More than Masks and Capes: Considering Comics as Political Discourse

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Research over the last decade shows that literacy is not a singular or monolithic entity. Rather, it is a set of multi-faceted social practices that are shaped by contexts, participants, and technologies.

—NCTE Policy Brief, 2011

We live in a world of multiple literacies. There is the literacy of the office, the gym, the bar, and the religious institution. We code-switch when moving from business colleague to softball teammate, and transition smoothly from reading a story about music to an essay on the Presidential election. Unfortunately, much of our pedagogy has failed to treat literacy as the social and dynamic entity that it is. While we perpetuate in-school literacies, teaching academic language as a universal objective, we often ignore the exciting and very relevant literacies that swirl around our classes, often being used and colorfully critiqued by our students.

Of this tapestry of literacies, the graphic novel stands out as exciting and engaging. While once seen as little more than extended comic books, the graphic novel is now being given credit for its sophisticated themes and iconoclastic characters. More importantly, the graphic novel provides teachers with a more student-centered, contemporary approach to reading and writing. And, as I found in teaching graphic novels and their film adaptations, many of the enduring themes that we hope to explore with students can be accessed through the graphic novel.

What is a graphic novel? It is a complex, multifaceted, political, and often subversive genre. Like any good piece of literature, it has questioned society and challenged enunciated power. It has explored the plight of the oppressed and the bullied, and debated American actions in other nations. Many who teach literature and reading do not realize that graphic novels have played an important role in shaping the course of American history. In the years before and even after America’s involvement in World War II, it was the use of the graphic novel—Captain America in particular—that helped garner support for America’s greater participation in the war.

As Paul Gravett notes, “not all Americans endorsed their country’s entry into the Second World War.” However, “after their front cover showed Hitler being socked on the jaw by the flag-waving Captain America in late 1940,” American sentiment began to change and the discourse was enkindled. Gravett notes that there were many graphic works of political commentary during this time, many of which were “fabricated by the city’s predominately Jewish comics industry” (p. 74).

Before starting a unit on the graphic novel, it is useful for students to be taken through its history, from its incipient years to its evolution and change. Students are often surprised to see how political, how iconoclastic comics have been, and how superheroes in masks delivered a series of profound messages to readers throughout the nation. For my specific unit, I asked students to examine the history and content of superhumans, the chronology of Batman, Superman, Captain America, and others. How, I asked them, were they created and what purpose did they serve? How did they affect the nation at the time, and what makes them both interesting and unique?

What students quickly discover is that the superhero genre has grown and matured into a very political and complex form. Often faultless good guys in their early years, superheroes have become more human, more introspective and more jaded, allowing their audiences to see the shades of gray in moral dilemmas and the subjectivity of right and wrong. Batman grows, from being...
a man fighting crime to a “dark knight,” a man who contemplates his own death while witnessing the corruption of people in authority. Gotham is not a place to be protected but a city filled with villains, unjust laws, economic inequality, and people who often present themselves as law abiding citizens, while wearing their own masks.

In doing this, the series introduces its audiences to very relevant and sophisticated political questions. For instance, in 2012, the Huffington Post debated the political issues that were showcased in The Dark Knight, focusing on the similarities between the movie’s villain Bane and the Occupy Wall Street movement. According to The Post, Rush Limbaugh suggested that Bane’s evil revolution, which parallels the Occupy Wall Street Movement ways, proved that the movie and its director were vilifying the Occupy Movement. And while the director Christopher Nolan has denied that his blockbuster was influenced by the Occupy Wall Street movement, questions involving the rights of people to protest laws and systems that they see as unjust were brought to the fore by the graphic novel and its cinematic production.

Equally interesting is the issues of The Patriot Act. Many of my students were quick to note the disquieting similarities between the Patriot Act and the draconian laws that the graphic novel’s Harry Dent instituted. They theorized that the graphic novel, with its roots in the counter culture, is better able to question entrenched heroes and systems, using its iconoclastic status as a way to raise provocative issues. As one student declared, “This is a piece of literature that came from us—that became a movie that we watch. We feel more possessive of it.”

