

The Superhero

Course description

This course is a critical examination of the hero figure across comic books, film, and TV. While this course mostly focuses on Marvel and DC comic book superheroes, we will be looking at superheroes beyond Marvel/DC. Throughout the course, we will learn about the historical and cultural context surrounding the emergence and development of a selection of heroes. We will look at how each text on our syllabus represents or explores tensions surrounding: the relationship between the individual and society; concepts of justice, moral action, and ethical responsibility; the power struggle between heroes and villains; national borders, community membership, and cross-cultural understandings; and social investments in particular forms of identity and images of embodiment.

In this course, you will have the opportunity to develop and strengthen your skills in close reading, academic writing, critical thinking, and researching in the field of English. We will focus on topics in comics studies, including the relationship between image and text in graphic narrative, and the development, adaptation, and subversion of canonical characters and stories.

Our course is divided into three units:

The Traditional Superhero

In this unit of the course, we will explore traditional superhero figures: their death, their origins, and their responsibilities. Additionally, we will be learning the ground work methods of interpreting and analyzing comics and its graphic narrative form, as well as discussing the adaptation of superhero figures.

Secret Organizations and Anti-Heroes

After reviewing the traditional superhero figures, we will study the secret organizations of superhero comics and the concept of the antihero, and how these two concepts subvert traditional notions and roles of the hero. Additionally, we will continue our familiarization of the graphic narrative form and its adaptations.

The Everyday Hero

After acquainting ourselves with heroes and anti-heroes of the superhero genre in comics and film, we will be looking at comics, film, and video games that are not superhero comics but draw from the superhero genre to discuss coming of age tales and contemporary everyday issues. These issues address identity, embodiment, and representations of gender, disability, race, and sexuality.

Course learning outcomes:

The design of the content and schedule of the course is determined by our goals of scholarly engagement with the idea and practice of ‘the superhero’ and of becoming stronger academic writers in a university setting.

Knowledge—by the end of the course you should be able to:

Identify the basic terms by which scholars study and theorize comics and the superhero

Write clear and persuasive short academic papers, supported by evidence

Discuss the different cultural contexts of superheroes and what superheroes represent

Application—over the course of the term you will:

Take notes from comics and lecture to understand, remember, and apply new ideas

Interpret texts using scholarly methods of analysis

Frame persuasive arguments in writing

Integration—this course encourages you to:

Develop a clear, concise, and scholarly ‘voice’

Write more professionally: conceive, research, draft, edit, and proofread your work

Connect our reading and writing strategies to the larger project of your degree

This course is **reading intensive**, **writing intensive**, and **participation intensive**: I expect you to do the readings, take careful notes, show up, and take part.

Required Texts

For Comics: All comics are available on Comixology. Please create an account and purchase these comics. You can purchase physical copies, if that’s what you prefer.

For Films: Some screening time of the films will be offered, but you may also rent these films on Google Play or iTunes or purchase these films. *Scott Pilgrim* is on Netflix, if you have it.

For *Life Is Strange*: *Life is Strange* is a video game that is available on Steam (Mac and PC), PS4 (or 3), and Xbox One (or 360). *Do not purchase individual episodes; make sure you purchase the full game.* Check in with me if you are unsure. *If you do not have a device to play this game, then please talk to me and we can arrange an alternative means of playing the game.*

Theme

Texts

The Traditional Super Hero

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud (UW Book store)
All Star Superman Vol 1 by Grant Morrison
Ms Marvel Vol 1 & 2 by G. Willow Wilson
Black Panther Vol 1 & 2 by Ta-Nehisi Coates
Wonder Woman (2017 film)

Secret Organizations and Anti-Heroes

Planetary Vol 1. by Warren Ellis
Doom Patrol Vol 1 by Gerard Way
Blade (film)
Shade the Changing Girl Vol 1 by Cecil Castellucci

Everyday Heroes

Ghost World by Daniel Clowes (UW book store)
Hawkeye #19 by Matt Fraction
Life Is Strange (video game)
Bitch Planet Vol 1 by Kelly DeConnick
Scott Pilgrim vs. The World (film)

Recommended Texts

These texts are only recommended and will not be taught in class, but may be alluded to. They do offer you alternative options for your assignments if the topics explored in these Recommended Texts appeal to you more.

