HUM 169: SUPERHERO ETHICS AND THE ART OF COMICS

Citrus College Course Outline of Record

Heading	Value
Effective Term:	Fall 2025
Credits:	3
Total Contact Hours:	54
Lecture Hours :	54
Lab Hours:	0
Hours Arranged:	0
Outside of Class Hours:	108
Total Student Learning Hours:	162
Strongly Recommended:	ENGL C1000.
District General Education:	C2. Humanities
Transferable to CSU:	Yes
Transferable to UC:	Yes - Proposed
Grading Method:	Standard Letter

Catalog Course Description

This interdisciplinary course examines comic books and graphic novels, focusing on the ethical dimensions of superhero narratives. Students will explore how comics address issues of justice, power, morality, and responsibility, tracing the history of the genre from its pulp origins to its cultural impact today. Through analysis of visual storytelling and narrative techniques, students will engage with key ethical questions raised by superhero characters and their worlds. 54 lecture hours.

Course Objectives

- Analyze the historical and cultural development of comic books and graphic novels, understanding their evolution as both art forms and cultural artifacts.
- Critique ethical dilemmas in superhero narratives by examining themes of justice, power, morality, and responsibility in relation to superhero decision-making and character development.
- Apply philosophical concepts of justice, virtue, and moral responsibility to the actions and motivations of superheroes, exploring how these ideas manifest in comic book characters and their worlds.
- Engage with primary philosophical texts to deepen their understanding of ethical frameworks, using these texts to critically evaluate superhero decisions and the moral challenges they present.
- Assess the impact of superhero stories on real-world issues, considering how they engage with complex societal themes such as identity, governance, and global conflict, while also shaping public discourse around justice and ethics.

Major Course Content

1. Historical and Cultural Development of Comics
    a. Origins in Pulp Magazines and Early Comic Books
    b. The Evolution of Graphic Novels as a Cultural Form
    c. The Global Influence of Comics Today
    d. Impact of Comics on Popular Culture and Society
2. What Makes a Superhero?
    a. Defining Key Superhero Traits: Power, Justice, Responsibility, Morality
    b. The Role of Superheroes in Ethical and Moral Narratives
    c. The Relationship Between Superheroes and Society's Expectations
3. Philosophical Focus: Ethics and Philosophy in Superhero Narratives
    a. Introduction to Basic Philosophical Concepts: Justice, Virtue, Moral Responsibility
    b. Applying Philosophical Ideas to Superhero Narratives
    c. Exploring the Role of Superheroes in Addressing Ethical Dilemmas
    d. Case Study: The Origin of Superman
4. Ethical Foundations of the Superhero Genre
    a. Superman's Moral Journey and His Impact on Superhero Archetypes
    b. The Influence of Superman on Subsequent Superhero Stories
5. The Role of Power in Superhero Narratives
    a. The Moral Use of Power: Can Absolute Power Ever Be Justified?
    b. The Dilemmas of Superheroes Wielding Extraordinary Power
    c. Examining the Tensions Between Power and Moral Responsibility in Superhero Stories
6. Superheroes as Vigilantes: Ethical Questions
    a. Should Superheroes Operate Outside the Law?
    b. The Ethics of Taking Justice into One's Own Hands
    c. The Dangers and Justifications of Vigilantism in Superhero Narratives
7. Justice and Morality in Superhero Stories
    a. Justice vs. Law: The Tension Between Legal Justice and Moral Justice
    b. Superheroes and Legal Authority: When the Law Conflicts with Morality
    c. The Role of Superheroes in Challenging or Upholding Legal Systems
8. Moral Dilemmas and the Anti-Hero
    a. Breaking the Moral Code: Superheroes Who Act Outside Traditional Morality
    b. The Rise of Morally Ambiguous Characters (e.g., Deadpool, The Punisher)
    c. The Ethics of Revenge and Punishment in Anti-Hero Narratives
9. Superhero Identity and Responsibility
    a. The Ethical Implications of Secret Identities and Personal Sacrifice
    b. Superheroes as Role Models: What Makes a "Good" Superhero?
    c. The Tension Between Personal Desires and Moral Duty in Superhero Narratives
10. The Ethics of Superpowers: Mutation and Technology
    a. The Ethics of Genetic Mutations and Technological Enhancements in Creating Super-Powered Individuals
    b. The Moral Implications of Power for Personal Gain or Societal Control
    c. The Challenges of Mutant Identity and Societal Acceptance in Superhero Stories
11. Power, Corruption, and the Villain's Perspective

a. Can Villains Be Justified in Their Actions?

b. Exploring the Fine Line Between Heroism and Villainy

c. The Role of Power and Corruption in Shaping Villainous Actions

12. Superheroes in a Global Context: Ethics of Intervention
    a. Superheroes and Global Conflicts: Should They Intervene in International Affairs?
    b. The Ethical Responsibility of Superheroes in Global Governance
    c. The Impact of Superheroes on World Affairs and International Ethics

13. Contemporary Ethical Dilemmas in Comics
    a. Modern Ethical Questions: Surveillance, Privacy, and Artificial Intelligence in Superhero Stories
    b. The Ethics of Superhero Teams and Collective Responsibility
    c. The Balance Between Individual Autonomy and Collective Action in Modern Superhero Narratives

14. The Philosopher-King and Superheroes as Moral Leaders
    a. The Concept of the Philosopher-King: Rulers Who Embody Both Wisdom and Justice
    b. Superheroes as Moral Leaders: Balancing Power with Wisdom and Justice
    c. The Role of Superheroes as Philosophical Figures in Maintaining Moral Order

15. Case Study: Wonder Woman's Leadership in the Justice League
    a. Applying the Philosopher-King Model to Superhero Leadership
    b. Wonder Woman's Leadership and the Ethical Responsibilities of Superheroes
    c. Superheroes as Exemplars of Moral and Political Leadership

Suggested Reading Other Than Required Textbook

DiPaolo, Marc. War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film. Illustrated ed., McFarland & Company, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0786447183, ISBN-10: 0786447184.

Examples of Required Writing Assignments

Writing Prompt:
In War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film, Marc DiPaolo discusses how superhero stories often carry deeper political messages and ethical questions. He looks at how comic book heroes—whether in their original form or as film adaptations—mirror society's views on war, politics, and morality. DiPaolo suggests that superheroes can both embody national ideologies and challenge political authority, all while grappling with tough ethical choices in times of crisis.

Writing Prompt:
Summary (200-300 words): Provide a brief summary of DiPaolo's main argument in War, Politics and Superheroes. What key themes does he explore regarding the relationship between superheroes and politics, particularly in times of war? How does he connect the ethical decisions made by superheroes to broader societal issues?

Analysis (400-500 words): Choose one superhero (from either comics or film) discussed in DiPaolo's book and analyze how their actions in relation to war or politics reflect the ethical dilemmas DiPaolo outlines. Does the character act as a tool of propaganda or challenge political norms? Use specific examples from the story to support your analysis.

How does this character's portrayal encourage the audience to engage with the political or ethical themes raised by the story?

Examples of Outside Assignments

Do superheroes promote violence? Using examples from both classic and contemporary superhero comics, examine how superhero characters and their actions depict violence, whether it's physical, emotional, or moral.

Instruction Type(s)

Lecture, Online Education Lecture