal Alchemist" manga by Hiromu Arakawa, especially conclusions about the author's creation of characters.

### COMICS AS AN ART FORM

Comics is an art form that tells a story the author created through drawing series placed in frames. Comics can occur with as well as without text; if it appears, it is embedded in dialogue bubbles (Szyłak, 2009, p. 5). The purpose of comics is to communicate between the author and the reader through illustrations and possibly text, making it a medium. In the case of comic stories without text, the author must use graphic elements that are understood identically by the audience (Szyłak, 2000, pp. 11-13). The mother fields of comics are visual arts – responsible for illustrations; literature – dialogues, narration, and all texts; and film arts – responsible for the principles of smooth transitions between frames (Birek, 2004, p. 14).

A comic strip consists of various elements, such

as frames, illustrations, dialogue bubbles, panels, characters, onomatopoeias, and titles. Any comic can consist of more or less elements. A comic frame can have different types. Their primary purpose is to direct the viewer's eye so that the plot presented makes sense, is read in sequence, and presents a change of location and time, e.g., a flashback or a dream. Movie frames are not synonymous with comic frames, because of their purpose – a comic frame is intended for print, and their importance to the plot, it can change the course of the story – a film frame lasts a short time. An entire single page filled with frames is called a comic page board. It can contain a large and small number of frames – in some cases, it can be one or half a frame (Szyłak, 2000, pp. 44-47). Dialogue bubbles contain text, which can vary in appearance depending on the type of speech. There are many variations of speech bubbles in comics – their appearance is to direct what tone of voice is shown at a given time. For example, a whisper can be shown through a bubble, which will be drawn with a dotted line; in the case of a shout, the bubble will have sharp, pointed edges. The role of onomatopoeia is to show sounds occurring in frames. Their appearance depends on the type of sound – a loud sound usually equates to a large caption and a quiet sound to a small one; with a stretch-out sound, the text will be long, and vice versa with a short sound. Illustrations placed in frames are supposed to show the plot of the story. They can be dynamic or static, depending on what the author has to convey (Szyłak, 2000, p. 110). The title serves as an identifier of a given comic strip and is supposed to encourage the viewer to read the work. It appears together with the cover (Szyłak, 2000, p. 135). The plot corresponds to how the events are presented, in what order they occur, and how the frames are set up on the pages. It can be based on fiction or real events. Usually, the

plot of a comic book concerns the fate of the main character. The worst thing that can happen is that the viewer gets bored with the plot – this often happens when the main character is incorrectly created, the pace of plot development is very slow or in the case of impenetrable prose (David, 2009, pp. 90-93).

Jerzy Szyłak (2009, pp. 7-10) calls comics the art of exaggeration because they do not show realism but caricatured images. Such a procedure aims to show important elements to the viewer, who is supposed to recognize them fairly quickly. The first primitive comics can be considered as early as prehistoric cave paintings. The current format of comics as we know it began to take shape in the 19th century. Three precursors to the art of comics can be distinguished: Rudolphe Töpffer, his student Gustav Doré and Wilhelm Busch. In those days, comic stories were slightly different from the ones we know today. The text appeared in a separate, lower part of the frame rather than in a dialogue bubble. In addition, comic strips were published mainly in newspapers as short stories with a humorous punchline. The thematic range of comics expanded in the 20th century. Stories began to be created with a variety of themes, such as didactic, melodramatic, and children's, to mention a few. Further, they began to publish them as separate books, and the most popular theme shown in them was superheroes, so it is not surprising that Marvel was successful, especially since they created slightly

different heroes – specifically, those who acquired their powers rather than were born with them (Szyłak, 2009, pp. 38-40).

Mentioning the history of comics, there can be no lack of information about Japanese manga. It appeared in the second half of the 20th century. This comic book type is quite popular among young and older audiences in the Polish market. It covers a wide range of topics, as the plot of a manga can be about everyday life, depicting cooking instructions or, dealing with fantasy or strictly adult themes (Pagon, n.d.). The Japanese portrayed the image of women and men differently. The woman was presented as innocent, delicate, and sweet – while men were courageous and brave, so they were more often chosen as the main characters. Osamu Tezuka decided to make a change. As a result, he created a female protagonist named Princess Knight – according to the author, she possessed both girlish and boyish qualities. This action inspired other creators to choose women as main characters (Petersen, 2010, pp. 180-181).

