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GRAPHIC NOVELS

AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTMODERNISM

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Name _____

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What are graphic novels, and how do they differ from comic books?

How are graphic novels especially useful in illustrating key concepts of postmodernism for students of literature?

What is postmodernism?

What are some key words from the vocabulary of comics that are essential to effectively analyze and discuss the art and text of graphic novels? Define the key words.

When interpreting works of literature, what does the term *closure* refer to? Why is closure so prominent in postmodern literature?

Name _____

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THE WORLD OF COMICS

If you didn't grow up reading comics, you probably only know superheroes from movies and television, unaware of the long, complicated history of particular characters or of their ever-changing depictions in print. Postmodern comic book writers, such as Frank Miller and Grant Morrison, complicate the intertextual nature of graphic novels not only with their allusiveness, but also in the ways they refer to the history of comics. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, Miller connects his comic book world to a larger universe similar to that of the reader, but he also reinforces the sense of a closed universe, whose codes and characters can be comprehended only by readers immersed in the histories of dozens of comic book characters developed over several decades. Using your smartphones and reference books, research the following characters from the comics we will be studying. Write general statistics and a brief history for each of the characters listed below. You may also want to use your classmates who are familiar with comics and superheroes as resources. They are generally eager to serve as experts on a topic about which expertise is often belittled.

THE DC UNIVERSE

Batman:

Black Mask:

Clayface:

Doctor Destiny:

James Gordon:

Joker:

Jones the Martian Manhunter:

Killer Croc:

Lucas “Snapper” Carr:

Mad Hatter:

Maxie Zeus:

Penguin:

Randolph Dibny:

Scarecrow:

Superman:

Two-Face:

Wonder Woman:

THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

Caliban:

Donald Pierce:

Professor X:

Wolverine:

Zander Rice:

There's this little saloon you'll find up and running and packed with patrons before most of us are ready for our morning coffee.

The joint's two subway levels beneath the streets of downtown Metropolis.

Step out at the Schuster stop on the south-bound side, take two lefts, walk maybe fifteen feet and you're right on top of it.

But you could just as easily walk right past it and never know it was there.

There's no sign up. Not even a door. Just a dark hallway that looks like a good place for a murder.

Take a breath. Follow the cigarette stink and the bluesy jukebox sounds inside.

It's a tolerable little gin mill. Get there before the morning rush, and you're likely to find a stool.

Your first clue that there's something wrong about the place is the bartender. You'll never forget his face. He's a hulk of a guy who's seen way too much. A broken man with laser-red eyes. His forehead's a fractured cantilever, an avalanche waiting to happen. His skin's gone a little gray from its natural chartreuse.

He's got a voice like Coke bottles getting ground up under a door.

His name is Jones.

He says he's from Mars.

And nobody tells him he's nuts, not one of these sad old barflies. It's not that they're scared of him, either.

They've seen and done things that are supposed to be impossible.

They're not the kind to out-and-out brag about being able to bench-press cars or run faster than a speeding bullet or jump up into the air and stay there. Nah. Not these guys.

These guys, they've got nothing to prove. Been there. Done that.

Except for old "Snapper" always at the same stool at the end, living up to his nickname, snapping his fingers in time to the music and rattling on and on and on about mighty powers, globe-spanning

TRUTH TO POWER

JAMES OLSEN

THE DAILY PLANET

continued

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adventures, nefarious world conquerors, you name it.

He never stops snapping his damn fingers. And he never stops sucking back the sauce and jabbering about the old days. The glory days.

The "Golden Age" he calls it.
The age of heroes.

And all the other old farts, they grunt and nod and grumble at each other, swapping old jokes they've swapped a thousand times. Even fat, beet-red old "Penguin" chirps out a curse or two before bursting into tears.

Then they get talking. And if you've got half a brain, you listen.

They talk about amazing adventures, sounding like a bunch of retired car mechanics the whole time.

They talk about a Man of Steel. An Amazon Princess.

But they never talk about the mean one. The cruel one. The one who couldn't fly or bend steel in his bare hands. The one who scared the crap out of everybody and laughed at all of the rest of us for being the envious cowards we were.

No, they never talk about him. Say his name and watch Dibny's face sag so bad his jaw hits the bar.

Not a man among them wants to hear about Batman.

Was he quietly assassinated? Or did he just decide we weren't worth the grief?

The question hangs in the air for a moment or two, then Jones springs for a round for everybody and himself.

They get talking again. About the old days. The glory days.

They remember.

They were right there. In the thick of it. Back then.

