The Superhero

ENGL 108A, Section 002
M/W 1:00-2:20
ML 349

Instructor Info

Instructor: Philip Miletic
Office: PAS 1061, AKA The Fortress of Solitude
Office Hours: M/W 2:30-4:00 pm, or can assemble by appointment
Email: pmiletic@uwaterloo.ca

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.
Technology Policies

**Email policy, pt 1:** Do not expect me to respond to your email instantaneously. Give me 24h to respond on weekdays and 48h to respond on weekends.

**Email policy, pt 2:** Please be professional in your email and use your waterloo email. Use a clear subject heading, begin with a salutation ("Dear Phil"), and end with a sign off (Best, [student name]). This makes me take your email seriously, and I know right away who the email is from and what the email will be about.

**Device policy:** No laptops. No cell phones. Bring a pen/pencil, notebook, and be prepared to talk. This course is designed in such a way that you don’t need a laptop. There will be lots of in-class exercises, group work, and thinking-out-loud. There may be a day or two that I will ask you to bring in your laptop for a writing day. But mostly we will “be in the moment.” You, your classmates, all of your ideas, and me.

**Accessibility and Accommodations:**

In our class environment, we will be mindful of the reality that everyone learns differently. If you have any concerns about accessing course content, participating in class discussions, or accommodating your learning style, please let me know. You can also arrange for formal accommodations with AccessAbility Services by registering at the beginning of each academic term. Their office is located in room 1401 of Needles Hall. (Phone: 519-888-4567 ext. 35082; Web: https://uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/; Email: access@uwaterloo.ca)

**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.*
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Texts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Traditional Super Hero</td>
<td><em>Understanding Comics</em> by Scott McCloud (UW Book store)</td>
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<td><em>All Star Superman</em> Vol 1 by Grant Morrison</td>
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<td><em>Ms Marvel</em> Vol 1 &amp; 2 by G. Willow Wilson</td>
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<td><em>Black Panther</em> Vol 1 &amp; 2 by Ta-Nehisi Coates</td>
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<td><em>Wonder Woman</em> (2017 film)</td>
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<td>Secret Organizations and Anti-Heroes</td>
<td><em>Planetary</em> Vol 1. by Warren Ellis</td>
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<td><em>Doom Patrol</em> Vol 1 by Gerard Way</td>
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<td><em>Blade</em> (film)</td>
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<td><em>Shade the Changing Girl</em> Vol 1 by Cecil Castellucci</td>
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<td><em>Ghost World</em> by Daniel Clowes (UW book store)</td>
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<td><em>Hawkeye</em> #19 by Matt Fraction</td>
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<td>Everyday Heroes</td>
<td><em>Life Is Strange</em> (video game)</td>
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<td><em>Bitch Planet</em> Vol 1 by Kelly DeConnick</td>
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<td><em>Scott Pilgrim vs. The World</em> (film)</td>
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**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

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

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**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**
**Presentation: Ms Marvel Character Analysis**

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

**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: Peer Editing  
April 4: Unwinding

Final Paper due April 9

Rights and Responsibilities

Every member of this class—instructor as well as students—has rights and responsibilities to ensure a pleasant and productive experience for all. Here are some more specific expectations for this course:

You will:

• know the university policies that govern your behaviour
• attend all scheduled classes
• arrive prepared: with assigned reading and writing completed, and with appropriate materials in hand
• participate actively in your own learning, while respecting the rights of others to learn as well: this means active listening as well as active speaking
• give thoughtful consideration to instructor feedback on written and oral work

I will:

• adhere to the university policies that govern my behaviour
• attend all scheduled classes
• make myself available for consultation in person and over email
• return assignments within 2 weeks
• provide helpful and respectful feedback on your work

On academic dishonesty: it is a serious offense to appropriate the intellectual labour of another to yourself. Plagiarism consists of using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution. I expect that the work you submit in this course will be the product of your own labour, and that your research sources will be scrupulously documented. If you have any concerns or questions about appropriate practice, you are sincerely encouraged to come discuss this with me—I would really like to help.

Absence and Late Policy

Attendance is vital to your success in this course. If you choose not to attend, you will be missing in-class exercises upon which some of your grades will depend. There are no ‘makeups’ for this work.

Assignments are due as noted on the assignment sheets; unless prior arrangements are made late assignments will lose 5% per day late, counting weekends. Assignments more than three days late will not be accepted without documentation or explanation.
Suggested Resources

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

Books:

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/