

Southern New Hampshire University

Comics Literature to the Rescue:  
Multimodal Theory within Composition Literature Classrooms

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
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By

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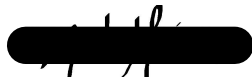
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### Abstract

A top priority for community colleges is ensuring student retention and overall academic success, and core class requirements bear the responsibility of ensuring this. Degree demographics from Three Rivers Community college in Norwich, Ct were analyzed to show that the majority of students on this campus will be required to enroll within the ENG 102-Composition and Literature course in order to graduate, making this course a key area to ensure that student engagement and retention is at its peak efficiency. However, students are often not connecting with literature in the classroom, leading to low student engagement and contrasting the objectives of this course. After reviewing numerous academic texts and pairing them with respective comics literature, this study confirms that comics literature is an exemplary tool to mitigate growing ambivalence in students while still ensuring that course objectives can be met. This is due to comics literature's ability to maximize multimodal elements. Multimodal theory is meeting the needs of students who are acclimated to digital technology while also providing an environment that allows for a new academic structure found within on-campus classrooms and online to adapt. This study looks at various elements found unique to comics literature structure. It also looks at literary genres and how they appear in the text and applies traditional literary theories taught in current classrooms. Finally, sample discussion questions, assignments, and essay prompts are provided to show the practicality of implementing multimodal theory and comics literature into a Composition and Literature course.

Keywords: Multimodal Theory, Community Colleges, Literature, Composition, Comics

In my time forming tutor-student relationships as an Embedded Support Tutor, I find that I often learn something new from those that seek my assistance; in fact, I often find myself in situations where students remarkably shift my understanding of academia. For example, a few years ago I met with a student who was struggling to get an idea for his latest Literature and Composition assignment. Now, I could tell the student wanted to succeed in this class, if only to never have to read and analyze another novel for the rest of his life, but he was mentally stuck and bogged down by the part of the semester where meaning of life type questions start to appear. What is the point of this assignment? Why should I do this if I am not going to get an English or Literature degree? Valid questions, even ones an English major ponders from time to time.

However, I had a question of my own that transformed our tutor-student relationship: “Do you read any of that?” From my eyeline, he could see that I was referring to the group of manga style characters on his shirt. He paused, not sure why I was deflecting from his woes about his class assignment. “I mean yeah, but that’s not reading, reading,” he replied, stressing the last “reading” in a way that sounded as if I had called him out on a dark secret. Admittedly, when I commented that I had not read the manga but was interested to hear what he had to say about it, our session got off track. Once given a platform to discuss his passion, he did not want to stop, and my engaged pedagogy primed me to utilize the objectives desired to flesh out his understanding of why the thematic elements in the manga could parallel with his essay assignment. Fortunately, our time talking about the manga provided an adequate bridge for him to get a foundation on his assignment, thus ensuring his success and retention in the class; however, I felt a new idea awakening.

It dawned on me that I had sat with a student who professed to be a bad reader but also admitted to reading daily. This seems strangely like I had walked into an academic paradox. After all, if one truly were a bad reader, what incentive would there be to continue the process as a daily habit; what fulfillment is gained by it? The answer lies in the environment the student and I were in. We were in an academic institution, one of a few that had provided my student with reading material his entire academic career, which unintentionally created a hierarchy of texts where the ability to invest oneself and flesh out the ideas of the text was scrutinized through book reports and essays. The double emphasis on the word “reading” in his response to my question about the manga that he reads denotes what many in society have come to believe: there is a remarkable difference between the reading that one is introduced to in school and what is available to be read at any other time. However, what if this student’s reading habits were exactly what Literature and Composition needs to retain students; what if comics, manga, and graphic novels have a legitimate place in higher academic discourse?

With student retention being a key factor for community colleges, there surprisingly is little discourse about how vital the success of students in Literature and Composition impacts their overall success. At Three Rivers Community college, this institution offers fifty-eight degree programs. Of these, twelve make it mandatory that students pass Literature and Composition (ENG 102), and eighteen require a writing course beyond Composition 101, which given the range of writing courses available at TRCC is predominantly ENG 102 (“Degrees & Certificates”). This number may seem low; however, if one looks at how many students require these degree paths, data shows that there are more students in programs requiring English 102 than others. For example, General Studies (32%), Liberal Arts (6%), and Nursing (7%) are the top three degrees pursued by students at TRCC, and if only these figures are accounted for,

almost half of the campus will have to take Literature and Composition to meet the expectations of their respective programs (TRCC Professional Development Program 9). If the other programs are included, it is possible that up to seventy-five percent of students will enroll within Literature and Composition.

Multimodal theory is a key area worth considering about how instructors can expand their abilities to engage and retain students in Literature and Composition. Multimodal elements include visual, verbal, digital components to compliment written instruction, thus allowing students to receive information in a variety of ways. Citing numerous studies in her article titled “Personalized Multimodal Instruction: Positively Impacting Lives Through Invitational Education,” Debra Coffey asserts that students inherently communicate in multimodal ways outside of the classroom, and classrooms should be designed to keep that in mind” (55). However, many scholars question the ability for current instructors to efficiently use visual elements in their classroom. For example, in their research presented in the essay titled “A Grounded Theory on Comprehension Processing of Teachers as ESL Readers of Multimodal Still Visuals,” Judy Cañero Bautista and Merry Ruth Morauda Gutierrez assert that “the majority of teachers do not use all elements of visual grammar and they lack the ability to integrate reader-based, text-based, and context-based sources of information in order to establish a closer match between their meaning and the intended meaning of the multimodal still visuals” (1). This shows that time and research should be invested in ensuring that multimodal forms of literature can be utilized better within the classroom setting.