It wasn't so long ago.

We had heroes.

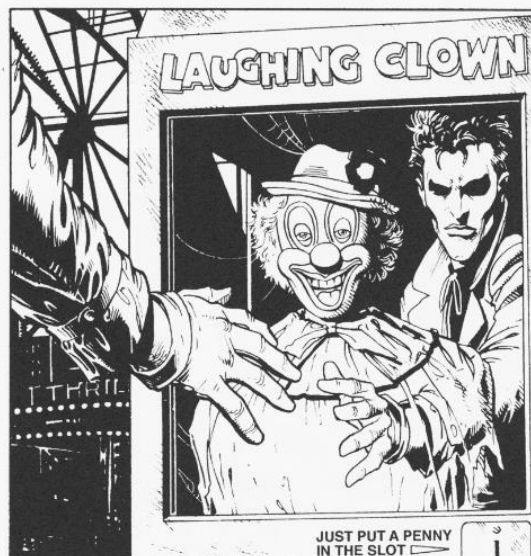
THE DAILY PLANET

Date _____

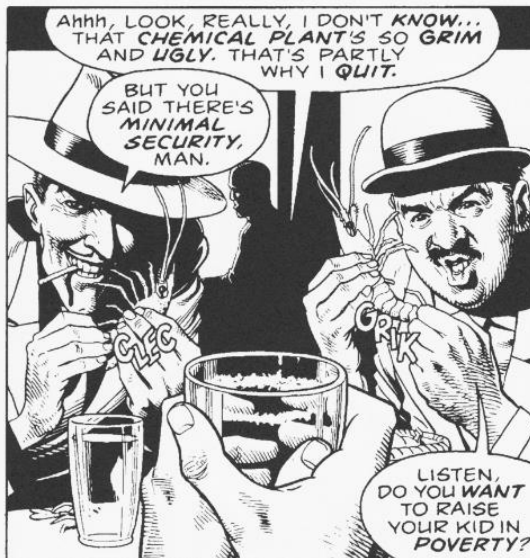
1. Frank Miller's graphic novels are frequently disrupted in ways that make readers aware of their own reading process, a trait of postmodern literature. He fragments *The Dark Knight Returns* in a variety of interesting ways, from the multiple television screens that comment on the action like a kind of Greek chorus to the various newspaper clippings. He continues to use these techniques in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* and even adds web video commentary, complete with internet addresses. By composing such disruptions in the graphic novel's plotline, Miller provides opportunities for readers to tinker with various components of the story and to imagine ways in which the story's elements might leak outside the traditional reading experience. James Olsen's "Truth to Power," which begins *The Dark Knight Returns*, exemplifies this postmodern approach to graphic novels. What does "Truth to Power" mean? How does the mock newspaper article blur the line between the real world and the fictional DC Universe?

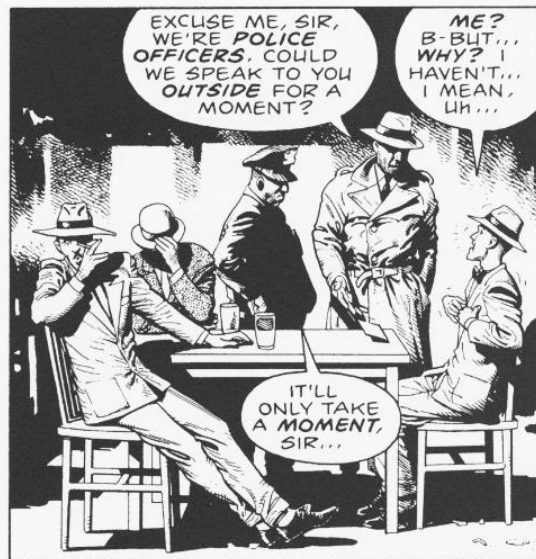
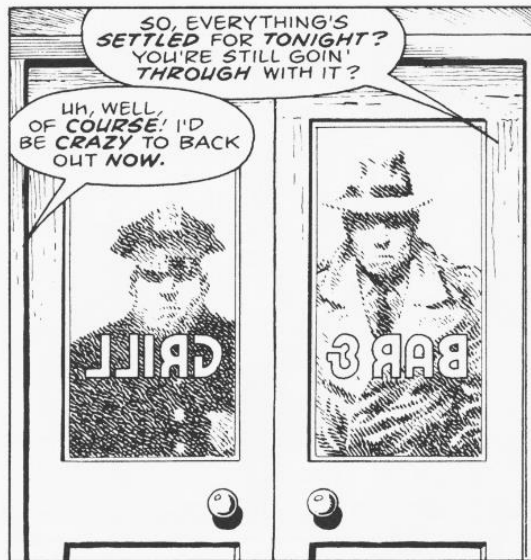
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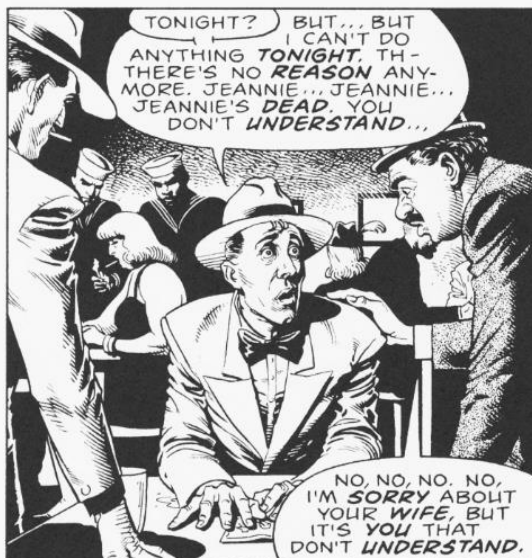