All Star Superman Vol 2. by Grant Morrison

(Why recommended: The conclusion of *All Star Superman*. This may be more useful for those who wish to write on *All Star Superman* for their midterm essay.

World of Wakanda Vol. 1 by Roxane Gay

(Why recommended: If you really liked the Midnight Angels in Vol 1 of *Black Panther*, the 5 of 6 issues of this TPB explores their relationship and history before the events of *Black Panther* #1)

Batman: Mask of the Phantasm

(Why recommended: A cult classic. 'Nuff said.)

Deadpool (film) or *Logan* (film) or *Jessica Jones* (Netflix)

(Why Recommended: Alternative options for your essay on the Anti-hero)

Assignments Breakdown

Assignment	Weight	Due Date
Weekly Blog Posts and Responses	10%	<i>See Description</i>
Weekly In-Class Activities	5%	<i>See Description</i>
Character Analysis Presentation	15%	<i>See Description</i>
Close Reading Text & Image Assignment	10%	February 5
Midterm Essay	20%	March 5
Final Essay		
Proposal w/ Topic and Thesis	5%	March 19
Annotated Bibliography	10%	March 26
Peer Review Activity	5%	April 2
Submitted Assignment	20%	April 9

Assignment Descriptions

Weekly Blog Posts and Responses (10% = 5% for posts; 5% for responses)

You will be required to create a blog dedicated to this course on wordpress.com in the first week of class and share this blog with me. I will create a directory of your classmates' blogs on Learn, but you have to create a "blogroll" on your blog containing all your classmates' blogs and follow your classmates' blogs.

Each week, beginning in the second week, you have to write a response to the text/film of that week. These responses should be 250 words minimum but can be as long as you want. You can write on any of your feelings or thoughts about that text/film – as long as you write the blog post, you get a completion mark for it. The other completion mark goes to two replies:

In addition to your own blog post, you must reply to two other posts by your classmates. There is no minimum word count for your replies, but you will not receive marks for replies like "Great post!" Reply to it fully by commenting on what that post made you think or feel, or how it changed your perspective about the text/film.

Please write your posts and replies Friday-Sunday of each week. Late posts will receive some deductions.

Pro Tip: Use Categories Tags for your blog posts – these blog posts can be a good resource for you and your peers about paper ideas, and Categories and Tags makes your blog easily navigable and searchable.

Weekly In-Class Activities

Each Wednesday (give or take a day or two), you will be marked for in-class activities, from personal reflections to group discussions and everything in between. There will be no prep. Just attend and participate in the activity and you will receive the completion mark.

Character Analysis Presentation

In groups of 2-3, your group will present a 10-15 minute presentation on the representation of a hero or a villain from your assigned text with reference to the prompts included in your instruction handout. After your presentation, you will be responsible for leading discussion for another 10-15 minutes. The questions of your discussion period **must be given to me a week before your presentation**. I will then distribute these questions to the class so that they can prepare for your discussion. I may ask you to revise questions if I feel they need more work.

Close Reading Text & Image Assignment

The close reading assignment will be a detailed analysis of the relationship between image and text in two to four pages of one of the comic books examined in the Traditional Superhero unit of the course. This assignment is due at the beginning of class on Monday February 5.

Please see the separate instruction handout for further details on this assignment.

Midterm essay

The midterm essay will be a critical analysis of one of the comics or films that we have covered in the Traditional Superhero unit and the Secret Organizations and Anti-Heroes Unit. Question prompts will be given with the instruction handout.

Please see the separate instruction handout for further details on this assignment.

Final Essay

The final essay assignment will be a critical analysis of one of the texts/films covered in the Everyday Heroes unit either on its own or as compared to one of the texts/films that we have studied earlier in the term. For this essay, **you will need to consult and cite at least three academic sources**.

Throughout the final unit, there will be accumulative assignments that develop your essay: Proposal w/ Topic and Thesis (due in class **March 19**), Annotated Bibliography (due via Learn dropbox **March 26**), and the Peer Review Activity (in-class activity on **April 2**).

