

COMICS AS LITERATURE

ENGL 4300 (IA) • ENGL 6000 (IA) • Special Topics in Literature • Maymester 2020 • 3 Credits • Online



Detail of an Illustration by Marguerite Sauvage — *America* #2 (2017).

CONTACT INFORMATION AND STUDENT HOURS

Professor:	Dr. Nicholas E. Miller (He/Him/His)
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Office:	West Hall 2106
Student Hours:	Available By Appointment

Student hours are opportunities for you to ask questions, to get help with assignments, to review course readings, to talk about connections between our class materials and other work, etc. These conversations are generally student-directed, but I can also help you to articulate your questions and goals. All student hours this semester will be conducted online through your choice of video conferencing platforms.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Popular yet understudied for over a century, comics are now critically recognized as a major form of communication and contemporary art. This introductory course will provide you with the skills necessary to read and understand this deceptively complex medium by exposing you a variety of artistic and storytelling approaches that tackle central themes of the American experience: politics, class, cultural and ethnic diversity, gender and sexuality, and violence. We will also ask fundamental questions about the medium itself: How do comics work? What unique effects can be produced as a result of the combination of words and images? How have comics responded to and reflected changes in American society over the last century? Our approach to these questions will be emphatically exploratory, and it will require us to read *lots* and *lots* of comics. Some of them will take you outside your comfort zone. Some will deal with controversial material. Some will look ugly or strange when you first encounter them. Some may frustrate or confuse you. But, when all is said and done, many will also entertain and move you. While I hope you will enjoy the comics that I have chosen for this class, I care more that you *understand* and *appreciate* them for what they tell us about visual media and American culture. The skills and habits of multimodal reading that you will develop this semester should be highly portable: they will improve your performance in other humanities courses, your enjoyment of other literary and artistic media, and (hopefully!) your discernment as a citizen outside the classroom. In other words, these three(ish) weeks are just the beginning!



COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To understand how comics convey meaning through the interplay of image and text.
- To demonstrate an informed appreciation of comics as artistic and cultural practice and to conceptualize visual storytelling as a process of cultural production and transmission.
- To explore how the multimodal design of comics shapes narratives for readers and reframes traditional concepts of literacy within the broader boundaries of popular culture.
- To understand the functions of comics in society—as entertainment, education, personal narrative, and history—in offering representations of reality and in shaping worldviews.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND PLATFORMS

There are two required texts for this course. They are available for purchase via the bookstore or online:

- Saladin Ahmed, Sami Kivelä, et al, *Abbott*. ISBN: 978-1684152452.
- Jen Wang, *The Prince and the Dressmaker*. ISBN: 978-1626723634.

To access the other readings and complete the assignments for this course, you must have an active Perusall account. If you do not already have one, you can create a new account at <http://app.perusall.com>. Please use the course code **MILLER-2CZ78** to enroll in this course. Most of the assigned readings for this course can be found as PDFs on Perusall at <http://app.perusall.com>. We will make active use of both BlazeVIEW and Perusall throughout the semester to help you engage with the course assignments and themes.

COURSE GRADING

- Video Completion (5%)
- Digital Annotations (30%)
- Discussion Forum (10%)
- Page Analyses (15%)
- Webcomic Analyses (15%)
- Comics Reviews (15%)
- Public Essay Project (10%)

Please submit all assignments to the appropriate platform by 11:59 PM on the due date *unless otherwise directed*. For each day an assignment is late, I may lower your grade by one grade increment.

Please note that you must complete ALL assignments in order to receive a passing grade for this course.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

VIDEO COMPLETION

Student engagement and a sense of community are both important to the learning experience, and I strive to create environments in which all students feel free to say what they think, ask questions, object, criticize, request clarification, return to a previous subject, and respond to others. In an online course, however, this can be challenging. I will not receive the same verbal and visual feedback from students that I do in a bricks-and-mortar classroom. Therefore, to make sure that you engage with the content and stay abreast of key themes and issues in this class, a small portion of your grade will consider your efforts to watch all of the videos I post to BlazeVIEW. I will keep my videos brief, as each video will focus primarily on the frameworks and feedback that are most essential to your success.