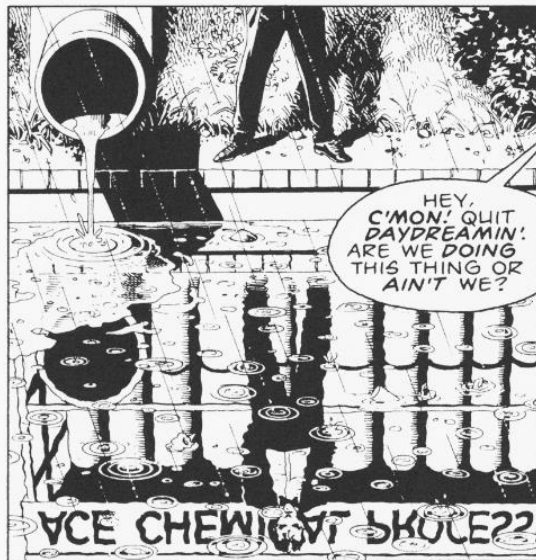






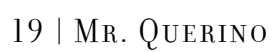












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2. Superhero comics are inherently intertextual, their appreciation dependent on a knowledge of both a specific character's history as presented in previous issues of that character's comic and of how this character relates to other characters in a universe filled with superheroes. To tell the Joker's backstory in *The Killing Joke* (1988), Alan Moore adapted the Joker's origin from DC's *Batman* #1 (1940). Moore's rewrite is now part of the DC universe continuity; however, later in *The Killing Joke* the Joker tells Batman, "I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another. If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!" Is the Joker's backstory in *The Killing Joke* the definitive history of this character's origin? Also comment on what specifically happens to the Joker's wife in the story.

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VOCABULARY

These words which appear in *Arkham Asylum* have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT and ACT exams. The vocabulary words are listed here in the order in which they appear in the graphic novel.

1. **Vast** - very great in number, size, amount, extent, or degree.
2. **Melancholy** - feeling or making somebody feel a thoughtful or gentle sadness.
3. **Fathomless** - impossible to understand.
4. **Portent** - an indication that something, often unpleasant, is going to happen.
5. **Rationality** - the condition in which values, beliefs, and techniques are believed to be based on logical, explicable principles.
6. **Degenerate** - somebody regarded as immoral or corrupt.
7. **Ravish** - to force somebody to engage in sexual intercourse.
8. **Duality** - a situation or nature that has two states or parts that are complementary or opposed to each other.
9. **Contradictory** - holding or consisting of an opposite view.
10. **Wean** - to cause somebody to go without something that has become a habit or that is much liked.
11. **Conducive** - tending to bring about an intended result.
12. **Stratosphere** - the region of the Earth's atmosphere between the troposphere and mesosphere. It has no clouds and is marked by gradual temperature increase.
13. **Frail** - in a physically weakened state and vulnerable to injury.
14. **Implicate** - to show that somebody or something played a part in or is connected to an activity such as a crime.
15. **Morbid** - showing a strong interest in unpleasant or gloomy subjects such as death, murder, or accidents.
16. **Perambulations** - walks to determine the bounds of a legal area by carefully inspecting the premises.
17. **Retribution** - something done or given to somebody as punishment or vengeance for something he or she has done.
18. **Ritual** - an established and prescribed pattern of observance, e.g. in a religion.
19. **Virtue** - the quality of being morally good or righteous.
20. **Ignorant** - lacking knowledge or education in general or in a specific subject.
21. **Domestic** - relating to or used in the home or everyday life within a household.
22. **Tranquility** - free of any disturbance or commotion.
23. **Posterity** - all future generations.
24. **Maim** - to inflict a severe and permanent injury on a person or animal, especially one that renders a limb useless.
25. **Pestilence** - an epidemic of a highly contagious or infectious disease such as bubonic plague.



