

ENGLISH 201: GENRE, NARRATIVE, AND THE SUPERHERO

Dr. Cory James Rushton

(902) 867-2225 (but email is a far more certain method)

Nicholson Hall 617

Office Hours: Mon, 2:15-4; Tues, 11:15-1; Thurs, 9:45-12:15

crushton@stfx.ca

The superhero genre is central to popular culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; it has been argued that the superhero is the most lucrative genre in modern artistic culture. While nobody would wish to argue a genre's importance solely from its commercial viability, it nevertheless remains the case that the profitability of the superhero (or the "metahuman") must be based on something. This course will argue that the superhero is a modern manifestation of tropes which are key in literary history: the hero who is larger than life, and the battle between good and evil, seen in Manichaean terms. Further, the evolution of metahuman narrative testifies (and alternately benefits and suffers from) changes in literary style. A central example might be the increasing use of a "realism" we might associate with the novel in a literature which began as pure wish fulfillment. The apparent simplicity of the texts to be studied will allow for a thorough analysis and discussion of both genre and narrative: what happens when an author attempts to push the superhero to its logical extremes? What happens when a narrative, for commercial reasons, cannot end? What role do fans play in a literature which must respond to their desires more directly than many other genres must?

While graphic novels have been a staple on university syllabi for some time, they tend to be texts with a historical or thematic claim to seriousness: texts such as *Maus*, which routinely appears in course on the Holocaust, or *Persepolis*. In both cases, there are real-life events lying directly behind the texts. Metahuman literature can sometimes make a version of this claim, but not as directly, and the superhero often functions as a metaphor for real world concerns: the mutants in *The Uncanny X-Men* are an oppressed minority, which leads to a sustained critique of racism (one going seriously off the rails in a recent crossover, *Avengers Versus X-Men*). At the same time, unlike actual minority groups, the X-Men have access to powers and abilities which troubles that critique. The X-Men are a minority group suffering from social prejudices; the X-Men can potentially obliterate their human opponents. The genre, in other words, makes demands of the narrative which may run counter to the narrative's social goals.

This course will also explore the superhero genre as a living tradition, still creatively and financially powerful, but no less influenced than the novel or film by the classic texts of the past. With that in mind, we will look at the superhero's sources: the Bible, mythology, early novels and film, wherever appropriate.

EVALUATION

Class absences are taken seriously; as in the *University Calendar* Section 3.8, I am required to report “all unexplained absences in excess of three hours over at least two classes in any term.” Final Exam dates to be announced.

Midterm	20%
Research proposal/Works Cited	10%
Research Paper	40%
Final Exam	20%
Participation	10% (attending every class but never speaking is worth around 6/10).

RESEARCH AND WRITING

A professional attitude is required for all written assignments: essays will include a title page and will draw upon research. Books, journal articles, chapters in edited collections, and articles from on-line literary and historical journals may be used; for the major essay, **no less than five such sources should appear in your bibliography, and the essay should reflect the sources you cite.** Wikipedia, Cole Notes, Sparks Notes, etc. are **not** acceptable research sources. MLA style is required both within the essay and in the Works Cited list; failure to do use MLA in a consistent manner will result in lost points.

The rules concerning sources are not arbitrary, although the number itself might be: the rule exists because no decent research question, no thesis, can be adequately explored or argued without engaging with previous ideas and arguments. “No less” indicates that this is a minimum number of sources, which approximately translates to a B-C range grade (depending on the validity of the sources and the depth and intelligence with which they are engaged). While it is admittedly strange given that students write for an audience of one (the person grading the essay), it is best practice to write as though you were participating in the broader conversation about the text, the traditions it comes from, and the world in which it exists.

In general, NO extensions on written work will be granted without a written note from Health Services, a University Counselor, or the Dean’s Office. However, in practice things do happen: life is really one thing after another. Take all negotiations with me concerning exceptions seriously, and I will take you seriously.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism and cheating are taken seriously, and can damage your academic career. Please review Section 3.9 of the *St. Francis Xavier University Academic Calendar*, and consult me if you need clarification. Plagiarism does not need to be deliberate to be damaging; it is your responsibility to ensure that you have not broken the rules, just as it is my responsibility to watch for plagiarism. All such incidents will be reported as required by the University.