My student’s daily reading habits is a clue to how Literature and Composition courses can form a bridge with multimodal elements, and as a result, help to solve the overall problem of student retention on campus. With visual elements being paired with words to convey a message;

comics literature maximizes the components of multimodal texts while still providing a message captures the spirit of traditional texts. Moreover, introducing college students within the Literature and Composition course to comics literature will compliment traditional pieces of literature, foster student engagement, and still successfully meet the course objectives as mitigated by New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE).

### **Form and Structure**

Literature and Composition is a time for students to learn that each form of literature has unique variables that separate them from other types, and the ability to decipher the right form of a text is a key course objective supported by NECHE. The first objective for Literature and Composition is to “identify the literary genres of poetry, fiction, and drama, and some of the forms and structures within those genres” (“102 Syllabus”). Ultimately, this objective focuses on what parameters are considered for identifying texts that are considered literature, and together, they show that teaching these elements illuminates the diversity that creative writing and reading encompasses. However, by listing poetry, fiction, and drama as the key literary genres, it sets a false premise that these are the only forms of literature, making this objective a key barrier for providing students an academic platform to analyze comics literature in this class. This is a disservice to comics literature because academic scholars have spent their careers legitimizing comics by identifying formalistic elements in comics literature and explaining how they function.

If one were to set a pile of traditional literature in front of students with comics literature in the mix and asked, “which of these are comics?”, students would have enough background knowledge to answer correctly. Throughout their lives, students have been primed through the immersion of digital media to understand that images, texts, the arrangement of these elements



are carefully constructed to convey a message that can be deciphered. Whether they have been given the opportunity or not within classrooms, comics are so entrenched in American culture that students intuitively have been primed to identify the unique structure of comics literature, just like they have other forms of writing. As such, they can decipher what are comics and what are not. With adequate instruction in the classroom, they can be empowered to move beyond identifying these elements into interpreting and analyzing them. Moreover, they can use these skills to interpret texts that they will be introduced in other classes, or find similar connections in their personal and professional lives.

### *Closure*

Closure is a distinctive formalistic element to comics because it relies on the relationship between panels to form meaning for the reader. The gaps between the panels, known as the gutter, are where the readers imagine and control the narration, thus giving them some modicum of control about how the story plays out, forcing students to engage with the texts. In his textbook *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud identifies six specific closure styles that occur in comics: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur (74). Identifying these elements and the illustrator's choice to utilize them is a great way for students to understand the conscious construction that goes into creating each panel, because they can explore the relationship between what is being shown and what is not. Moreover, closure is a specific form that is dependent on a reader's intuitive ability to decode what is happening between the panels. McCloud asserts that comics are "a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and action" (65). This leads to engagement because the reader has to interpret the relationships between panels rather than passively accepting what is beyond the

page, preparing them to use these skills in other ways, such as analyzing poetry. As these past experiences will vary between student to student, having classroom discourse about their interpretations will vary, leading to enriching conversations between peers. Students can have conversations about their interpretation of what happens within the gutter section and defend these interpretations based on key visual elements appearing in the panels. As a result, they will learn to create an argument using key critical thinking concepts.

In *The Complete Work of Persepolis* author and illustrator Marjane Satrapi uses comics literature to depict her experiences growing up in Iran after the Revolution of 1979. In “The Shabbat” chapter, a young Marjane is shrouded in blackness, conveying the darkness of her loneliness. In the next elongated panel, she sees her mother in the distance. The darkness that once encapsulated Marjane is replaced with whiteness, and her childhood depiction is running towards her mother with her arms wide open. In the following panel the two women are embracing, joyous to be reunited (Satrapi 140). In these three panels, there are a few things left out for the audience to interpret using their own experiences: when young Marjane sees her mother, the closing of the space between them, and the initiation and duration of their embrace. Satrapi intentionally crafts the gutter spaces between these three panels with moment-to-moment closure to show young Marjane’s fragmented feelings of loneliness being erased by her mother’s presence. The duration of time is intentionally regulated to the gutter because it reflects Marjane’s fear that she would never see her mother again. Or, at least that is one interpretation that could be made.

### *Line Structure*

Comics literature is often presumed to be static images upon a page, but comics artists have found specific visual grammar that appeals to the audience’s senses through the use of

lines. Repeated use of these elements in students' daily usage of visual media normalizes the lexicon, giving students more confidence to identify and interpret their meaning. Comics artists utilize line structure so that readers can interpret if something is loud, smelly, or moving, all of which can be deconstructed in the classroom. As McCloud is the master of structure, he once again has the skill set to illuminate how this particular line structure has formed over the years. He writes,

In the beginning, motion lines – or ‘zip ribbons’ as some call them—were wild, messy, almost desperate attempts to represent the paths of moving objects/ over the years, these lines became more refined and stylized, even diagrammic/ Eventually, in the hands of fantasy artists like Bill Everett and Jack Kirby/ -- Those same lines became so stylized as to almost have a life and physical presence of their own! (McCloud 111)

These motion lines take the place of transitional phrases, verbs, or other textual signals detailing action within a text. Essentially, students have a lexicon that represents all their senses to fully immerse themselves within the literature. They can smell odorous images or feel the temperature of the setting. In this way, students are relying on sensory stimuli to enact a large part of the story, which is very similar to how they engage their real environments. There is also a key opportunity to bridge comics literature with the poetic use of lines, providing a playful opportunity to analyze how this structure is a transversal.

