

ENGL 414: SUPERHERO LITERATURE

FALL 2015 COURSE SYLLABUS



Instructor: Adrian McClure

Office Hours: TR 2:30-3:30 PM and by appointment, Heavilon G42

Class meeting time and location: TR 1:00-2:10 in Room # Heavilon

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

Superhero literature, broadly defined, seems to be everywhere: movies from Marvel and DC pull in huge audiences at the box office, shows with superhero elements proliferate on TV, sales of superhero comics and graphic novels are booming, and serious superhero novels (such as Jonathan Lethem's 2003 *The Fortress of Solitude* and Nick Harkaway's 2014 *Tigerman*) have been growing in numbers and garnering widespread critical acclaim.

What lies behind this current craze for superhero texts? Why are we still fascinated with superheroes almost eight decades after the Man of Steel first appeared in *Action Comics* and captured the American popular imagination? What can superhero literature tell us about our society and our cultural preoccupations, and what deeper existential questions can close readings of these works illuminate? These are some of the issues we will be exploring over the course of the semester as we read through a representative sampling of superhero texts and the critical literature that has grown up around them. A high level of classroom engagement is expected, and there will be frequent impromptu group activities, such as invented dialogues and mini-debates, keyed to class readings. Assignments include a mixture of analytic and creative components.

As in all courses that involve literary analysis, the goal is to come away with a deeper understanding of the texts themselves, their wider socio-cultural contexts, and, ultimately, ourselves.

REQUIRED TEXTS

To keep expenses in check, you will be downloading some public domain comics for free, as well as buying 12 digital copies of individual issues at \$2 a pop. (Links are posted on Blackboard.) All critical readings will also be available through Blackboard. Here are the books you are required to actually purchase:

- Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, William Morris (HarperCollins) 1993 or 1994 reprint edition; **ISBN-13: 978-0060976255**
- Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics 1997; **ISBN-13: 978-1563893421**
- Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Picador 2000 or Random House 2012 reprint edition, **ISBN-13: 978-0812983586**
- Grant Morrison, *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery*, Vertigo 2014, **ISBN-13: 978-1401247027**
- G. Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*, Marvel 2014, **ISBN-13: 978-0785190219**

COURSE OVERVIEW: UNITS, READINGS, AND MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

Superhero literature is a sprawling subject (can you say “multiverse”?) and it would take a Thor or a Wonder Woman to cover all of its facets in a single semester. We will confine ourselves to focusing on four major units.

Unit 1: READING COMICS IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

- This unit will provide a crash course on how to read and analyze sequential art, as we immerse ourselves in the distinctive ways of reading and special vocabulary this entails. Our main text will be Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, but we will also be discussing a range of concepts drawn from other comics theorists. This unit features regular in-class group work in which you get together with several classmates and attempt to put theory into practice, analyzing the formal relationships and sequential patterns of a range of sample comics. The culminating assignment will be a 500-word individual analysis of the “dance” between text and image across a single comic book page. (You will have a number of options to choose from.)

WEEK 1 (Aug. 24-28): Introduction and Learning the Lingo

T Introduction

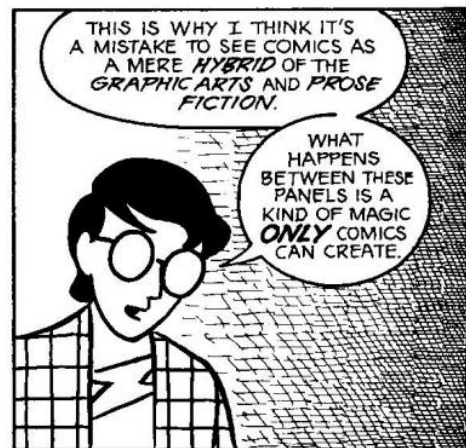
R Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Chap 2-3