DIGITAL ANNOTATIONS

Your assigned readings, most of which are available as PDFs, need to be completed on Perusall. You are required to annotate these comics by the assigned due dates in Perusall. These digital annotations will be the primary vehicle for engaging in conversations with your peers this semester and will also





demonstrate your ability to read visual texts carefully and critically. For more information on how to annotate your texts or how to use Perusall, please see the supplementary materials on BlazeVIEW.

DISCUSSION FORUM

For the texts that are *not* available digitally on BlazeVIEW and Perusall, you should submit a 250-word post to the discussion forum on BlazeVIEW by 11:59 PM on the day that module is assigned. Please be sure to read my prompts carefully before submitting your work. While I will not grade these posts for grammar and style, you *should* be thoughtful and edit your prose along the way. In addition, you will be responsible for replying to two of your classmates' posts within two days *after* completing that module. Each of your replies should be roughly 150 words. In your replies you are welcome to agree, disagree, extend an idea with additional examples or evidence, qualify an idea, suggest exceptions, identify areas of contention among posts, or suggest a way to resolve tensions between posts.

PAGE ANALYSES

In addition to the assigned readings for each module, I will post a single comics page on BlazeVIEW without any narrative context. For each of these pages, you are responsible for producing a 250-word analysis on the visual rhetoric of that page. For these page analyses, I am primarily interested in your ability to *notice* details and to *create meaning* from those observations. These assignments will serve as near-daily opportunities to develop careful viewing habits through small acts of visual analysis.

WEBCOMIC ANALYSES

In addition to the assigned readings for each module, I will post a link to an archived or ongoing webcomic on BlazeVIEW. You should visit that webcomic and browse through several episodes, issues, or pages to get a feel for its content. Once you feel comfortable with the series, you should choose a single storyline and produce a 250-word reflection on how that it participates in our ongoing conversations about comics more broadly. For these webcomic analyses, I am primarily interested in your ability to *situate* these webcomics alongside the key themes and ideas found in our assigned readings. These assignments will serve as near-daily opportunities to synthesize course content.

COMICS REVIEWS

For these assignments, you will need to seek out a comic (or comics series) that is *not* assigned for this class and that you would like to review. A review is a form of writing that you are likely familiar with, although you may be under the impression that reviewers simply say whether or not they liked a comic and why. Although such evaluations are important, good reviews also explore content, style, and meaning in ways that might interest people who disagree with your assessments. Your review should explore personal reactions in order to better understand how you experienced the comic, and you should express yourself with clarity and style throughout. These reviews will be particularly useful in this class as they allow you to practice new analytical skills with a public audience in mind. In fact, to help you conceptualize a potential audience for your review, I ask that you select a digital venue from the list included below and craft your review with that audience in mind. To do this successfully, you should review the submission requirements for that venue and read several of its publications; those pieces may serve as useful models for the kind of review that you want to submit. *There is no specific length requirement for these reviews*, so long as they are suitable for your chosen venue.

PUBLIC ESSAY PROJECT

For your final project in this class, I will ask you to write a public essay on a comics-related topic of your choice. Just like the comics reviews, I am asking that you select a digital venue and construct this essay with the requirements of that venue in mind. Unlike the comics reviews, however, this final project should be a long-form essay and comprise a *minimum* of 1000 words. These should *not* be typical academic essays—remember your audience. Instead, you should consider this an opportunity to write an engaging in-depth essay, a piece of narrative journalism, or a work of creative non-fiction





that is tied to the comics that we have read throughout the semester. Unlike the comics review, this project allows you to chart a more complex narrative trajectory and to get caught up in the details. Remember that—in an age of listicles and memes—long-form essays eschew clickbait for substance, and therefore rely on a combination of passion and expertise to engage readers for the long haul.

LIST OF DIGITAL PUBLICATION VENUES

For each of the comics Reviews and the public essay project, you must select one of the digital publication venues below and tailor your writing to that platform and its primary audience.