Khaled Hosseini teamed with Illustrators Fabio Celoni and Mirka Andolfo to transition his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, into a graphic novel. Their imagery is vivid in color and detail, but it is the motion lines in this text that truly empower the message. For example, during the infamous kite battle where Amir is controlling the kite in the sky, Hosseini's audience has a unique opportunity to see how agile Amir's kite work must be to compete with

the others in the open sky. Seeing the motion involved adds tension as to whether the boy can win the tournament. In one isolated panel, his kite is juxtaposed between the cheers and a line that loops two times from the kite's tail to the right (Hosseini 38). This line is not seen by crowd for it does not actually exist in comparison to the rest of what is seen. On the other hand, the audience reading the panel interprets that line to be the motion that kite transited through the air to secure Amir's victory. More importantly Amir's kite is the only kite showing motion lines, thus making it not only the focal point of the panel, but all empowers its motion to be more significant than the other moving objects.

### *Time*

Another fascinating unique formalistic element unique to comics literature is how time is portrayed. One often views time as being linear, but modern writing has often broken that structure to enhance the reader's experience. In comics literature, panels are constructed so that there is a progression of a storyline with one's eyes controlling the pace and location of where information in comics is received, just like reading text; however, there can be multiple time references presented in one single panel. In one example, McCloud depicts a panel that recognizes ten different shifts in time even though the image is organized in one panel (95). McCloud asserts this is possible because "Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and the 'real time' of everyday life to expect a very linear progression. Just a straight line from Point A to Point B" (106). The reader's brain naturally does not stop and count the time shifts as noted here, but due to the constant immersion into multimodal media, students intuitively use their sight line to create a logical path through each individual panel and their arrangement with others. In classroom discussions or assignments, students can take the time to consciously deconstruct how time is presented in comics literature. They can isolate how

shifts in time force the eyes to focus on key visual elements, and as a result, they can interpret why comics artists intentionally create those focal points and how those focal points connect to the larger concepts in the texts. This allows students to explore how point of view is intentionally manipulated to control how the audience interprets information. It also makes a perfect bridge to contrast with Modernist writers who utilized stream of consciousness within their writing.

Adapted by Renée Nault, *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood's novel is joined with graphic elements to show a visceral retelling of this narration. One panel depicts an arch running through the top, and the inner area is broken up with three lines to form four duplicated backgrounds. The only thing that changes is the location and commentary by the four Offreds to Ofglens (Nault 17). Using traditional eye flow to find patterns established in a top down order, the audience sees that the progression of this panel marks the repetitiveness of their exchanges that transpire over numerous days. Nothing changes, not even the way they greet each other. When paired with the arch, which serves as a portion of a circle, it shows the daily, continuous loop that these women are trapped in. As a result, this subtle display allows the audience to understand how their daily routines leaves the women stuck in a situation they cannot change.

## **Literary Genres**

Form and structure show how contrasting literary texts are from other others, thus organizing them into types of texts; however, there are some elements that are traversable and appear in literature no matter the form. The second course objective for Literature and Composition is to “identify and employ other critical strategies beyond formalism to analyze literature. These elements include such things as theme, tone, point of view, characterization,

and figurative language” (“102 Comp”). These elements form strong connections with the audience so that they can identify and analyze what makes literature powerful and able to be valuable for centuries to come. At this time in the course, students can draw parallels with a myriad of forms to analyze these unifying elements. As each literary style has often unique ways of displaying the elements covered in the second objective, instructors are already primed to recognize the diversity upon which these elements are conveyed.

Comics artists have strong multimodal elements at their disposal to convey the elements defined in the second objective. They can use prose, poetic, and even play form to project these elements in a new format that also utilizes how they are presented in visual art, giving comics artists a strong arsenal to craft their messages. Students have been given plenty of experience through their emersion of other texts and visual art to identify and analyze how these components develop in a comics structure. This is important because as evidenced in “Effects of Multimodal Learning analytics with Concept Maps on College Students’ Vocabulary and Reading Performance,” by Shih-Ping Wang and Yih-Lan Chen, “language must cooperate with other communication modes, which refers to other non-verbal signals, such as facial expressions, gazes, gestures, and the like, to achieve the characteristics of language through which people can express the meaning of their utterances and identities” (14). The very things that Wang and Chen identify as being necessary for effective language usage are illustrated in various ways through comics; therefore, when comics are paired with other forms of literature, student’s understanding of these concepts are enhanced due to this form facilitating gaps that written texts cannot fill.

### *Prefixes and Upfixes*

Readers intuitively want to know what characters are thinking and feeling, because that is a vital way to connect with them or the literature that encapsulates them. Moreover,

there are a myriad of ways that writers can express how characters in literature are conveyed or what they are thinking. Often in written texts, these are displayed with quotation marks or directive statements like “the character thought” or “the character felt.” While these certainly express to the audience a depth of information that allows them the right tools to facilitate characterization within the text, written text often forces it to be isolated from the rest of what is going on in the text due to restrictive punctuation expectations. Comics can certainly take the directive cues normalized by the written text, but there are other visual elements at their disposal that add emotional elements. Facial expressions can be seen and interpreted by the audience based on their natural proclivity to respond to people around them, and artists can choose to be as descriptive in their characterization of people’s faces or make them generalized. On the other hand, Neil Cohn asserts that there is another unique visual element that has been normalized over the decades to express emotions in characters: prefixes and upfixes. In *The Visual Language of Comics*, Cohn asserts that

Just as ‘prefixes’ appear prior to a root morpheme, another class of bound morphemes in visual languages appears above the head of characters as ‘upfixes,’ most often to depict emotional or cognitive states... the space above the head allows several signs including hearts (love), stars (pain), gears (thinking), exclamation marks (surprise), zzz (sleep), question marks (curiosity), dollar/yen/euro/etc. signs (greed), circling birds (wooziness), dark scribbles or rain clouds (bad mood), bubbles and/or sparks and spirals (drunkenness), skull and crossbones (death or anger), or lightbulbs (inspiration). None of these objects literally float above people’s heads, but in this position they convey various conventionalized meanings. (42-43)

These are key visual elements that students can identify and deconstruct to find their meaning largely because they are used often to construct emoticons and emojis. Therefore, seeing these messages lets the audience know what characters are thinking or feeling, which are crucial pieces of information to understand characters drives and motives and effect the literature they are within. Knowing when emotions are internalized or expressed to those around characters is a key indicator to the personality of the character and the situations that they are within.