WEEK 2 (Aug. 30-Sept. 4): Coming to Grips with Close Readings

T Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Chap 4-5

R Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Chap 6 and Chap 8

- **Sequential Art Close Reading assigned**



Unit 2: SUPERHERO LITERATURE AND SOCIAL HISTORY

- This unit focuses on the evolution of superhero comics (and its many spinoff genres) with an eye to broader social history. Readings constitute a mix of comics, graphic novels, and critical articles. We will finish off with an exploration of the shifting incarnations of Captain America and a viewing of the 2014 blockbuster Marvel film, *The Winter Soldier*. Throughout this unit, students will be periodically surfing the web and reporting to the class on interesting/illuminating fan websites they find. (Fandom, as you will discover, looms large in comics studies.) Your final assignment for this unit is to compose a “superhero portfolio” in which you invent a new superhero and “chronicle” their development, relating your character’s evolution to changing comic book conventions and broader social history.

WEEK 3 (Sept. 7-12): THE GOLDEN AGE—Popularity and Reaction (“Holy Homophobia, Batman!”)

T *Superman #1*, Action Comics 1939 (free download; link on Blackboard)

Scott Bukatman, “A Song of the Urban Superhero”

Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman”

R *Batman #1*, Detective Comics 1940 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Whiz Comics #2 (Captain Marvel), 1940 (free download; link on Blackboard)

Carol L. Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics”

- **Sign-up for website reports**

**WEEK 4** (Sept. 14-18): THE SILVER AGE—Enter Ethical Complexity and Angst!

T *Amazing Spiderman #1*, Marvel, 1963 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

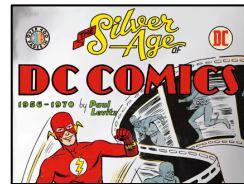
Adventure Comics #346, DC, 1966 (Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes) (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

John M. Trushell, “American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men--“Pulp” Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes” (READ THROUGH “SILVER AGE MARVEL”)

R Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*

Geoff Klock, “The Revisionary Superhero Narrative”

- **Sequential Art Close Reading due**

**WEEK 5** (Sept. 21-25): THE CONTEMPORARY AGE: Enter Darkness, Fragmentation, and Redemption!

T Grant Morrison, *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* (FIRST HALF)

John M. Trushell, “American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men--“Pulp” Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes” (READ FROM “BRONZE AGE MARVEL” THROUGH END OF ARTICLE)

R Grant Morrison, *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* (SECOND HALF)

Grant Morrison, “Man of Muscle Mystery” (Chap 18, *Supergods*)

- **Invented Superhero Portfolio assigned**

**WEEK 6** (Sept. 27-Oct. 2): The Capstone—Captain America in Comics and Film

T Evening viewing of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (**NO DAYTIME CLASS SESSION**)

Captain America #6, Marvel 2005 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Jason Dittmer, “Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings”

R Class discussion of movie

Christopher J. Hayton and David L. Albright, “O Captain, My Captain”



Unit 3: SUPERHERO LITERATURE AND GENDER

- This unit explores the fascinating topic of how superhero literature enforces and, at times, interrogates cultural constructions of gender. We will begin with the iconic Wonder Woman, move to She-Hulk and Storm, and end with Carol Danvers, a.k.a. Ms. Marvel, the former girlfriend of Captain Marvel who assumed his superhero identity in 2012. The critical literature on this topic is particularly lively, and the final assignment is to write a 750-word academic position paper. (I will offer you a choice of of preset topics, but will be happy to consider others as long as they are proposed at least two weeks prior to the assignment due date.)

WEEK 7 (Oct. 5-9): Wonder Woman

T *Wonder Woman #2*, DC, 1941 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Lilian S. Robinson, "Genesis: Departing from Paradise,"

Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, "Diversity in Superheroes"

R *Wonder Woman #24 and 25*, DC, 2008 (\$4; links to purchase on Blackboard)

Marc Edward DiPaolo, "Wonder Woman as World War II Veteran, Camp Feminist Icon, and Male Sex Fantasy"

Kelli Stanley, "Suffering Sappho!": Wonder Woman and the (Re)invention of the Feminine Ideal"