In examining the Batman series and other superheroes, students were able to identify political themes and recognized the development and societal sophistication of the genre. As a conclusion to our exploration into the history and political ambitions of the genre, I gave students the following quotation from Salon’s Andrew O’HeHir (2012):

“It’s no exaggeration to say that the Dark Knight universe is fascistic (and I’m not name-calling or claiming that Nolan has Nazi sympathies). It’s simply a fact. Nolan’s screenplay simply pushes the Batman legend to its logical extreme, as a vision of human history understood as a struggle between superior individual wills, a tale of symbolic heroism and sacrifice set against the hopeless corruption of society. Maybe it’s an oversimplification to say that that’s the purest form of the ideology that was bequeathed from Richard Wagner to Nietzsche to Adolf Hitler, but not by much.”
Defining Hegemony

After delving into the interesting aspects of superheroes and their obvious political place in society, I give students a quick look at political and cultural studies, providing them with a truncated version of Gramsci and Foucault, two important writers who suggested that society is controlled by media and traditions of carefully orchestrated normativity.

Foucault, for instance, believed that people could be taught to conform to unjust policies through social construction of what is normal and abnormal. If people hear stories about America being the “land of the free and home of the brave,” if they are forced to sing songs about loving their country and hating communists, they come to see this constructed truth as unassailable and beyond debate. Foucault touches upon the power and potential of discourses when he argues that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault, 1979, p. 194).

Gramsci explored the concept of cultural hegemony and the notion that people can be subjugated through schools, books, and movies—through various ubiquitous forms of information. Gramsci argued that militaries are not needed in an autocratic society if people could be taught to accept their own status as poor and lazy, leading them to never question the injustice of the minimum wage or corporate tax breaks. In such a scenario, people would govern themselves, gladly accepting and even reproducing the injustice to which they are subjected. How do despots do this? For Gramsci, the main avenue of hegemony was the school, workplace, the culture, and the literature people read. If society could be immersed in academic reading and patriotic songs that swayed them toward a certain ideology, they would be convinced to embrace that perspective—even if it was not in their best interests.

In short, I asked students to consider the power of media—both reading and technologies such as movies and television—to see how graphic novels can influence us as a people. Rosy the Riveter made women proud to be part of the war effort in the same way that Reefer Madness led millions of people to have inaccurate views of marijuana.

Creating New Superheroes

Once students are introduced to the obvious and inevitable politics of graphic novels and are given a short look at the power of media to change people or maintain the status quo, it is time for them to choose a specific superhero and begin their projects. Whether students choose Superman, Batman, Captain America, or Spiderman, their goal is to deconstruct this cultural personality and then recreate a new superhero in their own vision. In essence, what I asked students to do is to look at what other artists have done in using characters and then make their own superhero, commenting powerfully through its story.

For instance, one student, after looking at Spiderman, created Frogman, a bumbling but sagacious hero who walks the country roads of a rural town, helping people to be more successful farmers and maintaining low prices at the local stores. While seeming to be a boring and less captivating topic, Frogman is able to engage in an unremitting and totally heroic battle against Gladmart and other super stores that are forcing local stores to close. Sally, the student who created this superhero
wanted him to be flawed and complex, following our class-wide discussions about our heroes being real people. As a result, Frogman is haunted by his cowardice early in his life where he stood by passively and let a group of cruel bullfrogs enter his part of the pond and kill his parents. Again, while this may seem more comical than tragic, Sally’s very graphic description of the killing, which is done through a flashback that Frogman often has, is both riveting and upsetting.

“I wanted this to be serious despite the vision of a frog,” Sally said early in the process of creating her character. “Frogs can be very creepy and this is also an image I wanted to combat through the story. Of course, Frogman is also a loner, much like Bruce Wayne of the Batman saga. He devotes most of his time to making amends for the injustices he permitted because he refused to get involved.