- **AUTOSTRADDLE** — <https://www.autostraddle.com>
- **THE BEAT** — <https://www.comicsbeat.com>
- **COMICS WORKBOOK** — <https://comicsworkbook.com>
- **EXTRA INKS** — <http://extra-inks.comicssociety.org>
- **GRAPHIC MEDICINE** — <https://www.graphicmedicine.org>
- **GRAPHIC POLICY** — <https://graphicpolicy.com>
- **THE MARY SUE** — <https://www.themarysue.com>
- **THE MIDDLE SPACES** — <https://themiddlespaces.com>
- **THE VAULT OF CULTURE** — <https://www.vaultofculture.com>
- **WOMEN WRITE ABOUT COMICS** — <https://womenwriteaboutcomics.com>

COURSE POLICIES

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are bound by the university policy on academic integrity. All references to ideas and texts other than your own must be indicated through appropriate citations and footnotes. *You are responsible for being aware of and following the rules regarding the university academic integrity policy.* I reserve the right to give you a failing grade in this course for acts of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. Please be sure to review VSU’s Academic Integrity Code or consult with me if you have questions.

EMAIL AND COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

PLEASE ADDRESS ALL EMAILS TO ME USING YOUR VSU EMAIL ADDRESS !!! To reach me quickly, it is generally better to send emails outside of BlazeVIEW, if possible—I can be slow to respond in BlazeVIEW. When I need to communicate with you or send out class announcements, those messages will be addressed primarily to your VSU email address. I generally try to respond to email inquiries within 24–48 hours.

CLASS CONTENT AND DISCOMFORT STATEMENT

In this course, we will address ideas, topics, and theories that may challenge your taken-for-granted and “sacred” beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, ability, etc. In discussing how power and injustice operate and how they are experienced as oppression, subjugation, and violence by various persons, it is possible that you may feel some discomfort, guilt, anger, anxiety, or sadness. These feelings are normal responses to exploring such issues and they can be critical to the learning process. These feelings also have the potential to support a deeper understanding of structural inequalities, individual suffering, empathy, and human interconnectedness. **I WILL DO MY BEST THIS SEMESTER TO CREATE AN ONLINE COMMUNITY IN WHICH THESE FEELINGS CAN BE DISCUSSED OPENLY AND HONESTLY AMONG US !!!** I encourage you to share your ideas for making our class an inclusive online space in which all students can thrive. You are always welcome to contact me individually to discuss any concerns that you have.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT SUPPORT

As an educator, I fully support the rights of undocumented students to an education and to live free from the fear of deportation. I also recognize that immigration is a complex phenomenon with broad impact—particularly for those who are directly affected by it, as well as those who are indirectly





affected by their relationships with family members, friends, and loved ones. I want *all* students, regardless of immigration status or country of origin, to feel a sense of belonging and safety as they pursue their goals. With that in mind, **I COMMIT TO NOT SHARING YOUR STATUS WITH ANYONE IF YOU REVEAL IT TO ME !!!** I would also remind you that, by federal law, faculty and other school officials at VSU *cannot* disclose personal information about students without permission—that includes your immigration status.

TITLE IX STATEMENT

VSU is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive work and learning environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. VSU is dedicated to creating an environment where all campus community members feel valued, respected, and included. As such, VSU prohibits discrimination—on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex (including sexual harassment and sexual violence), sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, disability, genetic information, or veteran status—in the University's programs and activities as required by applicable laws and regulations such as Title IX. The individual designated with responsibility for coordination of compliance efforts and receipt of inquiries concerning nondiscrimination policies is the University's Title IX Coordinator. Contact information for the Title IX Coordinator can be found here: titleix@valdosta.edu, 1208 N. Patterson Street, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, Georgia, 31698, 229-333-5463.

ACCOMMODATIONS STATEMENT

Those of you with disabilities who experience barriers in this course may contact the VSU Access Office for assistance in determining and implementing accommodations. The Access Office is located in Farbar Hall. The phone numbers are 229-245-2498 (V) and 229-375-5871. For more information, please visit the Access Office or feel free to contact them via email at access@valdosta.edu.

MENTAL HEALTH STATEMENT

As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that interfere with learning, such as strained or violent relationships, death and loss, anxiety, substance use, depression, difficulty concentrating, and lack of motivation. These concerns may diminish your performance in class and reduce your ability to participate in school activities. **THERE ARE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO YOU !!!** You can learn about these mental health services at: <http://www.valdosta.edu/student/student-services/counseling-center>.