Legendary Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus I* and *Maus II* uses a style very similar to weekly comics to present simple imagery of complex and challenging tales. As his characters are composed of thick black lines, Spiegelman is not presented with a lot of opportunity to draw emotions on his characters as one would naturally read them upon a face. In *Maus II*, Spiegelman creates a visual representation of himself, and to show his feelings towards commercializing *Maus*; he utilizes upfixes to express how his verbal responses to the marketers are not actually reflective of his true thoughts and emotions (Spiegelman 42). The question marks and exclamation points, even the triangular shapes surrounding his head, serve to show that he is experiencing strong visceral responses to the demand to write another *Maus*, but the readers, not those within the panel, have access to interpret these emotions. Utilizing upfixes allows Spiegelman to flesh out his self-comic self so the audience can sympathize with how challenging it would be for him to revisit, and profit from, something that haunts him. However, as he is responding to people who happen to be in a position of authority, he must internalize these emotions. As such, these upfixes reveal to the audience the emotions that the Spiegelman representation has in a way that lets them remain hidden to the characters in the scene. In this way, the lack of facial expressions to convey his responses reinforces his need to hide them from others.



## *Color*

Novels often provide some visual elements in their covers, perhaps even some images sprinkled in, but rarely are these elements a predominant construction of the message. As a result, the most that predominant forms of literature can maximize on is the relationship between the text and the white space surrounding it. However, comics literature can maximize visual elements to be a part of the story. Rich color schemes, or the absence of them, are a key element in how comics artists set the tone, making this a key area for students to explore. Overall, colors are foundational to how students can code symbols, and they have been using them since well before preschool to convey meaning. As colors have a long history of being connected with cultural codes, codes that manifest in students' everyday lives, comics literature is in a unique position to utilize palettes to set the tone. McCloud relates this element to comics literature when he states, "suddenly it seemed possible for color to take on a central role/ Colors could express dominant mood./ Tones and modeling could add depth./ Whole scenes could be virtually about color/ color as sensation, color as environment./Color as art" (190-91). With this in mind, comics artists do not utilize colors just because they can; they do so because it is a crucial tool to convey a message to the audience. Therefore, students can pair their previous experiences with what colors symbolize with how they are being used by artists.

Daniel Locke and David Blandy, who are both scientists and artists, craft a graphic novel of the ages called *Out of Nothing*. Their goal is to link key moments of the past and how these moments continue to set a foundation for each scientific leap that comes after. Primary colors become a constant throughout the numerous time spans, and while connecting the story line, they also serve to link areas of science that area featured (Locke and Blandy 13; 45; 55; 124; 139; 177; 208; 224; 246-247). This is important because primary colors are also assumed to be the

rudimentary colors that are needed to be combined in specific ways to create all others. By synthesizing the connection of these historical moments with primary colors, Locke and Blandy are using the audience's previous experiences with these colors to make them agree with their purpose that mankind's progress has always been relational to the cosmos and the human ingenuity that it inspired.

### **Literary Theory**

All forms of art are impacted by the newest discoveries in science, and often literature is organized by the specific periods of when it was produced. This is a great idea because it allows instructors to provide a historic lens that explains shifts and transformations about how artists' craft their work. Additionally, the socio-political factors that impact individuals greatly influences what stories are considered powerful and reflective of society. The Literature and Composition objectives identifies the third objective for students is to "identify and employ other critical strategies beyond formalism to analyze literature, including some of the following: psychological, feminist, new historical, cultural, Marxist, post-colonial, reader response" ("102 syllabus"). This may be the first time that students are introduced to key concepts that are not only in literature but also social sciences like sociology and psychology. Therefore, Literature and Composition is a key time for students to explore the various literary theories that encompass many of the conditions that impact society.

When people think of comics literature, they often think of the weekly editions of superheroes that readers collect in plastic safety envelopes. Although these forms of comics should have valid academic representation, they are not the only types of comics literature. Creators of comics literature come from many different backgrounds, much like the great writers of poetry, short stories, plays, and novels, and like these other literature counterparts, they infuse

their beliefs and experiences into what they depict. As such, the required literary theories can equally be utilized in comics literature. For example, William Boerman-Cornell, in his essay “Using Historical Graphic Novels in High School History Classes” shows that comics literature enhances any sociological conversations that students are having. He asserts that

[Historical Graphic Novels] can embed timelines, photographs, and political cartoons so that readers encounter them within the primary flow and with the voice of a text box to help them connect the map, timeline, or image with the rest of the primary flow. This technique, found in a majority of the corpus of valuable affordance of both geographic and temporal contextualization that is not available in a standard textbook approach.

(210)

Boerman-Cornell focuses on the historical elements, which are almost always introduced when laying the foundation for literary theories because it is necessary to establish a foundation to understand the differences in one’s conditions or to evaluate change in society. However, the elements noted can be utilized efficiently to create a multimodal platform to display present conditions as well for all thematic elements.

### *Feminist and Gender Studies Theories*

A strong construct that students observe in the Literature and Composition classroom is how gender is displayed and represented in literature, thus promoting society’s interpretation of what it means to embody, or reject, masculine and feminine roles. Additionally, students can analyze how roles embodied in the past impact the present, or they can see how they have changed. Mel Gibson in her essay, “Girls, Women, and Comics,” points out that “though comics has often been wrongly identified as an exclusively masculinist field, close attention to its history reveals that comics for girls and women have played a significant role in the medium’s

development” (241). Therefore, students would benefit from looking at a form of literature that is perceived, wrongly, to be predominantly from a masculine lens. Moreover, students can see if the way women are depicted in comics reflect how women are represented in other forms of literature and analyze why there could be a discrepancy.

