Stephen Albertini

Comic Injustice: Teaching Social Issues Through The Graphic Novel

William Stryker and Nightcrawler from God Loves, Man Kills.

Part I: Creation and Inspiration

In "Comic Injustice," we will study various tales of oppression and social injustice through the graphic novel medium in a college-level English class.

Throughout this journey, we will show not only that graphic novels are a legitimate literary tool and teaching device, but that they can convey the same themes and generate the same discussions found in traditional texts, as well as have a similar, profound effect on readers. All of these texts cover different areas of the world, races and ethnicities, but all tie together the inherent themes of overcoming oppression, racial tension and socioeconomic disparities through a variety of lenses.

At the conclusion of the course, each student will create his or her own graphic novel, based on personal experiences with discrimination or any form of social injustice in an attempt to combine both the literary and visual element of the material.

Each selected book focuses on a different group of people and tackle different issues, whether it's religion, race or war, who are forced to deal with their surroundings in a very specific way. The visual element and structure of graphic novels will force your mind to operate in a way you aren't used to in other English classes to this point. Take note of things like scenery, shadows and facial expressions the authors and illustrators give you, to help create an engaging story of your own.

Long thought to lack the educational merit of more traditional English literature, "Comic Injustice" will show that graphic novels provide the vivid storytelling, eye-popping art and poignant thematic narrative necessary to be a driving force in the literary world.

Determining "Good" vs. "Bad" Graphic Novels

Michael Pagliaro, the author of "Is a Picture Worth A Thousand Words," a study published in *English Journal* that has served as an inspiration behind the creation of this course, studied 11 award-winning graphic novels to find common characteristics and similarities between the different pieces in an effort to help understand what makes them "good". He outlined four traits that were found in each work: detailed settings, formatting which delivers narrative information (or

form that functions), authentic dialogue and expressive characters (Pagliaro 13).

When creating this course, I selected books with those characteristics in mind.

Each selected work, while varying wildly in subject matter and presentation, contains these important traits necessary for a good graphic novel. You will always be able to find other examples of novels with better illustration or dialogue, but for the purposes of this course, the form and execution of the selected works best adheres to the previously stated characteristics of a good graphic novel, while discussing topics pertinent to our subject matter.

Why Graphic Novels?

This final project is a perfect marriage between two important aspects of the *Writing Teacher Writing* course for me: Pagliaro's aforementioned article and the difficulties of reaching students who do not respond to traditional literary texts, particularly students who do not have access to certain educational resources.

Throughout our course, we examined a variety of classrooms: the poverty-stricken, the working-class, the affluent and others. One of the main themes throughout each piece of literature we read on different teaching styles and classroom dynamics was that students in more affluent classrooms had more opportunities to be creative and to be active participants in class discussions. We saw that in the more working-class schools, students were forced to adhere to strict rudimentary educational practices that focused on students simply completing busy work and not necessarily engaging in class discussion or using their education as a tool for self-discovery and expression. As someone who would like to teach in the future, I want to create an educational environment in my classroom that

encourages these ideals, but more importantly, as a student who has benefitted from new experiences and taking chances, I hope this course can have a similar transformative effect on a student who is eager to learn but cannot fully connect with certain traditional texts.

Not all students enjoy reading the "classics" in English classes at all levels. Graphic novels give students the opportunity to understand the depth of hard-hitting topics via a non-traditional medium. It's a way to grab students you might not be able to grab via traditional texts, and shows students who might get bored with those traditional texts something new. One of my goals in the classroom is to always stimulate enthusiasm. I believe this course is a great way to engage and intrigue students.

At the onset of this project, I wanted this course to be for students in elementary school because they could benefit the most from it. There are young teenagers being exposed to some of these stories, however after analyzing the readings, I came to the conclusion that with the depth of the material, intense subject matter and language, it would be more suitable for college students at this moment.

Ideally, a version of this class would eventually be taught in elementary schools. Children in that age range would be most accepting of a book that's engaging and different. More importantly, these stories of superheroes and fictional worlds resonate so much with young children because they are relatable. It's a great way to start a discussion. The flashy pictures serve as a vessel to generate thoughts

and discussions about very real-life issues they may not have been comfortable talking about previously.