USE OF SYLLABUS

A syllabus is a tentative document and may be revised at my discretion. You should check it regularly and update your calendars when deadlines or assignments change. Questions about class can often be answered by consulting the syllabus. A best practice for being successful is to read and understand the syllabus in its entirety. *Once you have read this syllabus, please email me an image of your favorite superhero.*

COURSE CALENDAR

UNIT ZERO — COMICS STUDIES; OR, SOMETHING LIKE AN ORIGIN STORY

MODULE I — MAY 14 — INTRODUCTION TO COMICS AS LITERATURE

- **WATCH** — Introductory Video for “Comics as Literature” on BlazeVIEW
- **ANNOTATE** — Course Syllabus for “Comics as Literature” on Perusall
- **COMPLETE** — Create Perusall Account and Familiarize Yourself with the Platform
- **COMPLETE** — Visit BlazeVIEW and Familiarize Yourself with the Course Management System

MODULE II — MAY 15 — VISUAL LANGUAGE AND THE WORK OF COMICS

- **ANNOTATE** — Rachele Cruz, *Experiencing Comics* (2018)* — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader, *The World is a Text* (2018)* — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — Candida Rifkind, Brandon Christopher, and Alice RL, *How Comics Work* (2019)*





UNIT ONE — SUPERHERO COMICS

MODULE III — MAY 18 — SUPERHEROICS AND THE MUTANT METAPHOR

- **ANNOTATE** — James Shooter, Frank Springer, et al, *Dazzler: The Movie* (1984)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Ann Nocenti, Don Perlin, et al, *Beauty and the Beast* #1-4 (1984)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Magdalene Visaggio, Laura Braga, et al, *Dazzler: X-Song* #1 (2018)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Uncanny X-Men* #244 (1989)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Salamander* — <https://tapas.io/series/salamander>

MODULE IV — MAY 19 — DEATH, DISABILITY, AND SUPERHEROIC TRAUMA

- **ANNOTATE** — Chris Claremont, Bill Sienkiewicz, et al, *New Mutants* #1, #3, and #17-20 (1982)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Grant Morrison, Richard Case, et al, *Doom Patrol* #35-36 (1990)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Hawkeye* #11 (2013)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Witchy* — <https://www.witchycomic.com>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episode 8 of *Doom Patrol* (DC Universe — 2019)

MODULE V — MAY 20 — SUPER-ADOLESCENCE; OR, COMING-OF-AGE IN COMICS

- **ANNOTATE** — Brian K. Vaughn, Adrian Alphona, et al, *Runaways* #1-6 (2003)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Sean McKeever, David Baldeón, *Captain America* #602-605 (2010)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Mariko Tamaki, Joëlle Jones, et al, *Supergirl: Being Super* #1-2 (2017)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Genius* #3 (2014)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Super Mahou* — <https://www.maricomics.com/supermahou>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episode 1 of *Supergirl* (CBS — 2015)
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episodes 1-2 of *Runaways* (Hulu — 2017)

MODULE VI — MAY 21 — WHO RUN THE WORLD? SUPER-GRRRLS...

- **ANNOTATE** — G. Willow Wilson, Kelly Thompson, et al, *A-Force* #1-7 (2016)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Gail Simone, David Baldeón, et al, *Domino: Hotshots* #1-5 (2019)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Avengers: Wakanda Forever* #1 (2018)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *The Immortal Nadia Greene* — <https://immortalnadia.tumblr.com>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch *Deadpool 2* (20th Century Fox — 2018)

MODULE VII — MAY 22 — CANON, CONTINUITY, AND SUPERHERO NOSTALGIA

- **ANNOTATE** — G. Willow Wilson, Adrian Alphona, et al, *Ms. Marvel* #1-5 (2014)*
- **ANNOTATE** — N.K. Jemisin, Jamal Campbell, et al, *Far Sector* #1-5 (2019)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *America* #1 (2017)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Galanthus* — <http://galanthuscomic.com>