VOCABULARY

These words which appear in *Weapon X* have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT and ACT exams. The vocabulary words are listed here in the order in which they appear in the graphic novel.

1. **Prophecy** - the foretelling or prediction of what is to come; something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction.
2. **Vile** - repulsive or disgusting, as to the senses or feelings.
3. **Jostle** - to bump, push, shove, brush against, or elbow roughly or rudely.
4. **Adamant** - refusing to be persuaded or to change one's mind.
5. **Abnormal** - deviating from what is normal or usual, typically in a way that is undesirable or worrying.
6. **Impede** - delay or prevent (someone or something) by obstructing them; hinder.
7. **Credible** - able to be believed; convincing.
8. **Compensate** - make up for (something unwelcome or unpleasant) by exerting an opposite force or effect.
9. **Constitution** - the composition of something.
10. **Unprecedented** - never done or known before.
11. **Overindulge** - have too much of something enjoyable, especially food or drink.
12. **Induct** - admit someone formally to a position or organization.
13. **Explicit** - stated clearly and in detail, leaving no room for confusion or doubt.
14. **Infernal** - relating to or characteristic of hell or the underworld
15. **Pummel** - strike repeatedly, typically with the fists.

16. **Inexplicable** - unable to be explained or accounted for.
17. **Recklessly** - without regard to the danger or the consequences of one's actions; rashly.
18. **Supplant** - supersede and replace.
19. **Formidable** - inspiring fear or respect through being impressively large, powerful, intense, or capable.
20. **Haste** - excessive speed or urgency of movement or action; hurry.
21. **Apt** - appropriate or suitable in the circumstances.
22. **Eradicate** - destroy completely; put an end to.
23. **Feral** - resembling a wild animal.
24. **Dissent** - the expression or holding of opinions at variance with those previously, commonly, or officially held.
25. **Dictum** - a short statement that expresses a general truth or principle.
26. **Discreet** - careful and circumspect in one's speech or actions, especially in order to avoid causing offense or to gain an advantage.
27. **Impeccable** - (of behavior, performance, or appearance) in accordance with the highest standards of propriety; faultless.
28. **Cumbersome** - large or heavy and therefore difficult to carry or use; unwieldy.
29. **Tourniquet** - a device for stopping the flow of blood through a vein or artery, typically by compressing a limb with a cord or tight bandage.
30. **Falter** - start to lose strength or momentum.
31. **Purge** - physically remove something completely.
32. **Boon** - something that is helpful or beneficial.
33. **Cower** - crouch down in fear.
34. **Grotesque** - comically or repulsively ugly or distorted; incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree.
35. **Treacherous** - guilty of or involving betrayal or deception.
36. **Sever** - divide by cutting or slicing, especially suddenly and forcibly.
37. **Buckle** - bend and give way under pressure or strain.
38. **Instinct** - an innate, typically fixed pattern of behavior in animals in response to certain stimuli.
39. **Scenario** - a postulated sequence or development of events.
40. **Irrevocable** - not able to be changed, reversed, or recovered; final.
41. **Temper** - serve as a neutralizing or counterbalancing force to something.
42. **Tussle** - a vigorous struggle or scuffle, typically in order to obtain or achieve something.
43. **Pragmatic** - dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.
44. **Inculpable** - free from guilt.
45. **Cunning** - having or showing skill in achieving one's ends by deceit or evasion.

COMPLEMENTARY COLORS



GRAPHIC NOVEL PROJECT

Certain books, paintings, films, plays, or pieces of music can come into your life at just the right place and time, so that they help you see the world in a different light and perhaps affect how you think and feel. The same can also be true of the very best graphic novels. The goal of this project is for you to discover a graphic novel that will bring about such a change in you—and then in your classmates.

First, select a graphic novel to share with the class. The graphic novel may be your favorite comic book or one you are reading for the first the time. You may work alone or with a partner who shares your interest in a graphic novel. Then, learn as much as you can about the book's writer and artist: How did he or she begin their career? What are some of his or her legendary works? What contributions did he or she make to the business that left a lasting mark?