Nowadays, comics can be found almost everywhere. Its style is open to novelty; authors can create comics using stick figures, cartoons, manga or absolute realism. Comics can be created in the traditional way or digitally. In addition, due to the Internet, almost everyone has access to the works of authors worldwide.

### Figure 1:

A fragment of the comic strip “Akira” Katsuhiro Ōtomo as an example of a comic strip;  
<https://akiramanga.com/manga/akira-chapter-18>, online 24.11.2024



## HIROMU ARAKAWA AS MANGA AUTHOR

The following paper focuses on one manga author, Hiromu Arakawa, who creates fantasy-themed comics with a fair dosage of humor. Arakawa was born in 1973 on the island of Hokkaido. From an early age, she had a passion for drawing comics (Peoplepill, [n.d.](#)). After graduating from high school, she began taking oil painting classes while continuing to help her parents with their farm work. In 1999, she moved to Tokyo, where she found employment with Square Enix as an assistant to Hiroyuki Eto – creator of the manga “Mahojin Guru Guru. Arakawa’s first authorial publication was the manga “Stray Dog”, which was published by the monthly magazine “Shonen Gangan”. Subsequently, one chapter of her comic “Shanghai Yomakikai” appeared in the same magazine. In 2001 “Shonen Gangan published the first chapter of “Fullmetal Alchemist” – her most famous work, which circulated around the world. The entire series has 108 chapters, which have been collected into 27 volumes (Kiddle, [n.d.](#)). Hiromu Arakawa worked with Bones Studio to release “Fullmetal Alchemist” as an anime series. In the end, she was not fully involved in creating the script, producing a different ending than the one in the comic book. Another version of the manga adaptation was undertaken, and this time, the comic book author informed the director of the planned ending so that they would be identical. Studio Bones is not the author’s only collaboration; she assisted Flag Studio in creating the animation “Hero Tales” (Peoplepill, [n.d.](#)). In April 2011, she took on the challenge of creating a more realistic story, resulting in “Silver Spoon”. The comic told the story of a boy who decided to attend an agricultural school, although he had no experience. The challenges and good moments of farming are shown. There is also no shortage of environmental themes, the importance of hard work, animal welfare, or sustainable development of society (Silver Spoon Wiki, [n.d.](#)).

The author’s work has been recognized, earning her such awards as the 21st Century Shounen GanGan Award, Shogakukan Manga Award – she received this award three times, Osamu Tezuka Cultural Prize, New Artist Prize (Hahnlibraty Shogakukan Manga Award, [n.d.](#)). Her works include eleven original manga: Stray Dog (1999), Totsugeki Tonari no Enikkusu (2000), Demons of Shanghai (2000), Fullmetal Alchemist (2001-2010), Raiden-18 (2005-2021), Soten no Komori (2006), Hero Tales (2006-2010), Noble Farmer (2008-present), Silver Spoon (2011-2019), The Heroic Legend of

Arslan (2013-present), Daemons of Shadow Realm (2022-present). The author chose a cow with glasses as her avatar for the reader due to her upbringing on a dairy farm (Peoplepill, [n.d.](#)).

“Fullmetal Alchemist” presents the story of two brothers, Edward and Alphonse Elric, whose main goal is to recover their lost bodies after a failed attempt to bring their mother back to life. They can achieve this goal by using the philosopher’s stone, through which the older brother - Ed, joins the army as a state alchemist. With this title, he is entitled to research grants and access to military libraries. After passing the exam, Edward is given the nickname ‘fullmetal’. The story is set in the world of alchemy created by the author, where the principle of equivalent exchange rules. The brothers live in a country ruled by the military - Amestris. The depicted world is inspired by Europe, especially England, as indicated by the depicted architecture, landscape and pronunciation of the plot (Fullmetal Alchemist Manga Online, [n.d.](#)). In addition to the previously mentioned brothers, important roles in the manga are played by such characters as Roy Mustang, Riza Hawkeye and Winry Rockbell.