I encourage you to develop the ideas that you introduce in one of the three earlier assignments (character analysis, close analysis, and/or the midterm essay) so that you can use the feedback that you receive from me and from your peers to strengthen your critical arguments. Throughout the semester, we will set aside time in class for you to discuss your essays with your peers. The final essay is due via Learn on **Monday April 9**.

Please see the separate instruction handout for further details on this assignment and its accumulative assignments.

Schedule

Unit 1: The Traditional Superhero

Week 1: Introducing...

Theme: Understanding Comics...and Each other

January 3: Introduction to class and course concepts

Week 2: The Death of a Superhero

Theme: Humanizing the Superhero

January 8: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, Ch. 1-2; *All-Star Superman*, vol. 1

January 10: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, Ch. 3

Week 3: Ms Marvel

Theme: Superhero Origin Stories

January 15: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, Ch. 4-5; *Ms Marvel*, Vol 1

January 17: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, Ch. 6; *Ms Marvel*, Vol 2*

**you may skip the first two issues of Vol.2 and just read the "Generation Why" arc*

Presentation: *Ms Marvel* Character Analysis

Week 4: Black Panther

Theme: "between blood and nation"

January 22: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, Ch. 7; *Black Panther* Vol 1*

January 24: **Read:** *Black Panther* Vol 2*

**you do not have to read the older issues written by Stan Lee in these volumes*

Presentation: *Black Panther* Character Analysis

Week 5: Wonder Woman & Batman, big and small screen

Theme: Adapting Comics

January 29: **Read:** *Understanding Comics*, 8-9

Watch: *Wonder Woman* dir. Patty Jenkins

January 31: **Watch:** *Batman: Animated Series*, “Heart of Ice” (to be viewed in class)

Presentation: “Trinity” Character Analysis (Batman, Superman, or Wonder Woman)

Unit 2: Secret Organizations and the Anti-Hero

Week 6: Planetary

Theme: The art of self-contained issues

February 5: **Read:** *Planetary* Vol 1

Due: Close Reading Text & Image Assignment

February 7: **Presentation:** *Planetary* Character Analysis

Week 7: Doom Patrol

Theme: “It’s a strange world.” “Let’s keep it that way.”

Feb 12: **Read:** *Doom Patrol* Vol 1

Feb 14: **Presentation:** *Doom Patrol* Character Analysis

Week 8: Reading Week Theme: The Fantastic Break

Week 9: Anti-heroes

Theme: Going Rogue

Feb 26 : **Watch:** *Blade* dir. Stephen Norrington

Feb 28: **Read:** *Shade the Changing Girl*, Vol 1

Presentation: *Blade* OR *Shade the Changing Girl* Character Analysis

Unit 3: The Everyday Hero

Week 10: The Everyday

Theme #1: Coming of Age and Coming to Terms with Being Human

Theme #2: Disability in comics

March 5: **Read:** *Ghost World*

Presentation: *Ghost World* Character Analysis

Due: Midterm Essay

March 7: *Hawkeye* #19

Week 11: *Life Is Strange*

Theme: Everyday life is strange

March 12: *Life Is Strange*

March 14: **Presentation:** *Life is Strange* Character Analysis

Week 12: Scott Pilgrim

Theme: Superheroing everyday life

March 19: **Watch:** *Scott Pilgrim*

Due: Proposal with Topic and Thesis Statement

March 21: **Presentation:** *Scott Pilgrim* Character Analysis

Week 13: *Bitch Planet*

Theme: Science Fictioning everyday patriarchy

March 26: **Read:** *Bitch Planet*

Due: Annotated Bibliography

March 28: **Presentation:** *Bitch Planet* Character Analysis

Week 14: The Final Boss

Theme: Working Collaboratively

April 2: *Thunderbird Strike*

April 4: Peer Editing

Final Paper due April 9

Suggested Resources

Journals:

*Image Text: Interdisciplinary Comic Studies International Journal of Comic
Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics Studies in Comics*

Books:

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics*. Cambridge: Da Capo, 2007. Print.

Websites:

Canadian Society for the Study of Comics: <http://comics-scholars.com/> *The Comics Journal*:
<http://www.tcj.com/>

Women in Refrigerators: <http://lby3.com/wir/>