

## Reading Comics as Literature

In the last two decades, comics, a medium that most Americans had long dismissed as pulp fantasy and cheap entertainment, has begun to mature into an impressive and promising literary form. The 1980s saw the emergence of the “graphic novel,” the long-form comic that aspires not only to narrative coherence and closure, but to formal complexity and psychological depth. The current generation of comics artists has built on this foundation, and is now in the process of creating what may be the major literary medium of the twenty-first century. These so-called graphic novels are the texts we will be studying.

In order to understand the ways in which these comics create and manipulate meaning, we will be concerning ourselves (especially in the first weeks of class) with questions about comics’ formal practice. Here, we will take our cue (when possible) from Scott McCloud’s remarkable Understanding Comics. As the term progresses, you will learn habits and skills of active reading that will help you be aware of literary meaning and what the author has done to create or suggest what you understand. Comics, as you will see, is both a very accessible medium and a very subtle one: this is one of the reasons McCloud calls it “the invisible art.”

The skills and habits of active reading that you develop this summer should be highly portable: they will improve your performance in other humanities courses, your enjoyment of other literary and artistic media, and (possibly) your discernment as a citizen outside the classroom. No, seriously: these five weeks are just the beginning.

Texts for This Course:

James Sturm, The Golem's Mighty Swing  
Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics and Reinventing Comics  
Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons, Watchmen  
Art Spiegelman, Maus (both volumes)  
Will Eisner, To the Heart of the Storm  
Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean, Violent Cases and Mr. Punch  
Joe Sacco, Safe Area Gorazde  
Jason Lutes, Jar of Fools  
Daniel Clowes, Ghost World and Caricature  
Dylan Horrocks, Hicksville

I’m aware that the reading list for this course is somewhat expensive, and if the aforementioned on-line vendors can’t help you keep the cost under budget, you might arrange to share some texts with a classmate, or to check one or two of the texts out from the library. However, you should always have a copy of the text with you and in front of you in class.

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## THE STRUCTURE OF OUR ASSIGNMENTS

The three primary components of your grade for this course, in descending order of importance, are as follows:

- The final essay (7-10 pages). Due on the last day of class. Do not let it sneak up on you. I will be happy to talk with you about essay ideas, to read and comment on drafts, or to suggest texts or topics, at any time in the term. My standards for a literary essay are fairly high, but I will be preparing you for them as the term speeds by; make it a habit to remind yourself about the essay, and talk with me as you work on it.
- Class participation. This includes regular, prompt, and prepared attendance, as well as a willingness to enter into the day's discussion. Please note: Summer Programs policy allows no absences. Also please note that I have been known to count people absent when they are physically in the room, in some extreme cases.
- The mid-term (take-home, 2 hours). This will take the form of a short and fairly informal essay, of the sort you would write for an in-class exam. It will be due in class on July 23. The topic (or exam question) will be delivered on Tuesday July 22, by email.

In addition to these responsibilities, you will also have two daily assignments, the regular completion of which will factor into your class participation grade. They should be submitted together, by email, pasted into the body of the email (not as an attachment), by 10:00 AM on the day of class. They are:

- A brief synopsis of the text. This should be no more than a page, double-spaced (about 100 - 250 words). It should present a quick summary of the plot (or argument) of the text, as you understand it.
- Thematic or literary analysis is not necessary. Writing these should be helpful for you (as preparation for class) and for me (as a way of assessing your understanding of the text).
- Three questions. I will explain these in more detail in class, but the three discussion questions should be pitched at three discrete sorts of understanding: content, theme, and literary analysis.

## SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

M July 7 Reading comics closely.  
Introductions and techniques.

W July 9 An exemplary literary comic (short story)  
James Sturm: The Golem's Mighty Swing

F July 11 The groundwork, the vocabulary  
Scott McCloud: Understanding Comics

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M July 14 Contesting McCloud's groundwork

Dylan Horrocks: Inventing Comics

Plus

Understanding the Real Problem, *Six Steps, Leading Nowhere, Identification in Comics*, and the relevant parts of *First Impressions*.

W July 16 Pattern and complexity

Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons: *Watchmen* (through Ch. 6)

F July 18 What can we learn from superheroes?

Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons: *Watchmen* (through Ch. 12)

M July 21 Telling the Truth in Comics I: the Memoir

Art Spiegelman: *Maus* (both volumes)

W July 23 Telling the Truth in Comics II: Autobiography

Will Eisner: *To the Heart of the Storm*

A brief take-home mid-term exam will be due in class today. The exam question will be distributed by email on Tuesday. Please plan to give yourself an hour or two to complete it.

F July 25 Telling the Truth in Comics?: Autobiography?

Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean, *Violent Cases* and *Mr. Punch*

Plan to confer with me about your essay topic this week.

M July 28 Telling the Truth in Comics III: Comics Journalism

Joe Sacco: *Safe Area Gorazde*

W July 30 Seriality I: a story in small units

Jason Lutes: *Jar of Fools*

F August 1 Seriality II: a story in short chapters

Dan Clowes: *Ghost World* and *Caricature*

M August 4 The Future of Comics I: Love of Comics

Dylan Horrocks: *Hicksville*

W August 6 The Future of Comics II: Building a Canon

Student presentations from outside the syllabus

“Comics Your Professor Should Be Reading” (pamphlet)

F August 8 The Future of Comics III: Prognostications

Scott McCloud: *Reinventing Comics*

Essay (7-10 pages) is due today. Sample topics will be circulated shortly after the mid-term.

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Notes on prior knowledge:

I imagine that some of you may be familiar with comics, either from fortunate exposure to texts like those we're studying in this class, or from an early or deep immersion in superhero comics or manga. It should go without saying that the goal of this course is to develop new knowledge and new habits of reading, not merely to repeat or receive validation for your years of independent study. If you have read one of these books before, please read it again (with fresh eyes) for class.

Important: do not assume that a long acquaintance with genre comics will give you an advantage over your classmates, or make this course "easy" for you. Much of what we read this summer will stretch your standards and your comfort zone; these literary comics will often have merit precisely insofar as they present an unfamiliar terrain. Plan to be surprised.

-- *Contributed by Isaac Cates, Yale*