Like other forms of literature, comics literature has been analyzed by academics to see how gender has been reflected in this form. In her essay “Incorrigible ad Innocents,” Lara Saguisag identifies how women were depicted in comics during the Progressive Era. She writes that one particular archetype labeled the “Gibson” girl is utilized by comics artists to highlight shifting roles for women in society when women were pursuing the right to vote. She argues, “she embodied male ambivalence over women’s efforts to change the patriarchal status quo. On the other hand, the Gibson Girl could be understood as a sympathetic attempt to explore the preoccupations and motivations of women who pushed against social boundaries and engaged with the world outside the home” (Saguisag 150). Saguisag also links notable feminist writers to the content, citing a quote from Charlotte Perkins Gilman about her interpretation of the Derby girl (150). For instructors, this is a great opportunity to show comics by artists utilizing the Derby girl in their texts and pair them with short stories, such as Perkins “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

### *Cultural Studies and Post Colonial Theory*

In addition to gender, graphic novels can be a key bridge to discuss race and how colonialism impacts the structures that reinforce society. With current events leading to a new civil rights movement that pushes for a wider scope of equity within the United States, students are curious about exploring this construct. In *Race, Shock & Social Protest*, Qiana Whitted begins her textbook by explaining that comics literature has a long history of being a platform for

artists to understand and challenge ideologies surrounding race and culture. She writes, “The preachies – also referred to in this book as *social-protest comics* or *message stories* – are cautionary, discomfoting, and often quite grim; many rely on an extradiegetic narrator to drive home the lessons signaled by exclamatory titles such as ‘Hate!’ and ‘The Guilty!’” (Whitted 6).

When retelling the gory details of one of the comics listed in the Introduction, Whitted states,

‘The Guilty!’ was the first story in the series to focus on antiblack violence and the racial disparities of the modern criminal-justice system. Regrettably, the sheriff’s brutal disregard for black life may not have been all that shocking when the story appeared, considering that the Fourteenth Amendment’s promises of equal protection and due process were still being regularly denied to African Americans. (52)

Whitted observes a notable change between what would have been identified as shocking in the past and present, which can be explored by students to see why there is a change. As such, instructors have a responsibility to give them the space to do so and provide texts that help them understand, even challenge, the social narrative around them, literature can be a key area to help them discover their own voices.

Written by Mat Johnson and illustrated by Warren Pleece, *Incognegro* is a graphic novel set in the 1930s when racial segregation was at its peak and Ku Klux Klan members were in key positions of power. However, it was also a time when the Harlem Renaissance allowed Black men and women to have a voice that empowered their desire for equitable conditions. Together, these elements provide a powerful platform for students to analyze racial constructs, especially when the main character, Zane Pinchback, uses his ability to pass as a white man to expose members of the Ku Klux Klan. As Pinchback is making visual changes to his physical appearance to appear more white, he affirms,

I am Incognegro. I don't wear a mask like zorro or a cape like the shadow, but I don a disguise nonetheless./ My camouflage is provided by my genes; the product of the southern tradition nobody likes to talk about. Slavery. Rape. Hypocrisy./American negroes are a Mulato people; I'm just an extreme walking reminder/ since white America refuses to see its past, they can't really see me too well, either...assimilation as revolution.

(Johnson 18)

The ability to pass as a white person is indeed a superpower as it provides Pinchback privileges and safety that are otherwise inhibited to people like him, solely due to the color of their skin.

This is powerful to note, because it proves that the way society categorizes individuals is arbitrary and flawed. Consequently, this graphic novel has similar topics as presented in James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man."

### Ethnicity and Cultural Studies Theory

In addition to race, ethnicity is a key area for students to explore higher academic critical thinking skills, and comics literature has numerous texts flesh out. This area helps student explore the various cultures that make the United States a diverse demographic, thus exposing them to cultures and ethnicities that they might have had access to before, or they were too shy to express their curiosity. Comics Literature is uniquely equipped to be a strong learning ground for students to explore various ethnicities because comics artists encompass a range of various ethnicities. For example, comics culture has been a medium for prominent Jewish artists to share their craft with mainstream Americans. In *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!*, Simcha Weinstein lists a myriad of comics artists who are Jewish:

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, creators of Superman; Bob Kane (born Kahn) and Bill

Finger, creators of Batman, and their protégé, Jerry Robinson, who invented the immortal

villain the Joker; Will Eisner, creator of the Spirit and graphic novel pioneer; Julius Schwartz, the publisher known as the father of science fiction comics and the man behind the Justice League of America; Martin Nodell, the man behind the Green Lantern; Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg) and Joe Simon, who brought the world Captain America; Max Gaines, the father of comic books, his son William, publisher of *Mad Magazine*, and William's partner in satire, Harvey Kurtzman; Stan Lee (born Stanley Martin Lieber), who created Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four, and the X-Men; and Lee's boss, Martin Goodman of Marvel Comics. (Weinstein 16)

This list is extensive, fifteen compiled in this list, and most of them are mainstream names due to the rise of DC and MCU universes. He continues to add that the reason Jewish artists thrived using comics is because “each generation of Jewish comic book creators explored the ambiguities of assimilation, the pain of discrimination, and the particularly Jewish theme of the misunderstood outcast, the rootless wanderer. Again and again, the triumph of good over evil remained a central comic book theme” (Weinstein 18). Given the centuries of displacement and even a Holocaust that devastated this community, it is no surprise that Jewish artists found a home in a literature style that gives them an outlet to express their lived experiences.