The main character is Edward Elric, who has an explosive temper. He gets irritated easily, especially when someone mentions his short height. He has golden eyes and braided hair; characteristic features of his appearance are steel prosthetics and a red coat with the Flamel cross on the back, which signifies the pursuit of truth. Edward’s younger brother is Alphonse Elric, who is the opposite of Ed - calm, composed and understanding. Al lost his entire body after the incident in an attempt to resurrect his mother, but Ed managed to restore his soul to steel armor. In this form, he does not need food or sleep. His human form has short golden hair and golden eyes. Winry Rockbell is the brothers’ childhood friend and their mechanic. Winry has long blond hair tied up in a high ponytail and blue eyes. She is a cheerful, empathetic teenager who has a high sense of morality, always ready to help others. Roy Mustang supports the Elric brothers on the military side as a colonel and the state alchemist. He has dark eyes and short black hair. His characteristics are pride, trust in his subordinates, and striving. Mustang’s lieutenant is Riza Hawkeye, whom he trusts the most. She has medium-length blond hair, which she pins up in a bun, and brown eyes. She is self-controlled, disciplined and rational, often acting as a sniper. The main antagonist is a homunculus, which represents the seven deadly sins; this is how the author named each of them. Their names are Lust, Gluttony, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Pride and Sloth.

At the core of each of them is a philosopher's stone, so they have extraordinary regeneration abilities and individual skills, such as changing their form or an indestructible shield (Fullmetal Alchemist Wiki, [n.d.](#)).

"Fullmetal Alchemist" was published in Poland by J.P. Fantastica from 2006 to 2012, with all volumes printed as Japanese editions with right-to-left reading directions. Currently, the manga is being reissued in a deluxe version.

### Figure 2:

*A fragment of the comic strip "Akira" Katsuhiro Ōtomo as an example of a comic strip;*  
<https://akiramanga.com/manga/akira-chapter-18>, online 24.11.2024



## METHODOLOGY

The research protocol involved using two analytical methods - stylistic analysis, which is a form of textual study, and visual analysis, focusing on interpreting the graphic layer of messages. The research procedure used purposive sampling - volumes 2, 14 and 26 were analyzed (to obtain a cross-sectional selection of analytical material).

As Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak (2008) writes, stylistic analysis studies a text, its features, structure and function to improve our understanding of its construction and the given message. In the case of the meter of selected volumes "Fullmetal Alchemist" translated into Polish by Paweł "Rep" Dybała, the text is mainly dialogues, so it is to them that most focus was dedicated. The stylistic study aimed to establish the features of the characters created by Hiromu

Arakawa and set in the world created by her. The second research method used was visual analysis, i.e., a study that exclusively interprets graphic elements. In her article, Grazyna Penkowska (2017) wrote that it is significant to look at such aspects as color, framing and composition in visual analysis.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Stylistic analysis:

The plot of the manga under study deals with subjects related to alchemy, and as a result, many keywords related to this topic appear in the dialogue layer, such as: "alchemy," "transmutation," "equivalent exchange," "philosopher's stone," "steel alchemist" or "homunculus." There is practically no narrator in the comics - the exceptions are volumes 1, 3, and 27.

The narration is impersonal; in volume 1, he begins a phrase, and in volume 27, he finishes it; in volume 3, he describes the nature of the philosopher's stone. The characters' landscapes and appearance are not described, as illustrations show this. In the story, there are mainly dialogues and monologues, which do not end with periods but exclamation points, question marks, polys or nothing. The characters use colloquial language, but formal phrases appear when the situation demands it, such as during conversations with high-ranking military officials or when the character requires it. There are a lot of interrupted sentences, which adds dynamics to the dialogue. Because of the comic character, there are many sound-alike words like "boom," "shzzzz," and "crunch," and their purpose is to show what is happening around them and add dynamics to the scenes. Edward Elric uses colloquial language, rarely using formal words, sometimes addressing military people by rank, an example being Riza Hawkeye, to

whom he refers as "Lieutenant." He is often referred to as a "shortie" because he is relatively short for his age. Being referred to as short, Edward gets angry, which he expresses through cursing and many exclamations. Ed's dialogues often contain insulting words, such as "mongrel," "muzzle," "you bastard" or other such phrases. He usually addresses his brother as "Al" or "Alphonse." Over the course of the story presented, his type of pronunciation changes somewhat, becoming more mature, but there is still much vulgarity in his lines. Al also uses colloquial language, but slightly different from his older brother. Alphonse uses polite phrases very often. He addresses Edward as "brother," "Ed" or "Edziu." It can be noted that Al notoriously apologizes to Ed and explains his behavior, and outbursts of anger. Through this type of treatment, some characters think that it is Alphonse who acts like an older brother.