- Sign up for Individual Fan Website Report**



Debut of Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel
1977

WEEK 8 (Oct. 12-16): She-Hulk and Storm

T *She-Hulk #1*, Marvel, 2014 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Ramzi Fawaz, "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!" Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America"

Donald Palumbo, "Metafiction in the Comics: *Sensational She-Hulk*"

R *Uncanny X-Men #198*, Marvel, 1985 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Carol Cooper, "Leading by Example: The Tao of Women in the X-Men World"

Suzanne M. Stauffer, "Taking a Dip in the Crazy Pool: The Evolution of X-Women From Heroic Subject to Sexual Object"

- Invented Superhero Portfolio due**



Hypersexualized Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel
2006

WEEK 9 (Oct. 19-23): From Sidekick to Starring Role—Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel

T *Ms. Marvel #1*, Marvel, 1977 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Captain Marvel #1, Marvel, 2012 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Gerard F. Beritela, "Super-Girls and Mild Mannered Men: Gender Trouble in Metropolis"

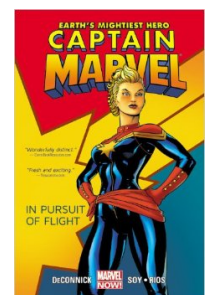
Carolyn Cocca, "The 'Broke-Back Test': A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Portrayals of Women in Mainstream Superhero Comics, 1993-2013"

R *A-Force #1*, Marvel, 2015 (\$2; link to purchase on Blackboard)

Christy Marx, "Why I Didn't Grow Up to Be a Marvel Girl"

Karen Healy, "When Fangirls Perform: The Gendered Fan Identity in Superhero Comics Fandom"

- Gender and Superhero Literature Position Paper assigned**



Carol Danvers assumes identity of Captain Marvel
2012

Unit 4: SUPERHERO LITERATURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

- In our final unit, we will be reading, discussing, and analyzing Michael Chabon's *Kavalier and Clay*, a sprawling novel fixated on comics and cultural identity about two immigrant Jewish cousins in New York City at the outbreak of World War II. During this unit, you will collaborate on one group presentation on background material related to the novel, such as Jewish influence on the early comic book industry or the figure of the golem in Jewish folklore. We will wrap up the unit (and the semester) by reading the first volume of the newly reinvented *Ms. Marvel*, a superhero comic featuring a female Muslim immigrant teen. Your final assignment will be to write a 750-word reflective essay that: a) explores your own heroic qualities or b) explores how superhero literature (of any variety) has influenced your life and sense of identity.

WEEK 10 (Oct. 26-30): Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

T Part 1 (pp. 1-66)

R Part 2 (pp. 69-161)

- Sign up for Group Presentations on *Kavalier & Clay* Background Topics**



WEEK 11 (Nov. 2-6): *Kavalier & Clay* cont'd.

T Part 3, Chaps 1-6 (pp. 165-230)

R Part 3, Chaps 7-15 (pp. 231-288)

WEEK 12 (Nov. 9-13): *Kavalier & Clay* cont'd.

T Part 4, Chaps 1-6 (pp. 291-339)

R Part 4, Chaps 7-17 (pp. 340-421)

WEEK 13 (Nov. 16-20): *Kavalier & Clay* cont'd.

T Part 5 (pp. 425-468)

R Part 6, Chaps 1-11 (pp. 472-559)

- Comics and Gender Position Paper due**
- "Superheroes and Me" Reflective Essay assigned**

WEEK 14 (Nov. 23-27): *Kavalier & Clay* cont'd.

T Class canceled to compensate for extended movie showing

R NO CLASS THANKSGIVING BREAK

WEEK 15 (Nov. 30-Dec. 4): *Kavalier & Clay* cont'd.