Thematically, comic books and graphic novels often deal with topics and characters that are very accessible to young adults. For example, most superheroes are seen as outcasts within their fictional environment. The X-Men mutants are despised by human civilization despite their constant need to save the world from evil. Spider-Man and Batman often draw the ire of their local fictional media and government despite their heroic conquests. That struggle endured by our masked heroes resonates so much with those of us who read graphic novels, mainly because they represent the issues so many people face every day.

These characters appeal to young men and women who are often dealing with the common difficulties of growing up and fitting in. They show that regardless of their superpowers and strength, many of these heroes are still outcasts trying to find a way into society, most of whom struggle regularly with their "mutant" or "heroic" identities the same way youth struggles with any gender, race or sexual orientation issues. It's hard to find better examples in literature connecting with youth on that level.

Beyond the awesome graphics, cool costumes and intense action, most of these stories at their core deal with accessible, universal issues of acceptance from your peers, respect for your fellow man and being proud of what makes you unique. What person can't identify with those struggles?

Part II: Reasons Behind Selected Works, Assignments & Grading
The following is a breakdown of the attached course syllabus (Exhibit A).

Learning Goals

- **That you will learn how to dissect a graphic novel and understand its formatting**

Graphic novels, because of their visual elements, must be dissected differently than a novel (Pagliaro 5).

> *Will Eisner (2008) worked for decades as an industry-leading graphic artist, and explains in his guide Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative that comics are, at their most basic, "a form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story." Importantly, sequential art is defined by Eisner as "images deployed in a specific order" (p. xvii).The difference between comics and illustrations is that sequential art requires a fundamentally different kind of reading. In traditional text, illustrations can serve to support, explain, or contradict the text (Werner, 2004). In graphic novels, images are the text.*

- **That you will understand the importance of visual literacy and the graphic novel's place in contemporary literature**

The graphic novel has been disparaged through the years as an inferior genre of literature, but through its vast subject matter and boundless artistic license, the form is thriving. Structurally, it's ideal for modern society. In an ever-changing world where instant gratification is desired and young men and women thrive on visual engagement, there is no better way to reach them than through this medium. "Graphic novels also support a global culture in two ways: graphic novels are deeply multicultural texts, and they have a visual focus which reflects the image-saturated Internet, the transmitter for global culture," says Gagliaro.

You will reflect on what is helpful about the process of reading graphic novels and how you can incorporate these visual elements into your writing.

- **That you will become a more aware reader and a more precise writer**

The benefits of reading graphic novels are two-fold. For one, they go a long way in developing struggling readers of all ages. "The ability of sequential art to reinforce and scaffold text gives students who might still be learning English syntax and vocabulary another route by which to comprehend the text," says Gagliaro.

For the purposes of this course, however, the goal is that through the analysis of graphic novels, the student will challenge him or herself in ways he or she never has...

> *In fact, reading comprehension experts often suggest teaching students to visualize what they're reading, and even draw pictures of it, in order to increase comprehension and retention (Beers, 2003). "Comic books can be a great way to pique reluctant readers' interest and challenge those students who are fluent in more traditional literature," Cleaver explains (p. 29).*

...and will become a more skilled writer (Pagliaro 8), particularly through focusing on mastering precise language and visual inference while developing setting and tone.

- **To push yourself as a writer**

By the end of this course, my students will take everything he or she has learned from the various stories and implement them into a personal work.

Each graphic novel, while some may be fiction and extremely far-fetched, is typically inspired by real-life experiences or current events of the time period. My students will have to draw from similar experiences in the world around them (or family/friends) and paint that picture in their own unique way.

The characters in these stories deal with issues prevalent in every day life. They may be sensationalized and the protagonists may have superpowers, but their struggles are no different than the rest of us.

Hopefully by the end of this course you will be inspired to take chances with your writing and challenge your self-imposed limits and fears.

Required Reading

- **Selections from *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Will Eisner)**

Will Eisner will live on forever in the pantheon of great cartoonists. It is in this work, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative,* where the master himself pulls back the curtain on comic books and provides a most fundamental guide to producing stories with a graphic element.

Here we will learn how to combine words and images seamlessly, use visuals as a narrative device, be exposed to various types of comic book stories and learn how to write effective dialogue. Certain passages will be used throughout the course.