Perhaps the most notable comics literature that students know is the recently “banned” tale *Maus*; it was published originally as installments but then as a two-part anthology. Art Spiegelman utilizes comics literature to depict this father's experiences during World War II, and he weaves between his father retelling graphic and soul wrenching events and Spiegelman's attempt to understand and love his father as they cope with how these events still impact them in the present. The characters are aware of the impact that their stories will have upon society, and at one point, they acknowledge it. Mala comments, “It's an important book. People who don't

usually read such stories will be interested” and Vladek replies, “Yes. I don’t even read such comics, and even I am interested” (Spiegelman 133). In this way, Spiegelman expresses his awareness that he feels that he has a responsibility to share his family’s history, no matter how brutal, so that those who would prefer to ignore the significance of this time period may be swayed to witness it. More importantly, the text is significant because it highlights the generational impact of cultural trauma; even when the war has ended its victims still live with the aftermath. Worse, even those who live after the events still carry its weight.

### **Classroom Discussions and Written Assignments**

With all the above elements in mind, the instructor must move beyond the specific elements that make literature rich enough to be used in class; the instructor has an obligation to ensure that the classroom time is efficiently used to provide students a platform to expand their academic prowess. The fourth objective clearly states that students will be given the opportunity to “articulate in both classroom discussion and written assignments their perspectives about both meaning and structure in a work of literature and support their perspectives with specifics from the text” (“102 syllabus”). As such, while learning about various forms of literature, and finding new ways to see American society, they must also be given the tools to articulate their own thoughts and positions in an open and safe space. Having conversations within the classroom provides a structured environment for students to engage other’s ideas about how literature impacts society.

Comics literature can be a useful tool to helping students begin to form higher academic level discourse because they can rely on the multimodal elements of the comics to feel confident in having conversations about what they are reading in the classroom. Students often rely on their experiences with previous Language Arts classes to assume that there are



specific, intentional choices because these conversations are largely directed by the teacher. This often leaves students questioning if their interpretations are “correct.” Multimodal texts certainly have the same ability to force readers to form interpretations in a similar fashion, but their history with multimodal texts makes students feel more comfortable using what they see, which feels indisputable, instead of what is read, this giving them more confidence to assert their stances. For example, William Boerman-Cornell reveals how graphic novels prime students in early academia to have proficient skills that will help them throughout their academic career in his essay “The Intersection of Words and Pictures: Second Through Fourth Graders Read Graphic Novels.” He states, “A final consistent finding is that GN’s help older students detect bias and apply critical thinking skills. Shipwright, Mallory, Atack, and Demacio (2010) found that 18 undergraduates reading GNs evidenced both skills. Sabeti (2012) conducted a GN book club with ten 16-year old students that also confirmed that GNs supported critical skills necessary to read complex texts” (Boerman-Cornell 329). The study presented by Boerman-Cornell not only states that students are able to efficiently use the skills required in literature courses to analyze texts, but they are choosing to do so in a club format, which means they are actively pursuing the ability to use these skills in a non-compulsory setting. This display means that students are willfully engaging in use these skills with comics literature.

### Assignment One- Classroom Activity

Some of the most memorable moments that students will have in relation to this course are the conversations that they have with their peers. In a constructive setting, students can form bonds with their fellow classmates, seeing that the conversations that they have in the classroom can have tangible effect upon their communities, making it one of the strongest areas to harness

engagement from students. Jodi Leckbee shares her excitement about using graphic novels like *Maus* in her article “I Got Graphic!” She writes,

In mere moments, my students are transported to Poland in the 1930s, and they, like the main character Vladek, are witnessing the horror of the Holocaust. They watch helplessly as German soldiers hang a group of men on the street; they experience the fear these family members felt because they are there with them and can see it on the expressions of their faces. I repeat they can see it themselves. This is the power of the graphic novel, compelling visuals that move literature beyond just a simple collection of words into a form of visual literature” (Leckbee 30)

It can be hopefully said that students will never have to experience the horrific experiences of another Holocaust-like event, but knowing that this is a lived experience that people suffered fosters empathy for others and a responsibility to ensure that it never happens again. The content that Leckbee describes gets expanded when students are aware that their classmates are being immersed in the same experiences. These shared journeys become validated when their peers affirm or challenge each other’s understanding of the readings.

#### *Classroom Discussions for Maia Kobabe’s Gender Queer*

1. Why is Kobabe so obsessed with gender? Is this a common occurrence for adolescents coming into adulthood? How does this reflect other forms of coming of age tales?
2. What consequences do e (Spivak pronoun) or others face when they do not conform to traditional forms of gender?

These questions are designed to show students how relatable (or not) Kobabe’s text may be to their own experiences with gender. They can rely on personal or previous experiences with

other people's displays of gender, and they can use this as a foundation to determine the value that gender conformity has on mainstream society.

3. Just recently, the *New York Times* posted an article that focused on Kobabe's text being considered one of the most recently banned books. In "How A Debut Graphic Memoir Became the Most Banned Book in the Country" by Alexandria Alter, she writes,

Suddenly, Kobabe was at the center of a nationwide battle over which books belong in schools — and who gets to make that decision. The debate, raging in school board meetings and town halls, is dividing communities around the country and pushing libraries to the front lines of a simmering culture war. And in 2021, when book banning efforts soared, "Gender Queer" became the most challenged book in the United States, according to the American Library Association and the free speech organization PEN.

(Alter)

The day after this article was published, *The Guardian* published a rebuttal, with many readers angry that the *New York Times* failed to utilize Kobabe's preferred pronouns. A reply from one commenter states,

So interesting that the *New York Times* can write 2000 words on Maia's work (which is ABOUT EIR GENDER) being censored, while simultaneously refusing to use Maia's pronouns in print at any point," Portland-based journalist Tuck Woodstock, who first reported the Times' failure to use Kobabe's preferred pronouns, tweeted Sunday. (Qtd in Migdon).

