Advanced English: Liberalism, Conservatism, Vigilantism - Politics and American Super-Heroes

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This course is meant for students of the advanced C1 and C2 levels. Theme-based language classes aim at developing written and oral skills through the study of a specific topic.

Course Objectives

This is a 12-week course exploring the origins and ideologies of what has been called the quintessential American artform: the super-hero comic-books, as a means of improving student understanding and use of English.

The course has three main objectives:
- Introducing students to the emergence and subsequent popularity of American super-heroes
- Facilitating the critical analysis of selected works in view of the political and social contexts
- Expanding the appreciation of the genre through interactive presentations.

Background

It can be argued that the figure of the super-hero is essentially, if not uniquely, American. The creation and immediate success of Superman (1938) led to the appearance of hundreds of costumed super-heroes, some acquiring a fame as lasting as Superman's: Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, all of them actively participating in the war effort until 1945.

Slowly disappearing from the newsstands as the war came to an end, they enjoyed a brief revival at the height of the Cold War, fighting Communists rather than Nazis. Their success became international in the mid-sixties, in the wake of the growing influence of Marvel Comics and its flagship titles *The Amazing Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four, The Incredible Hulk, The Mighty Thor, Daredevil, Iron Man, X-Men*, to name the most famous ones. Slowly drifting away from conservative values, they came to embody the liberal, more inclusive values of this decade.

Thanks to the worldwide success of the Disney adaptations for TV and cinema, virtually everyone on the planet is now familiar with a wide array of characters that had all debuted in throwaway publications printed on cheap paper, produced by artists with limited artistic skills.

Crudely drawn, garish, Manichean and juvenile, it would take fifty years before comic-books came of age. 1986 marked the appearance of two hugely influential mini-series: *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* (Frank Miller) and *Watchmen* (Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons), both tackling in an adult way questions that had largely been evaded until then: the philosophy and politics of "super-heroing."

The issues raised by these two series invite the reader to question the very concept of super-heroes: does might make right? Are super-heroes fighting for justice, an extension of the strong arm of the law, vigilantes, or forces of social progress?

The course

This course focuses on the historical, political, and sociological aspects that gave the genre of super-hero comics, its birth and form, and examines how it informed its development and popularity. It aims at providing students with an original approach to examine those questions and develop their skills in understanding and using English to explore the complex questions that underlie the study of an often underlooked form of mass entertainment.

The course will follow a chronological and thematic approach, concentrating notably on the following aspects:

- Super-heroes: an embodiment of the American Dream?
- Superman: totem of conservative values or alien in search of integration?
- Batman: at the service of the law, or vigilante?
- Captain America: fighting nazis, fighting communists: comic-books as propaganda
- The hidden roots of a uniquely American genre
- The question of race relations in super-hero comics
- Liberal creators in a conservative environment
- Female super-heroes: feminist icons or exploitative imagery?
- Tackling politics and moral questions head-on: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, Watchmen, Civil War*
- *The Boys*: if corporations are people, are corporate super-heroes people, too?

Organization

Activities will cover the four language skills. While in-class discussion will emphasize **speaking** (including oral presentations and discussions), the course will require preparation time, **reading**, examining or watching the assigned materials, critical **writing**, and **listening** (including film extracts and recordings).