- ***A Contract with God* (Eisner)**
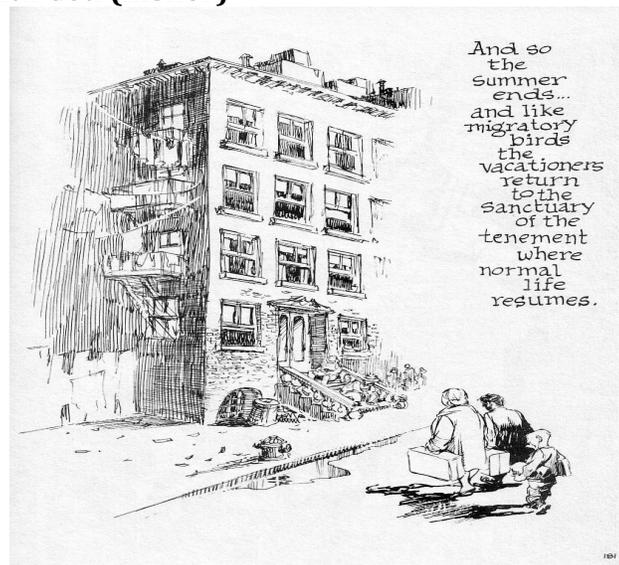
It's only right that after learning the basics from Eisner, you will read what many

regard as the *first* graphic novel ever produced, *A Contract with God.*

Here you will read stories regarding the issues of adultery, sexual abuse, suicide,

domestic abuse, classism and more through interwoven tales by a cast of characters

residing in tenement buildings in the Bronx.

- *American Born Chinese* **(Gene Luen Yang)**

Yang does a masterful job of weaving three different stories into one, all of which

revolve around the themes of societal inclusion and discrimination. All three main

characters must overcome their own insecurities and fears (and in one case, hubris)

in order to eventually realize what is truly important in their lives.

For being a graphic novel, its form adheres to a strict comic strip style, far different than that of *Contract.*

- ### *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* **(Chris Claremont)**

The X-Men were a natural choice for this course and they are the only selection from the superhero genre. More than most superheroes, the X-Men's struggles embody a large portion of the social issues touched on throughout this course. This particular story, *God Loves, Man Kills*, is one of the most poignant pieces in the entire X-Men canon.

Written by Chris Claremont, the story focuses on a leader of an ultra-conservative, religious movement named William Stryker who vows to eviscerate the entire mutant race. The X-Men not only need to fend off Stryker and his growing number of supporters, but convince the rest of humanity that they belong and deserve the same rights as anyone else.

From the opening page, the art evokes memories of America's own racist past by showing the hanging of two mutant children. The theme of racism is prevalent throughout, perhaps more so than in any other X-Men story arc. Claremont focuses on very dense subject matter and presents a look at racism and discrimination through the X-Men lens.

- ### *Maus* **(Art Spiegelman)**

In Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, we get a look at the Holocaust through the stories retold by Speigelman's father, a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. *Maus* is the first

graphic novel to ever win a Pulitzer Prize (1992) and a different animal portrays every specific race within the story.

It's one of the most important graphic novels and for good reason. The book is part memoir, historical text and graphic novel all rolled into one. Tackling one of the most important and devastating historical events of the 20th Century, Spiegelman draws the audience in to the cruel world in which his father lived many years ago. Although it's in the graphic novel medium, *Maus* carries as much literary weight as other Holocaust stories of its time that are typically found in traditional English classrooms.

- *Persepolis* (**Marjane Satrapi)**

Persepolis is an autobiographical account of Satrapi's childhood growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The story spans years and shows the growth of Satrapi through the most adverse conditions; dealing with constant war, death of family members, all while trying to make sense of a confusing, ever-changing world around her and coming to grips with her own, passionate beliefs.

It's an excellent account of one woman's journey in the midst of an issue, while her account took place 30 years ago, still resonates with many of us today.

*Additional Recommended Reading can be found on the attached syllabus, including: *Incognegro (*Mat Johnson*); Nat Turner (*Kyle Baker*); Fun Home (*Alison Bechdel*).*

Assignments and Grading

50% Final Project (using Comic Life 3 software)
25% Response Papers
15% Participation
10% Storyboard Exercises

Each class will be predicated on class discussion about the different readings and we will make connections with similar stories in history (through different mediums) and current events. The readings, besides telling complex stories in a new and engaging way, will hopefully serve as a vehicle to generate discussion about larger worldwide issues of oppression, discrimination and the like. Students are encouraged to bring any other graphic novel, comic book, comic strip or piece of art to the table as well in the hopes of expanding our graphic novel library.