You are now ready to start crafting your presentation. Your presentations should all be custom made. What I mean by custom is that I don't want you to use a Microsoft template, so you will be starting with a blank page. The theme of your presentation should match the tone of the writing and artwork of the graphic novel. Because graphic novels are a relatively new medium and most works are covered under copyright protection, pictures may be difficult to find. Don't let copyright laws stand in the way of presenting your favorite graphic novel. You may have to scan images from the book yourself. I have a scanner you can use and there are others in most of the computer labs.

Once you have enough high-resolution images to complete your theme, your presentation should contain the following: important background information on the writer and artist; an in-depth analysis of the writing, artwork, and themes of the graphic novel; and an explanation of how your selected graphic novel can be seen as a postmodern artifact. You may also include audio and video in your presentation. The total length of your presentation, including any film clips or other multimedia, should be between five and six minutes.



Project Due Date: _____ Title of Graphic Novel: _____

Partner Name and Contact Information (if applicable): _____

STORIES TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE

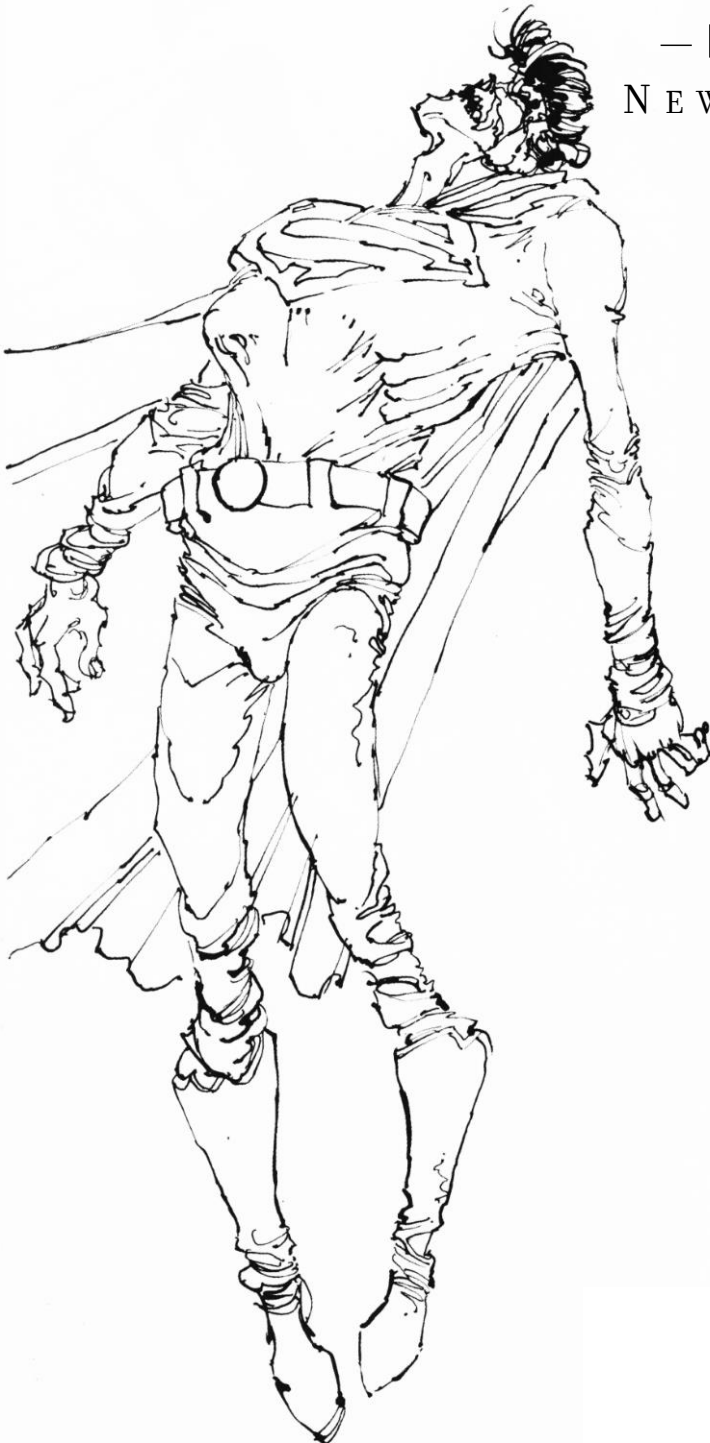
Perhaps *Persepolis* is the only graphic novel you have ever heard of. Perhaps someone once lent you a volume of *Sandman*, or you've seen the movies based on *From Hell*, *Ghost World*, or *Sin City*. There is no predicting what will be someone's first encounter with a graphic novel, for better or worse, but, whatever your reaction has been, one of these masterworks should be a good place for you to start exploring titles for your project.