### Figure 3:

Examples of comic pages showing the text in Arakawa's work;

The authors' materials - images from the 14th volume of the "Fullmetal Alchemist"



The antagonists in the manga definitely and clearly, in their dialogues, inform us about their contempt for people. In volume two, when the action moves to the city of Liore, a homunculus named Lust makes statements about humans: “Look Gluttony! How bottomlessly stupid people can be!” (Arakawa, 2006, vol. 2, pp. 65). In volume fourteen, during a meeting with the Elric brothers and their friend Lin Yao, the Father of Homunculus compares humanity to worms “Do you people, seeing a worm crawling on the ground, think of it as ‘stupid’? Even if it litters about, fighting for life, the difference between you is so great that you simply don’t care. That’s what you are to me – worms” (Arakawa, 2009, vol. 14, p. 18). Homunculuses refer to characters such as Edward, Alphonse, Izumi, Roy, Hohenheim as ‘sacrifices.’ This is to emphasize their importance to the father’s plan and not, as it may seem, a negative form.

The author tried to show the character of the characters through their style of pronunciation. An example is Alex Louis Armstrong, who stands out through the use of archaisms and sometimes in punctuated chic. Volume two features a chimaera who spoke in a human voice. Her utterances were divided into syllables, resulting in pauses when reading her statements. Pages 131 and 132 of the second volume show a text that can be interpreted as the narrator telling the story of the Ishvar war, but the subsequent text box clearly indicates that Roy Mustang pronounces the text - he is distinguished from the narrator of the first and last volumes by his font, which is sans-serif, unlike the narrator. The author often deviates slightly from the main plot, that is, the Elric brothers’ search for a way to recover their bodies. These treatments are meant to better acquaint the reader with the world of alchemy created in “Fullmetal Alchemist” and its characters.

### Visual analysis:

The author uses a style typical of manga - the characters have large eyes, expressive facial expressions, and a moderately realistic depiction of the figures; however, there are elements depicted in a realistic manner, such as the landscape, buildings, clothing, etc. There are no visible pen pulls, so Arakawa definitely uses

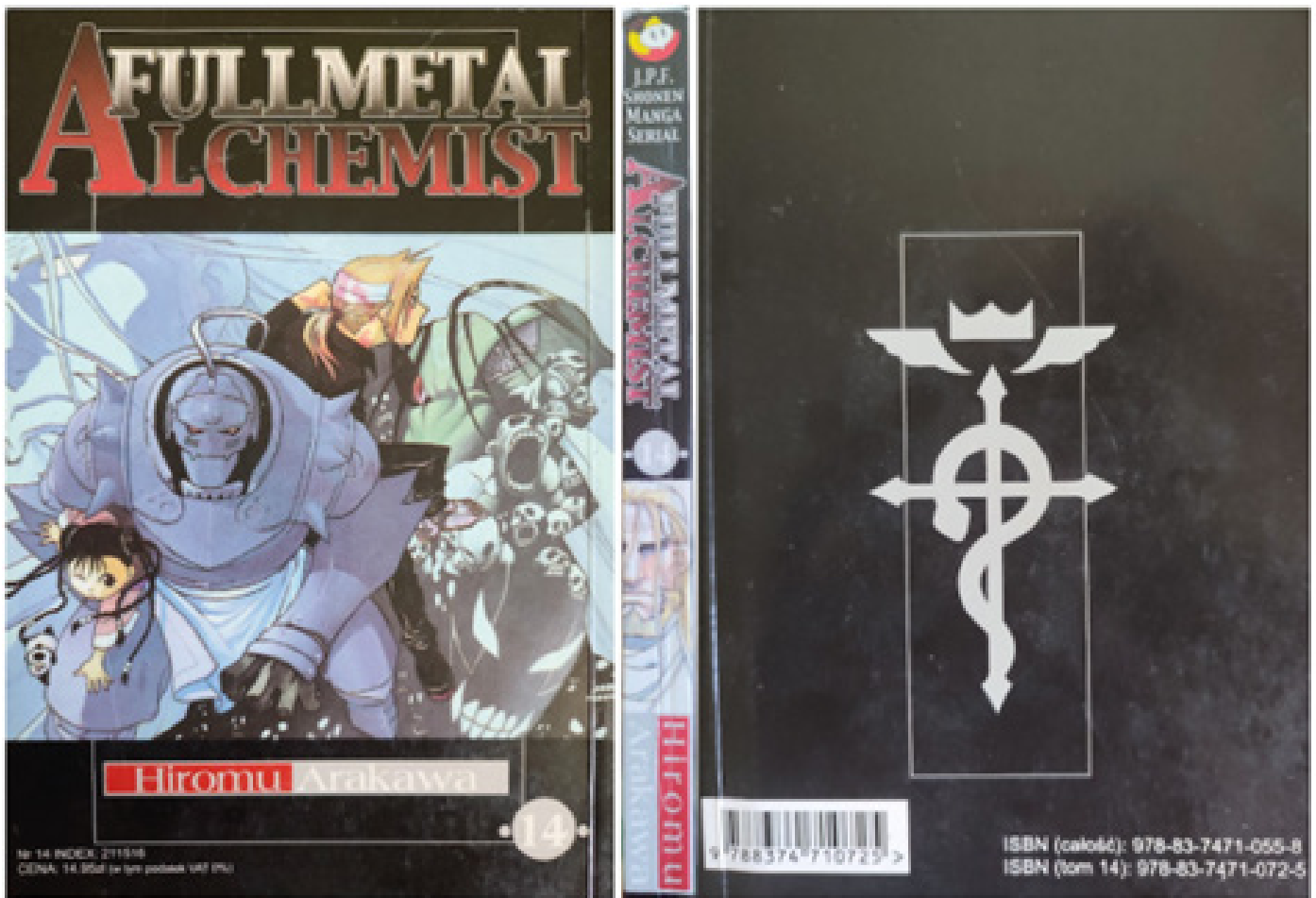
single strokes to paint. A great number of frames have lots of details, especially clothing, background objects, weapons or armor. Most of the characters have their own special features, such as Ed’s braid and prosthetics, Al’s horn on his armor, Envy’s tattoo of an uroboros on his left thigh, Gluttony’s tattoo of an uroboros on his tongue, Scar’s “X” shaped scar on his forehead; these elements make the characters recognizable at a glance. The author is not afraid to draw a variety of silhouettes, so she does not limit herself to one type of figure for men and women. One can see people with disabilities, young people, older adults, fat people, skinny people, beautiful people, ugly people or even average people. However, men prevail when considering the number of male and female main characters.