Emerging from this unlikely superhero is a rather dynamic and intriguing character. Also important in discussing the importance of this unit is the political writing and commentary that is evident in Sally’s story. If Foucault and Gramsci have any validity in their work about reproduction and hegemony, it is imperative that students use their language experiences to do more than complete assignments in a passive, apolitical way. To teach a true, empowering literacy—and to make an exploration of the Batman saga. He devotes most of his time to making amends for the injustices he permitted because he refused to get involved.

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Instead, we must invite a process where students use language to pose problems and seek answers—where they question their political system and simplistic visions of good and bad. This takes students beyond a banking system, where essays are deposited like a bank. “In sum: banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces fail to acknowledge men as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take man’s historicity as their starting point,” argues Freire (1988, p. 71).

Indeed, the true importance of the graphic novel—its language and political iconoclasm—can be also understood in the words of Hilary Janks (2010) who poses the question, “How does one provide access to dominant forms, while at the same time valuing and promoting the diverse languages and literacies of our students and in the broader society?” (p. 24). One answer is to allow students to research and use the graphic novel—a different discourse form—and then use it to challenge dominant discourses and their tendency to reinforced injustice through books and other forms of media.

This iconoclastic response can be seen in Justin’s creation of Null People, the subjugated population that are forced to go underground and to live on the discarded crops that are consumed by the Superiors. In his story, Justin tells of how the Superiors use their inherited wealth and education—and the resources of the police—to gradually destroy the Nulls, arguing that they are carriers of disease and that they have threatened to poison their culture.

As a Jew, Justin wanted to use the graphic novel concept to reprise the issue of the Holocaust and do it through a fictitious and eerie storyline. The Nulls are described as ugly people who seem perpetually dark and zombie-like. They roam the fields and farms, often scavenging for food and occasionally fighting a guerilla war against the Superiors. Much of their time, Jason tells us, is spent underground. They are invisible and only written about as a group of disease-carrying people who seek to save their culture and very existence.

What many in the class found to be very profound and intriguing about Justin’s paper is the many parallels to history—how, like the Jews during Nazi rule, the Nulls fight constantly to keep their culture and race alive, struggling to overcome the media and its campaign to make all people believe in the necessity of expunging the Nulls as a race. Also impressive is Jason’s allusions to Ellison’s Invisible Man and the opening lines, where Ellison suggests that he is invisible because he is not seen as a person but as an entity, as part of a reviled group.

Students were immediately attracted to the Nulls because of their “walking dead” personas and clever way of deceiving their oppressors by pretending to be intellectually inferior. Their gothic appearance and crafty strategies of surviving in a genocidal world made them a kind of cult favorite among many students, who liked their dress and rebellious spirit.

Understanding Comics as Political Commentary

In Literacy and Power, Janks (2010) argues that it is essential that a language arts class teach students to “harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change exiting discourses” (p. 25). In looking at both Jason’s and Sally’s graphic stories, we find the use of a genre to challenge not only the standard and classic notion of a novel but also the use of a new semiotic system to contest entrenched cultural and political power.

In doing graphics for her story, Sally worked with fellow students and friends to create a brooding and
sad Frogman, a superhero who, in her words, does not follow the stereotype of the superhero. “Frogman never smiles, and finds his superhuman ability to oppose injustice, and later defeat Gladmart, an obligatory response to the injustice he witnessed earlier in his life. Indeed, Sally uses graphics throughout her story to show the general malaise that results from greed and autocratic rule. There is no romanticism in her tale, and the characters are either ugly or melancholy. “This is a statement I wanted to make,” she said after presenting her graphic work to the class. “I wanted readers to see my vision of inequality. I am no friend of Ayn Rand and her idea that the hard working will save the world. I believe we are a greedy society and that the powerful exploit the less powerful.”