Should classrooms and libraries have limitations on the types of texts that individuals read? What parts of Kobabe's text falls within "bannable" guidelines? Do reporters have an obligation to ensure linguistic integrity, or does a person's personal pronouns take precedence?

This question relies on outside research that must be analyzed with the literature to show how relevant Kobabe's work is (or is not) in contemporary society. This allows students to refresh their knowledge of synthesizing sources into their arguments, while controlling it through the lens of what is experienced in the literature that they are reading.

### *Assignment Two- Online Discussion Post*

If the pandemic has taught instructors anything, it is the need to provide quality discussion content to students in an online format. Three Rivers extensively offers online Literature and Composition courses, and the number of classes remaining online are increasing. However, discussions and connections with students are crucial to students' experiences, and many teachers who traditionally taught in person are struggling to adapt in an online world. Online discussion posts can be used to bridge the gap between the in-class experience and online ones, and comics literature can be tool that makes it easier for instructors and students to have fulfilling conversations. For example, Bonny Norton looks at the social connections that children form with each other based on their shared love for coming books. In her article, "The Motivating Power of Comic Books," she concludes, "As Kress (2000) argued, especially in light of the increasingly visual nature of communication, scholars need to rethink the view that visual modalities are a distraction from the process of making meaning. Technologies of communication, he suggested, lend themselves to visualization because the transport of information is seen as more efficient in the visual rather than verbal mode" (143). This shows that comics literature can be a key tool to helping students work in an online format, and given that comics literature already incorporates visual elements into his construction, it creates a healthy bridge for students to explore online learning. As such, comics literature is a key area to efficiently transition into a larger multimodal world.

### **Online Discussion Prompt- *Out of Nothing***

Read *Out of Nothing* by Daniel Locke David Blandy. Identify a key time period presented in the text. Why is the girl sent to that particular time period? Why would her experiences in this period impact the future? Minimum of 250 words, due Thursday Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> by midnight.

Respond to two classmates who have identified different time periods. Do you agree with their analysis of why this time period is vital? Why or why not? How does their time period connect with the one in your original post? What formal, comics elements link the two periods together and why would that be significant to the reader? Each response should be a minimum of 250 words and due by Sunday February 6<sup>th</sup> by midnight.

This prompt allows students to analyze what they feel is the strongest display that Locke and Blandy depict in the novel and why it has overall significance. In this way, students originally look at the storyline. In their responses, they are critiquing their classmate's perspective, but more importantly they are transitioning from looking at the storyline to finding patterns within the form and structure.

### **Writing Essays**

As the name implies, Composition and Literature is more than just reading and analyzing texts; it is also a time for students to hone their academic writing skills. As such, instructors must be mindful that all the literature presented in class has enough of an academic background that students can formulate an essay that meets NECHE standards. The final objective is to create strong, academic displays of the new information. This objective focuses on students' abilities to "provide evidence of effective writing strategies including planning, revision, proofreading, and reflection on writing choices" ("102 syllabus"). As numerous

academics have written extensively about comics literature, this proves that students can effectively compose reading responses and essays that proficiently display this course objective. The real challenge lies in instructors having confidence that students can model these expectations.

Like other forms of literature, comics books provide the required components for students to develop their own written arguments that expand on what other academics have established. Leckbee argues that “A literacy piece, like a graphic novel, is calling on a student to use both their analyzing and synthesizing skills, actually requiring more involvement and focus in their reading” (31). As these texts are multimodal, there are a plethora of ways that students that blend this literature with the tenets of composition, most of which has already been discussed. Moreover, there is extensive research in Three River’s Library that allows them to efficiently find sources that support their ideas.

### *Essay: Rhetorical Analysis of Handmaid’s Tale*

When Margaret Atwood penned her novel *Handmaid’s Tale*, she likely had no idea that decades later this tale would appear in movies, TV shows, and a graphic novel that she helped create with the help of Nault as an illustrator. As a result, her story can be explored through multiple forms, which can be a unique area for students to explore. Jared Gardner and David Herman, write in “Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory” that “transmedial narratology disputes the notion that the *fabula* or story level of a narrative – the sequence of situations and events that interpreters work to reconstruct via information presented at the *sjuzhet* or discourse level – remains wholly invariant across shifts of medium. Instead, the assumption is that stories have ‘gists’ that can be remediated more or less fully and recognizably – depending in part on

the semiotic properties of the source and target media” (5). As such, looking at how tales are transformed in various ways, allows students to identify why certain elements are changed to adapt to a new form. This means that a story can be shared in various ways, and there are familiar elements that makes the audience know that the story is the same. This is why so many people are passionate about reading a story as a novel before watching the movie, or why so many movies get book adaptations.

### **Essay Prompt**

**3-5 Pages** (does not include Works Cited Page)

**MLA formatting**

**Due: March 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Read Margret Atwoods’ *Handmaid’s Tale*

Read Renée Nault’s *Handmaid’s Tale*

1. As one text is prose and another is comics, identify three commonalities between the two texts and three differences.
2. Analyze why certain elements remain the same between the tales, and why certain elements would need to be adapted to for a different form.
3. Which of these changes are more effective for conveying the story?

***Essay: Thematic Analysis using Feminist Theory***

Many instructors at Three Rivers organize the literature based on form, which gives students the opportunity to fully flesh out the structure of specific types of literature. However, organizing the class based on theories can be equally important as it emphasizes the areas of literature that impact students and let those be focal point of conversations. Doing so would

emphasis on the connections that students can make with the literature instead of focusing solely on the form of the text.