The main female characters are courageous, brave, confident, have a firm outlook and can inspire fear in males. The main characters are mostly portrayed as attractive people. An interesting trick the author uses is the sudden transition from a serious scene into a comedic one - this is evident in the sudden simplification of the drawing style—landscapes, whether a simple rural scenery or a city centre, are drawn in detail. Sometimes, the backgrounds in the frames are heavily reduced to just one or two elements to better draw attention to a character or another object or to mere lines to show movement.

The color scheme in “Fullmetal Alchemist” is not overly complicated, as the comic’s interior is shown in black and white, and the shadows are done with applied dots (called rasters). Other colors appear only on the front of the covers; the rest of the cover has a black background, on which on the front, in addition to the drawing, is also the title and author, and on the back is a white flamel cross. The manga was published in softcover. The color shades on the covering image are reminiscent of watercolor paintings in that they are not heavily saturated; they are even pastel and transition well into other colors. In most cases, the title image is placed in a dynamic composition. The publisher’s logo is placed at the top of the side panel. Of course, on the cover, there is information such as the volume number, index, price, barcode, and ISBN number.

**Figure 4:**

*The cover of volume 14 as an example of the color scheme;  
The authors' materials - a cover of volume 14 "Fullmetal Alchemist"*



The frames are both open, closed and semi-open. They have different sizes and shapes. Sometimes, the author partially overlaps the frames, but enough so they are still fully readable. Dialogue bubbles are not perfectly rounded; they can even be approached as angular figures. The shapes are variable depending on the text being spoken; if a character is shouting, the balloon is sharply pointed, and the size of the balloon also changes depending on the volume of the spoken issue. In the case of thinking, there are two appearance options: a classic cloud with circles towards the thinking person and a circle surrounded by dashes. The author often gives bubbles a different shape and additional features when necessary, but the reader is able to quickly recognize what a given bubble is supposed to be, such as a conversation with someone on the phone, because it is shown by manoeuvring the frames. An example of talking on the phone and changing speech bubbles can be found in volume 14 when Edward talks to Winry. The person's dialogue