COMICS REVIEW #1 MUST BE SUBMITTED BY MAY 23 AT 11:59 PM

UNIT TWO — NON-SUPERHERO COMICS

MODULE VIII — MAY 26 — AMERICANA AND THE ARCHIE-VERSE

- **ANNOTATE** — Bob Montana, et al, *Archie* #1 (1942) — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — George Frese, et al, *Reggie* #1 (1949) — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — Dan DeCarlo, Rudy Lapick, et al, *Archie* #228 (1973)* — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — Frank Doyle, Dan DeCarlo, et al, *Betty and Veronica* #320 (1982)* — [EXCERPT]
- **ANNOTATE** — Marguerite Bennett, Audrey Mok, et al, *Josie and the Pussycats* #1-4, #7 (2016)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *It Rhymes With Lust* (1950)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Sarararara* — <https://sararararawebcomic.tumblr.com>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episode 3 of *Riverdale* (CW — 2017)





MODULE IX — MAY 27 — UNDERGROUND FEMINISM AND QUEER COMIX¹

- **ANNOTATE** — Diane DiMassa, *Hothead Paisan* #1, #3, #5, and #20 (1991)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Matt Fraction, Chip Zdarsky, et al, *Sex Criminals* #13 (2015)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Black Hole* #4 (1997)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Dykes to Watch Out For* — <https://dykestowatchoutfor.com/dtwof>

MODULE X — MAY 28 — THE CHANGING FACE OF CONTEMPORARY COMICS

- **ANNOTATE** — Marjorie Liu, Sana Takeda, et al, *Monstress* #1 (2015)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Francesca Lyn and Sally Cantirino, *Flower Girls* (2018)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Vita Ayala, Emily Pearson, et al, *The Wilds* #1-5 (2018)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Bitch Planet* #3 (2015)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Agents of the Realm* — <https://agentsoftherealm.com>

MODULE XI — MAY 29 — REVISITING THE STRONG FEMALE PROTAGONIST

- **ANNOTATE** — Beau Smith, Joyce Chin, et al, *Wynonna Earp* #1 (1996)*
- **ANNOTATE** — Beau Smith, Lora Innes, et al, *Wynonna Earp: Homecoming* #1 (2016)*
- **DISCUSS** — Saladin Ahmed, Sami Kivelä, et al, *Abbott* #1-5 (2018)
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Love and Rockets* #20 (1987)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Strong Female Protagonist* — <http://strongfemaleprotagonist.com>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episodes 1-2 of *Wynonna Earp* (Syfy — 2016)

COMICS REVIEW #2 MUST BE SUBMITTED BY MAY 30 AT 11:59 PM

UNIT THREE — THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

MODULE XII — JUNE 1 — GALAS, GOWNS, AND GENDER PRESENTATION

- **DISCUSS** — Jen Wang, *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018) — [CHAPTER 1 - CHAPTER 4]
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Moonstruck* #5 (2018)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Namesake* — <https://www.namesakecomic.com>

MODULE XIII — JUNE 2 — FAIRYTALES AND THE MAGIC OF FRIENDSHIP

- **DISCUSS** — Jen Wang, *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018) — [CHAPTER 5 - CHAPTER 8]
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* #18 (2014)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Unsounded* — <http://www.casualvillain.com/unsounded/comic+index>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episodes 1-2 of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (The Hub — 2010)

MODULE XIV — JUNE 3 — FROM HAPPY ENDINGS TO NEW BEGINNINGS

- **DISCUSS** — Jen Wang, *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018) — [CHAPTER 9 - CHAPTER 12]
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *The Legend of Korra: Turf War* #1 (2017)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *The Dreamer* — <http://thedreamercomic.com>
- **EXTRA CREDIT** — Watch Episodes 1-2 of *The Legend of Korra* (Nickelodeon — 2012)

MODULE XV — JUNE 4 — THE END; OR, I REALLY DON'T LOVE THIS PART...

- **ANNOTATE** — Tillie Walden, *I Love This Part* (2015)*
- **ANALYZE** — Selection from *Fence* #2 (2017)*
- **WEBCOMIC** — *Check, Please!* — <https://www.checkpleasecomix.com>
- **COMPLETE** — Student Evaluations (SOIs) Online via SmartEvals

PUBLIC ESSAY PROJECT MUST BE SUBMITTED BY JUNE 4 AT 11:59 PM

¹ The content for this module is *mature*. If you have concerns about images that are explicitly sexual or provocative, please contact me.