There are various forms of texts that focus on women's oppression that could be paired with Nault's version of *Handmaid's Tale*:

Poetry: "Lady Lazarus," by Sylvia Plath  
"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou  
"A Woman Speaks" by Audre Lorde  
"Mrs. Midas" Carol Anne Duffy  
"Ulysses" Lord Alfred Tennyson

Short Stories: "Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin  
"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman  
"The Game" by Jack London

Plays: *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill  
*Trifles* by Susan Glaspel

### **Essay Prompt**

**3-5 Pages** (does not include Works Cited Page)

**MLA formatting**

**Due April 13**

1. Choose two of the above assigned readings and determine a framework for what these artists are trying to say about gender.
2. In what ways are they accepting or challenging conventional expectations on gender?



## Essay: Research Analysis of *Incognegro*

As Literature and Composition expands on the previous class (Composition), this course continues to ensure that students are able to research efficiently and utilize academic resources to ensure that their ethos as students is strong. As such, the final essay for this course is often devoted to a research style argumentative essay. Students are encouraged to utilize the library to find strong, academic sources to back up their statements to create a formal, academic text. Comics literature can be vital to ensuring that students are successful in writing effective essays. In “Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic novel,” Alicia C. Decker and Mauricio Castro combine their unique backgrounds to prove how well comics work to bridge challenging moment. In this essay, Decker shares a personal testimony of utilizing the *Unknown Soldier* graphic novel in her violence, war, and militarism in modern Africa course. She states,

Everyone seemed to agree that the comic book was a welcome addition to the course.

They enjoyed the readability of the text and appreciated the author’s candor. Several of the students were inspired to learn even more about the conflict. I know that at least two of them were looking for ways to volunteer in Uganda over the summer. This seems to suggest that if you can get students excited about history, they are more likely to become socially and politically engaged in the world around them. (Decker 180)

Decker’s testimony shows that this graphic novel affects students in a way that drives them to connect with it personally and use that passion to affect change within society. They can reflect on the experiences personally and do further research that correlates with a strong engagement from the student. More importantly, Decker’s statement shows that what is taught and experienced in class is not complete; further research on topics is a true sign that students are

engaged in the material. Showing students that they can expand on what is taught in class, or more importantly that they have agency in discovering more about important issues, is a key facilitator of critical thinking. As such, having at least one essay in Literature and Composition that incorporates research is an important part of the

### **Essay Prompt**

**5-7 Pages** (does not include Works Cited Page)

#### **MLA formatting**

**Literary Theories:** New Historicism, Cultural Studies, or Feminist Theory (others may be used with permission)

**Research requirements:** Three outside sources (two must be peer reviewed). Refer back to course content Week Eleven folder for links to the TRCC library databases. There is also the direct link to the librarians who are able to work with you.

Use one of the following questions to compose and defend an argumentative essay. These are only suggestions based on what research is currently available in our library and what we have discussed in class. You are welcome to create your own path relating to this text, but it must be presented in the proposal and approved before starting.

- 1: What does it mean to “pass” as a white person, and what is Johnson trying to prove by making is a central point in his graphic novel?
- 2: What role does Michaela Mathers serve in the tale? What does each of her “deaths” serve to prove about conditions of the South in the 1930’s.
- 3: At the end of the book, Johnson is quoted of saying:

I didn't write this thinking racism itself had ever left American society, or that the crippling effects of racism and prejudice in America have been arranged, but I did think that the age of organized, public, avowed mainstream white nationalism was over/ But I was naive. Writing this after the white nationalist display at the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017, a white nationalist protest that left one counter-protestor dead in the streets, the racial dynamic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to be, in some ways, repeating itself. (Afterward)

What about *Incognegro* still applies to present society? Or, is Johnson misrepresenting current events?

4: Taking a formalistic approach, what elements does Warren Peece utilize in this novel to convey Johnson's purpose?

**Due Week Fifteen:** Rough Draft. Peer Review 3 May 2022.

**Due Week Sixteen:** Final Draft. Submit in Black Board in Course Content Week 16 folder no later than 12 May 2022 by 11:59 p.m.

## **CONCLUSION**

After reviewing the value that comics literature has to academic students, I am reminded of my son. There was a small convenience store by our bank, and I would take him in every time we stopped by so he could grab the latest *Simpsons* comics. One when day, when he was eleven, the store had gone through extensive reconstruction; we couldn't find the comics stand anywhere. My shy, never talk to strangers, son went to the front and asked where they had moved it. The clerk said they were not going to sell comics anymore. "Well, you just ruined my childhood," he lamented. I thought the comment was hilarious at the time, but there was some truth to his statement. Perhaps not as obvious, my manga loving student had learned the same

lesson; comics literature should be regulated to childhood activities. This lesson has no truth behind it, but academia does this to children every time that teachers reduce the value of comics reading to students. Other than to learn that comics are nonacademic reading material, they are never given a legitimate reason. Some could say simply because it has not been taught before, but there was a time when students could not read novels on a screen. There was a time when certain children were not allowed to read at all.

Ultimately, the spirit of using literature in the classroom is based on teaching students critical thinking skills that traverse beyond the texts they read, meaning these skills should be adaptable to any situation. Instructors should be ready to find any opportunity to help students hone these skills, and that requires flexibility and awareness to opportunities they might not have anticipated. Fortunately, as multimodal practices have transformed education; it has the capacity to take the fundamentals of teaching literature to transform it as well. This is evidenced in the textbooks that identify formalistic and genre specific elements of comics literature. It is fleshed out in the numerous texts and academic essays that flourish in recent publications. It is seen in the way instructors who already implement them within the classroom express engagement from their students that continues after they have left the classroom. Despite current college reading trends claiming that reading literature is in a decline or that students are not interested in higher academic discourse surrounding them, there is no indication to confirm that reading literature that is rooted with multimodal texts is. This would be a key area for future research; as comics literature might just be the superhero needed to ensure students are successful in their academic career.

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