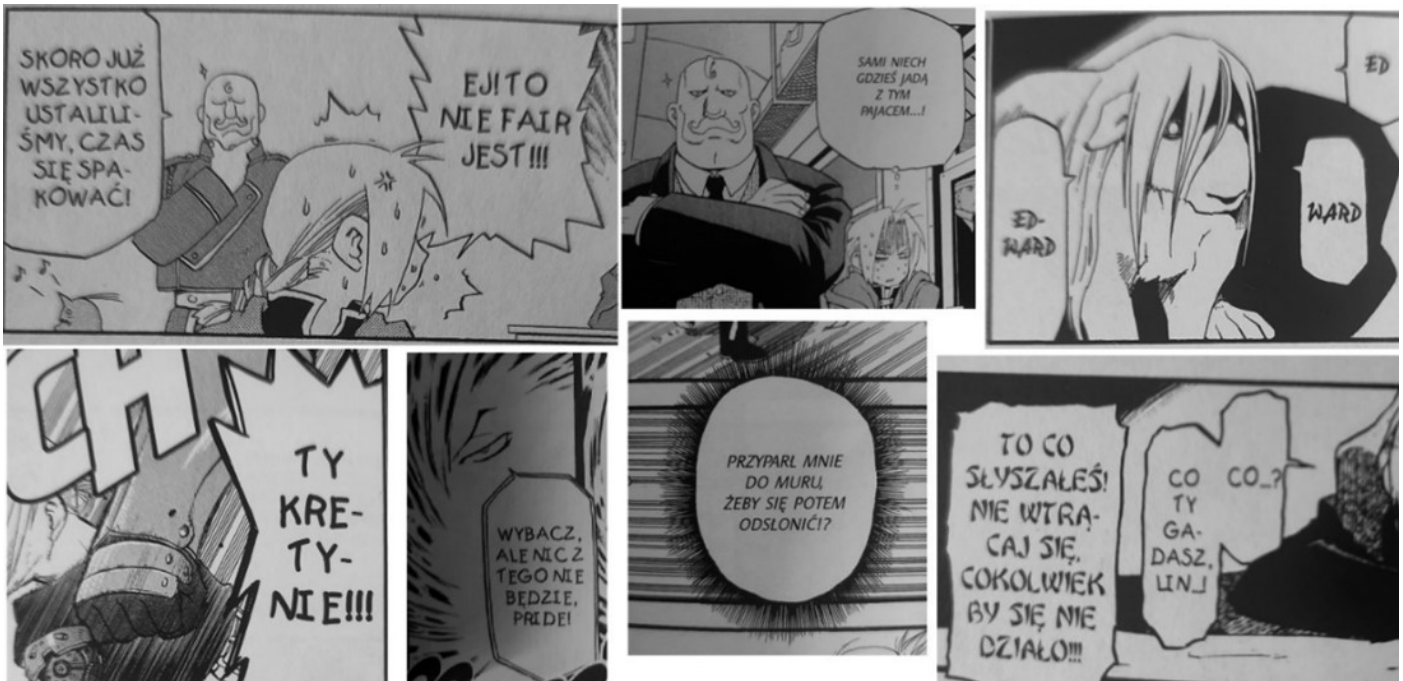
on the handset's other side has a double line. The font used by the publisher for dialogues is sans-serif and written in majuscules, making it difficult to read long speeches fluently and to recognize words that should begin with a capital letter. However, this is not the only typeface used, as those coming from Xing have a somewhat ornate typeface in their dialogues, still sans-serif, but the letter dashes taper off on one side. This treatment emphasizes that these characters speak with a certain accent. The same was done for the Chimaera speaking in a human voice from volume 2. Here, too, the purpose was to show the otherness of the pronunciation style. The cover and the table of contents also use a different typeface, which is a serif font. With onomatopoeia, the typefaces are often fitted into the scenery with their style or are toned down not to disturb it. From time to time, these words can appear in balloons, like dialogue, which draws attention to that particular sound.



### Figure 5:

Summary of dialogue balloons from volumes 2, 14 and 26;

The authors' materials - images from the 2nd, 14th and 26th volumes of the "Fullmetal Alchemist"