- *The Airtight Garage* by Jean "Moebius" Giraud (1987)
- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1991)
- *When the Wind Blows* by Raymond Briggs (1982)
- *Palomar* by Gilbert Hernandez (2003)
- *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (1987)
- *The Frank Book* by Jim Woodring (2003)
- *My Troubles with Women* by Robert Crumb (2003)
- *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel (2006)
- *Scene of the Crime* by Ed Brubaker, Michael Lark, and Sean Phillips (2000)
- *The Nikopol Trilogy* by Enki Bilal (1995)
- *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner (1978)
- *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken* by Gregory Gallant (1996)
- *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell (1999)
- *American Splendor* by Harvey Pekar (1986)
- *Black Hole* by Charles Burns (2005)
- *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (2001)
- *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes (1997)
- *Lost Girls* by Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie (2006)
- *Buddha* by Osamu Tezuka (1983)
- *Sin City* by Frank Miller (1992)
- *Strange Embrace* by David Hine (2003)
- *Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa (1985)
- *Epileptic* by David Beauchard (2005)
- *Gemmy Boverly* by Posy Simmonds (2000)
- *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd (1989)
- *Locas* by Jaime Hernandez (1996)
- *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt (1976)
- *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman and various artists (1989-1996)
- *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* by Chris Ware (2000)
- *Digger* by Ursula Vernon (2005)
- *Bone* by Jeff Smith (2004)
- *The Invisibles* by Grant Morrison and various artists (1994-2000)

“I’ve seen all these characters of my childhood fall into disarray. Those of us who wanted to test the boundaries of what a superhero comic book could do unfortunately broke those boundaries and the results have not all been very good. We pushed against the old walls, and they fell—but nothing much has been built to replace them.”

— **FRANK MILLER**

NEW YORK CITY, 2000



DECONSTRUCTING SUPERHEROES

In the 1980s a drastic shift occurred in the comic book industry. Once the elements of the superhero genre had been firmly established—and comic book writers had spent decades telling stories while mostly adhering to those conventions—writers began to deconstruct the traditional superhero narrative. Graphic novels such as DC's *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* were firmly entrenched within the superhero genre but highlighted inherent flaws and limitations within traditional comics while telling their stories.

To compete with DC Comics in the new modern age of comics, Marvel also invested in darker anti-heroes, including Wolverine and the Punisher. Wolverine had been created in the mid-1970s but experienced a surge in popularity in the 1980s. Whereas Spider-Man webs villains to incapacitate them, Wolverine has sets of retractable claws that emerge from the back of his hands. This undeniably more violent method of dealing with enemies is a marked departure from the early Silver Age of comics, where violence was often implied and rarely gratuitous.

Director James Mangold furthers the deconstruction of superheroes in *Logan* (2017), where an aging Wolverine struggles to find enough good in the world—and himself—to complete one last journey. For this assignment, you will identify key postmodern aspects of the film *Logan*, while focusing on the deconstruction of the superhero genre. This assignment is not meant to be a film review. You are being asked to take a critical approach to Mangold's film. Your completed essay will count as a homework assignment grade. Because the length is only 3-5 pages, you will want your writing to be clear, concise, and focused on Mangold's application of postmodern ideas within *Logan*.

- **Deconstruction** designates a theory and practice of reading which questions and claims to subvert or undermine the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text. Typically, a deconstructive approach sets out to show that conflicting forces within the work itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities.

Requirements: The essay must be at least three pages long but no longer than five. You must properly introduce and explain at least two direct quotations from our class notes, *Weapon X*, or *Logan*. So, two quotations are required. The paper must have your own original thesis in the first paragraph (usually the last sentence or sentences before the transition into the next paragraph). Remember, a thesis is not a question; it is an answer to the question. A thesis is not a fact; it is an opinion or theory—one worth arguing. As always, the paper should follow MLA format. Use white 8 ½ X 11 - inch paper. Font size should be 12 and Times New Roman. Margins should be one inch around (top and bottom, left and right) on each page. Paper should be double spaced throughout. Your last name and the page number should appear in the top right corner of each page. The Purdue OWL website has sample papers written in MLA format.