TEXTS

Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross, *MARVELS* (ISBN: 9780785142867)

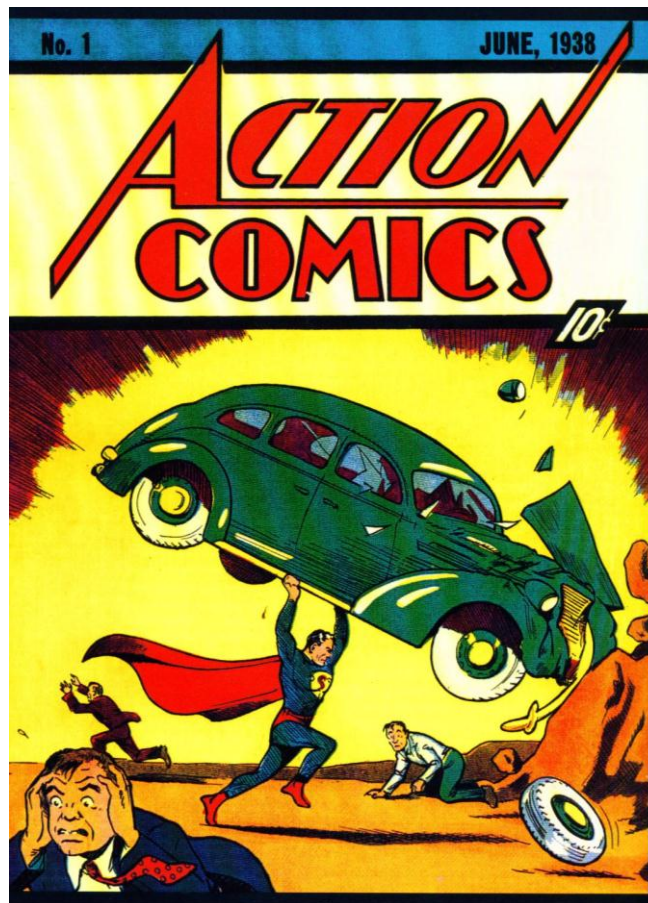
Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson, *X-MEN: GOD LOVES, MAN KILLS* (ISBN: 97807851572670)

Michael Chabon, *AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY*
ISBN: 9780812983586

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *WATCHMEN* (ISBN: 9780930289232)

Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *BATMAN: KILLING JOKE* (ISBN: 9781401216672)

Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, *ALL-STAR SUPERMAN* (ISBN: 9781401232054)



Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Sept. 6: Introduction: Superhero Bigtime

Sept. 11: 1938. Chabon, 1-66.

Sept. 13: Origin Stories. *Exodus* 2-3; Eco, "Myth of Superman" (online, *Diacritics* 2.1, 1972)

Sept. 18: Discussion of Formal Components.

Sept. 20: Chabon, 67-161

Sept. 25: Morrison and Quitely, *All-Star Superman* 1-6

Sept. 27: Morrison and Quitely, *All-Star Superman* 7-12

Oct. 2: The Metahuman Body. Taylor, "He's Gotta Be Strong" (online, *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.2, 2007)

Oct. 4: *Wonder Woman* (film)

Oct. 9: Wonder Woman and the Female Metahuman. Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation" (online, *Journal of Popular Culture* 39.6, 2006).

Oct. 11: The comics at war. Chabon, 163-289.

Oct. 16: *New Frontier* (film)

Oct. 18: *New Frontier* discussion

Oct. 23: Arnold T. Blumberg, "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" (online, *Reconstruction* 3.4, 2003).

Oct. 25: Apollo/Dionysus: Batman, Moore/Bolland, *The Killing Joke*

Oct. 30: Hulk Smash. Recommended: Stevenson, *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Nov. 1: Political Meta-human: Mutants. Claremont/Anderson, *God Loves, Man Kills*

Nov. 6: Chabon, 289-468

Nov. 8: The Ages of Superman: Golden, Silver, Dark, New. Busiek/Ross, *Marvels*

Nov. 13: Chabon, 469-636

Nov. 15: Moore/Bolland, *Watchmen* 1-3

Nov. 20: Moore/Bolland, *Watchmen* 4-5

Nov. 22: Moore/Bolland, *Watchmen* 6-8

Nov. 27: Moore/Bolland, *Watchmen* 9-12

Nov. 29: Review/Catch-up



Bibliography

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- Fingeroth, Danny. *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Gardner, Jared. *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling*. Stanford UP, 2012.
- Hajdu, David. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.
- Harris, Cheryl. *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subcultures, and Identity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1998.
- Hills, Matthew. *Fan Culture* (Sussex Studies in Culture and Communication). London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kaveney, Roz. *Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2008.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: Paradox, 2000.
- Morrison, Grant. *Supergods*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012.
- Ndalianis, Angela. *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 19. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Pearson, Roberta E., and William Uricchio, eds. *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. Studies in Popular Culture. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
- Robinson, Lillia. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. London: Routledge, 2004.