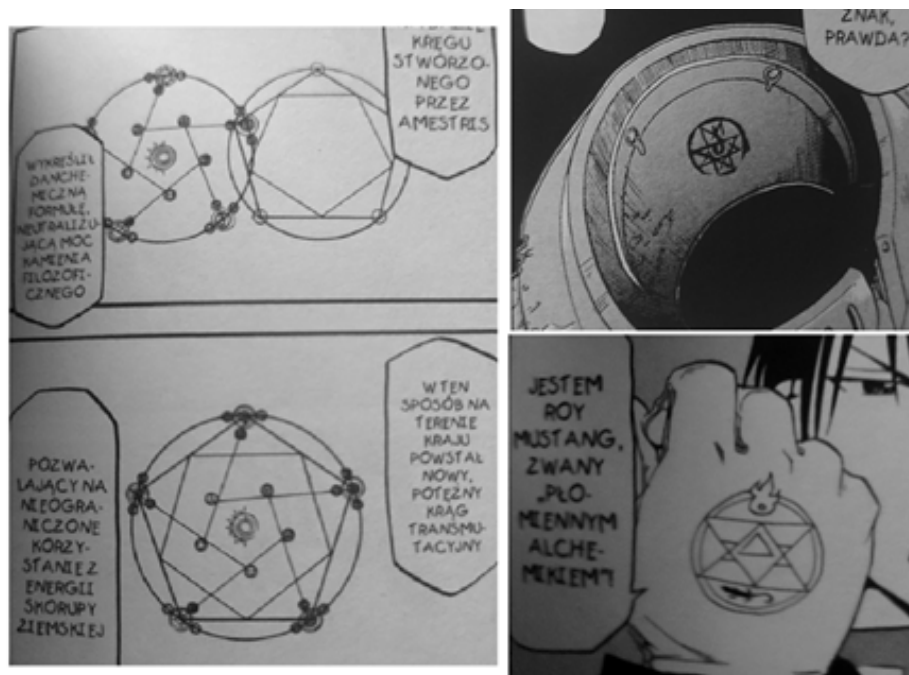
The manga contains recurring symbols such as the flame's cross, uroboros and transmutation circles. Each has its own meaning, the first two have a specific definition, but each transmutation circle can look different. The flame's cross is a symbol that appears on the back covers and is often worn by Ed, Al and their teacher, Izumi. The symbol is not explained in the comic, but it comes from a medieval French alchemist, Nikolas Flamel, who is said to have created the Philosopher's Stone (Paryz, [n.d.](#)). The stone is crucial to the plot of this manga, as the brothers want to obtain it in order to regain their bodies. Uroboros appears in the form of a tattoo on the bodies of the homunculus. The symbol is defined in Volume 10 in a short FAQ from the translator. It appears to be a snake that eats itself and is meant to symbolize the transformations taking place in alchemy and the philosopher's stone. Uroboros fit very well with the concept of homunculus in the

manga, as they can regenerate extremely fast, and their core is this philosopher's stone. Many types of transmutation circles are shown in "Fullmetal Alchemist"; each has a different functionality, such as the circle for transmutation of the philosopher's stone or the human. The circle in each is meant to signify the cyclic flow of energy, while the symbols inside are so-called alchemical runes, which vary depending on what the alchemist wants to create by releasing energy. It can be seen that they are often geometric figures, such as triangles or other polygons. Some alchemists have circles placed on clothing, weapons or even skin. Alphonse Elric has a transmutation circle inside his armour collar, which Edward placed there. The symbol is created when Ed decides to summon Al's soul after his mother's transmutation fails. The younger brother's soul would leave the metal armour if the mark were disturbed.

## Figure 6:

Example of showing transmutation circles;

The authors' materials - images from the 2nd, 3rd and 26th volumes of the "Fullmetal Alchemist"



The author definitely knows what she is doing to create a comic to which a significant audience will become attached. This is due to the perfectly matched dialogues to the drawings and facial expressions of the characters - when the reader sees a character and dialogue bubbles, he can almost perfectly imagine how the character would sound. Arakawa uses different silhouettes and appearance elements so that each character has its own character. This makes it easy for the reader to choose a protagonist who will be his favorite so that he can identify with him.

Nine years have passed between the first and last volumes of the manga. During this time, the comic's author's drawing style has changed somewhat improved. This can be seen through changes in line strokes, better balance of lines and more attention to detail. After looking at the abovementioned volumes, one can see the progression of the author's drawing already from the covers. The colors used on the cover of volume 27 are paler and less saturated. Arakawa placed exactly the same characters in both volumes, but Ed plays the main role in the last one. In both cases, the composition is dynamic. The cover of the last volume, despite Ed's wounds, is more positive due to the use of lighter color tones and the fact that Edward is smiling. In the first volume, the older brother has a visibly negative face, even upset. It is easy to see that the main characters have changed not only through the author's progression but also because of growing up. In the first volume, it can be