T Part 6, Chaps 12-20 (pp. 560-659)

R *Kavalier and Clay* Wrap-up



Rabbi Loew and Golem by Micoláš Aleš, 1899 (Wikipedia)

Illustration of novel by Tom Humberstone
<http://vented spleen.com/blog/2012/02/01/kavalier-and-clay/>

WEEK 16 (Dec. 7-11): Diversity, Global Influence, and “Superheroes and Me”

T G. Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*

Jack G. Shaheen, “Arab Images in American Comic Books”

Stefan Meyer, “‘Truth, Justice, and the Islamic Way’: Conceiving the Cosmopolitan Muslim Superhero in The 99”

R Semester Wrap-up: Your Personal Superhero Pantheon

Henry Jenkins, “Death-Defying Heroes”

FINALS WEEK (Dec. 14-18)

- “Superheroes and Me” Reflective Essay due (submit on Blackboard only by Wednesday, 12/16)



Panel where Captain America chides Kamala for denying her Muslim identity in the reinvented *Ms. Marvel* #1; Cover #2

NOTE: You can find a more detailed version of the weekly schedule on Blackboard, which includes the links to purchase comics as well as downloads of the critical readings.

GRADING

Your grade will be determined based on the following percentages:

- 10% Participation
- 10% Individual oral fan website reports
- 10% Sequential Art Close Reading paper
- 20% Invented Superhero Portfolio
- 20% Gender and Superhero Literature position paper
- 10% Group presentation *Kavalier and Clay* Background Topics
- 20% “Superheroes and Me” reflection paper

Grading rubrics will be provided for each individual assignment. I assign all grades using a +/- system; for example, 90-92% = A-, 93-96% = A, 97-100% = A+.

COURSE POLICIES

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

- Regular attendance and participation are key to your success in this course; consequently, missing more than two classes without a documented reason for the absence will result in your grade being lowered by a whole grade level. Participation counts for 10% of your grade and will be assessed through your engagement in class discussion and the frequent in-class group activities.

PREPARATION

- You are expected to come to class having done the assigned readings and thought carefully about the issues they raise. Frequent in-class activities make it painfully obvious when you have not done so; this in turn affects your participation grade. You are also expected to check your Purdue email regularly for any course updates or changes.

LATE WORK

- Late work is accepted ONLY when there are extenuating circumstances such as a serious illness or genuine emergency. I am, however, willing to consider extensions on assignments when you contact me in advance by email and make a convincing case for why you need one.

CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

- This course relies on an open, respectful exchange of ideas. Fan expertise is welcomed, but be aware that this is not our focus, and classroom discussion will revolve around issues and ideas rather than information. (I promise to rein in my own comic geek tendencies too.) Electronics use is only permissible when it is part of an assigned classroom activity.

PLAGIARISM

- Plagiarism on assignments will result in a grade of zero for that paper and will also be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students. All assignments submitted on Blackboard are automatically run through a plagiarism checker.

CAMPUS EMERGENCY

- In the event of a major campus emergency, course requirements, deadlines and grading percentages are subject to changes that may be necessitated by a revised semester calendar or other circumstances. I will keep you informed of any such changes through the course email list and by posting them on Blackboard.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

- I have a strong personal commitment to helping students with disabilities. If you have a disability that requires academic accommodations as documented by the Disability Resource Center at Purdue, please make an appointment to speak with me within the first three weeks of the semester—the sooner, the better—so that suitable arrangements can be made as quickly as possible.

RESOURCES

BLACKBOARD LINKS

- There are links on Blackboard to many useful sites on comic book literature that provide character summaries and synopses of both individual issues and major plot lines. Some are produced by industry sources and others by fans.

PURDUE WRITING LAB and PURDUE OWL

- As many of you know, the Purdue Writing Lab provides free, one-on-one tutoring sessions where you can get input on every aspect of the composition process, from outlining to final polishing:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/writinglab/>
- Purdue OWL (the Online Writing Lab) has a wealth of electronic resources: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

OFFICE HOURS

- I care about my students. If you are having trouble with any aspect of the course, would like advice on how to approach an assignment, or just want to share an insight about superhero literature and what it means to you, please stop by during my regularly scheduled office hours, or, if you have a conflict that makes this impossible, email me to make an appointment for another time.