Much of the same ideological work can be seen in Jason’s graphics. Much like the Nazis of the twentieth century, his Superiors are masters of language and media, creating books and programs to persuade the general population that the Nulls are bottom dwellers, the disease ridden dregs who must be avoided or destroyed. In doing this, they create sympathy and depict their officers as even kind, showing them mercifully killing the Nulls so as to limit the pain.

Of course, it is only through Jason’s graphics that the class can see the Superiors, with their light eyes and pleasing, warm smiles. They are reluctant to kill the Nulls and want nothing but to keep them away. In other graphics, the Nulls are shown to be dark but very introspective, beings who have devoted themselves to culture and history, always aware that their knowledge and dedication are the only qualities keeping them from extinction.

In many ways, then, Jason’s graphic novel comes alive because of his use of depictions. As with Sally before him, he uses illustrations to capture the way media and different semiotic systems are employed to create realities and re-inforce injustice. “I know this is what the Nazis did to my ancestors,” he told us as he made his final presentation. I wanted to use the graphic novel as a way to show the many ways propaganda and hegemony can operate. I wanted to suggest that this could happen again.”

Equally impressive about Jason’s work is his willingness to eschew the stereotype and the polarized versions of good and bad. Neither the Superior nor the Nulls are completely benevolent or malevolent. Both share qualities of real people.

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“graphic novels have great transformative potential for English classrooms and the students in them” (49). Gretchen Schwarz adds to this statement, contending that “the graphic novel now offers English language arts teachers opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy.” (58) Clearly, when students are liberated to use other forms of literacy—other discourses—to express themselves and find a sense of self-actualization, the language arts classroom has the potential to be a dynamic and personally transformative place. In both the work of Justin and Sally, we see students recognizing the potential of a new discourse and using it to explore their own verities about the world and society.

Words such as transformative are apt when looking at the graphic novel that Petula completed for the class. In it, she looked at the use of colors to invert societal values and traditions. Petula’s hero is Ebonyman, an African American who wears black and who employs the use of men and women who are also wearing black or dark garb.

Clearly, as she later explained, Petula wanted to call attention to the use of colors to reveal the cultural deficit in American society. “If you’ll remember,” Petula told the class, “even in The Lion King, the villain was a darker version of the hero. We have lived our lives in a society that sees black as bad. The dark knight is less heroic than the regular knight. We talk about dark clouds and the evil in blackness. Our culture has been conditioned to hate black and to see goodness in the man in the white hat.”

In contrast, her villains are smiling white men and women, who grin constantly and mask their deception with formal talk and superficial kindness. Ebonyman’s history involves a tragic past where his family was killed and the murderer was exonerated because of a corrupt justice system. Through much of her comic, Petula shows Ebonyman as he tries to work around a unjust society, one that tries to subvert societal changes and brainwash its people.

As with the writers before her, and many others not mentioned in this essay, Petula used the graphics and writing to contest a system that has worked to undermine justice and equality. She used literacy—both writing and graphics—to oppose political dilemmas.
Advocating Comics

In all, the unit on graphic novels asked students to write at least ten pages, using graphics on every page but making sure that they had a complete, well developed story. The graphics were developed in and outside of class, using artists from other classes and friends of the writers. The goal for each writer was to augment the power of the written word with graphics, with images that could expand the potency of language to prove political and personal themes that were both interesting to the students personally and the class as a whole. Through the use of colors, personal and animal images, the writers were able to use and appreciate yet another discourse, another way with words.

In *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Paulo Freire argues that “if learning to read and write is to constitute an act of knowing, the learners must assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects” (1982, p. 13). In writing and illustrating graphic novels, my students explored and then used a new form of discourse to expand their vision of what literacy can be. At the same time, they used a subversive discourse to challenge institutions that they saw as traditionally corrupt and unjust. If teachers are looking for a discourse that is both inviting and liberating for many students, graphic novels offers much in terms of expanding the possibilities for linguistic and political growth.

References


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