There will be several storyboard exercises to help students get more familiar with Comic Life software, which they will use for the final projects. An example of this could be to produce a four-panel comic strip that doesn't contain any dialogue, instead focusing the students' attention on setting, tone and character details, while familiarizing themselves with the software. There will also be in-class character building and setting exercises to help expand on final project ideas throughout the semester.

Response papers for each book will be required throughout the semester. Through these response papers, students will have the opportunity to react to the different readings in a number of ways. Here are some examples:

- *What about this book was effective in your understanding of this subject?*
- *What connections can you make between this book and your own personal experiences?*
- *What connections can you make between this book and what is going on in the world today?*
- *What artistic choices did the author take with his illustrations that enhanced/distracted you in the reading?*

(Response papers will typically be 2-3 pages in length.)

The final project is to serve as both a culmination of all the material reviewed throughout the course and an opportunity to do a piece of personal writing.

Each student in the class will take an event in his or her life (or an account of a family member or friend) where they felt unfairly criticized, discriminated against, etc., and write a fictional graphic novel using that experience as the basis. There is no central theme or type of social injustice that needs to be the focus, as all students have their own unique life experiences. It will be fiction and the author can take

whatever liberties they'd like with the characters (they can be animals like in *Maus*), setting and outcome, as long as it's based on a real-life situation.

Since not every writer is a skilled illustrator, each student is urged to purchase Comic Life 3 ($29.99 at the Apple Store), the latest version of the comic book software that will allow you to bring your story to life. The software is very user-friendly and allows you to import photos that you can edit any way you like – to give it that comic book feel. This way, even if you cannot draw, you can still create a graphic novel through photos.

If a student does have an affinity for drawing or cannot make the necessary accommodations to purchase Comic Life, I can provide alternative software or the student can draw the final project/assignments, pending my approval.

When handing in the final assignment, students will write a paper detailing the reasons for their creative choices as well. Extensive workshop/peer evaluations will occur throughout the semester before handing in final copies.

Part III: Graphic Novels Elsewhere in Education

Who Else is Doing This?

Throughout my research, I was pleasantly surprised to see that graphic novels and comic books were becoming more popular teaching tools in all levels of education.

At Germantown Friends School, a local high school here in Philadelphia, *Persepolis* was incorporated into a freshman literature course. As a final assignment, the students took a personal essay and adapted it into a short graphic novel, similar

to the proposed final in this syllabus, which brought about a variety of engaging stories from the class.

"This is only the third year we have been teaching *Persepolis* as part of our literature program, so including a graphic novel is relatively new for us," says English teacher Connie Thompson. "The ninth-grade teachers all believe, however, that this is first-rate literature in the comic format."

At Penn State University, The Graphic Novel (ENGL 136) is offered for students pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree. This course examines the graphic novel as a literary and visual form through an intense overview of the history of comics, analysis of the medium, as well as reading and analyzing a selection of graphic novels. There the students get a better understanding of formal graphic novel artistic techniques, consider the benefits and challenges of writing in this medium and will learn to think critically about a variety of issues (identity, ethnicity, sexuality, history and religion).

Professor Philip Nel has taught two different courses pertaining to the graphic novel during his tenure at Kansas State University, including English 830: Comics and Graphic Novels (Fall 2009), as well as English 440: The Graphic Novel (Fall 2012).

Through an intense workload of 18 required texts and 12 quizzes, Nel focuses on the "golden age" of the graphic novel (late 70's-present day). The emphasis in this class is on the form, and not so much the history. Much of his class is predicated on class discussion, as each class is dedicated to a different graphic

novel and the pace is swift. There are three written assignments in addition to the final.

While these themes of discrimination, oppression and social injustice are prevalent in many graphic novels and those themes are highlighted in some of these courses, I was unable to find a course this specific. Every example found through my research was a generic graphic novel course and there are many in universities across the country. The amount of time dedicated to the medium's history, form and themes varied among the different examples.

My iteration of this course will focus heavily on the themes previously outlined while giving just enough background on the medium. The students need to know how to accurately put their ideas and stories into this unique format, so a certain amount of explanation is necessary. There are fewer readings assigned here compared to the other college-level courses I mentioned, in an effort to dive just a bit deeper into the different stories and characters, rather than flying through dozens of books. Hopefully, this course can be a springboard for students who previously never thought of graphic novels as a viable literary tool before and will read more of them going forward.

Part IV: Works Cited and Consulted

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