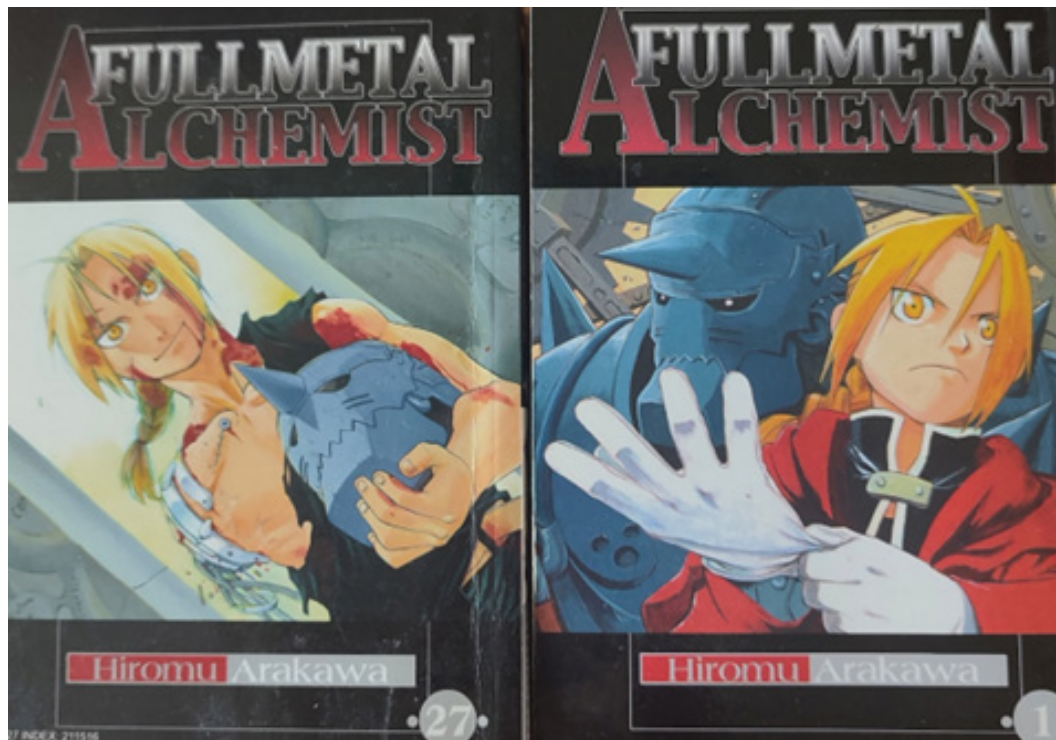
seen that Ed is a child, and in the last volume, he is already a grown man. Looking at him, it is noticeable that his clothing and hairstyle resemble his father, Hohenheim, in the final pages. He no longer has his hair braided but simply has it tied in a ponytail. He has also started wearing more elegant clothes. In the case of Al in armour, the passage of years is not too visible; the only elements that might indicate the flow of time are the scratches in the metal. However, in both volumes, Alphonse is also shown in his human form, and it is through this that his growing up can be seen. The drawing style in "Fullmetal Alchemist" has become bolder, which can be seen through the variety of line thicknesses. The first volume was delicate, even tentative, and not necessarily well balanced, while the latest volume matched the action. The author has also managed to improve her skills as to human proportions. This is evident through the style of the hands drawn, the detail of the elements and the facial expressions of the characters.

Hiromu Arakawa has definitely started to add more detail to the frames, whether in the characters, landscapes, buildings or fight scenes. In addition, the fight scenes have been lengthened. In the first volume they last about two pages, followed by a break in the action. In volume twenty-seven, the fight scenes are spread over more pages, and the action can move from fight to fight, not necessarily with an interlude of quiet scenes.

**Figure 7:**

Comparison of volume 27 with volume 1 of the manga;

The authors' materials - images from the 27th and 1st volumes of the "Fullmetal Alchemist"

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, from the stylistic and visual analysis carried out above, it can be deduced that the author of the manga perfectly knows how to match the text with the drawn frames and facial expressions of the characters. The procedures used by Arakawa integrate the text and image and complement each other. Each created character has a different character, which is presented both by the language they speak and by elements of their appearance. The dialogues presented are not composed in a dull or monotonous way but are tailored to specific actions, and have a fixed bluntness of enunciation, conditioned by punctuation marks. Comparing the first and last volumes makes it evident how Hiromu Arakawa's drawing style has developed.

Currently, the series, published between 2006 and 2012, is becoming unavailable due to its going out of print, caused by the release of the "Delux" version. This edition is printed in a larger format with different covers, more pages per volume and additional color pages. Due to this action on the part of publisher J.P. Fantastica, it will be possible to expand the study of the "Fullmetal Alchemist" series when all the collector's volumes appear.

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