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English 4

12 January 2017

Comics As Literature

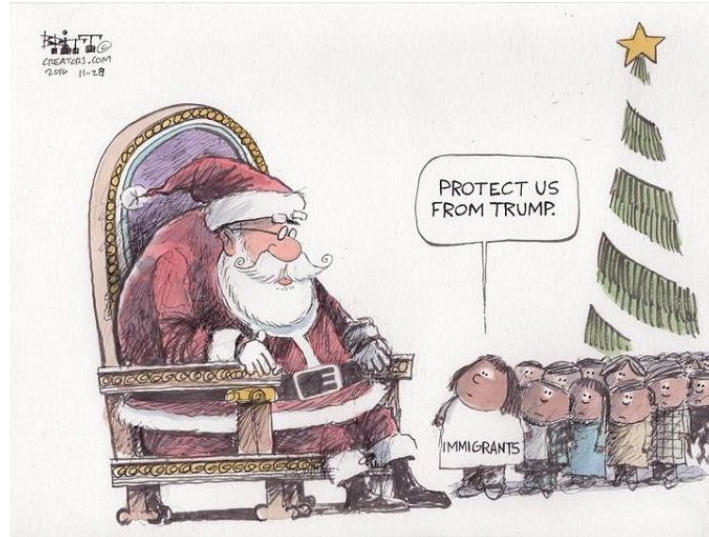
What do you think of when you hear the word 'comics' in conversation?

Most people would immediately think of *The Avengers* or *Batman*. Others might think back to their childhoods reading *Calvin & Hobbes* or *Bone*. Would you regard these comics as literature? Typically, literature is thought of in the context of classic books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Of Mice and Men*. These novels are lauded for possessing critical lessons for society. In contrast, comics are perceived as childish fantasy. Yet, comics draw a large and often highly literate reading audience. This begs the question, should comics be considered literature? Comics are a medium that allows artists to tell stories that are compelling, and they also can be used to highlight contemporary issues. I believe comics are just as capable of delivering critical lessons and should be recognized as literature.

Comics have a long and varied history in the United States; stretching back to World War II and beyond, comics have taken many forms in popular culture. Appearing in the funny pages, in the form of graphic novels, and magazines; comics document and commentate on every aspect of society. The evolution of comics over time is marked through the Golden Age of comics with the birth of *Superman* during World War 2 to the present. Superheroes such as Captain America and Superman were created in

response to the public's need for stories that could lift their spirits during the war. They also provided a format for political commentary. For example, the Jewish creators of *Captain America* expressed their hatred for Hitler and fascism through the cover page of an issue of their comic, wherein Captain America is shown delivering a punch to Hitler's jaw. At this time, comics were the cheapest and most easily accessible form of entertainment for the masses. It was documented that, "By 1941 there were over 30 comic book publishers producing 150 different monthly titles, with combined sales of from 15 to 18 million copies every month and a projected readership of nearly 60 million" ("Youth, Popular culture and moral panics: Penny gaffs to gangsta rap, 1830-1996"). However, with the publication of Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 and the rising anti-comic sentiment of the 50s, comics were deemed immoral and were censored or destroyed. This almost destroyed the comics industry. Today, people are as well acquainted with Superman as Lennie or Huck Finn.

Comics should be recognized as literature because since their conception they have been used to highlight current issues. Political cartoons notwithstanding, comics have been used as a way to emphasize one's own political ideologies and exacerbate others. As well as used in order to prop up the government's decisions through propaganda, such as the comics produced around World War 2. Naturally, these comics evoked and continue to evoke strong reactions from their audience. Take the recent satire comics that have been flooding the newspapers and internet concerning Trump's election as president.



Some decry these comics as slanderous towards the president-elect, while others agree with their messages. In fact, Trump has threatened to sue those who have written negative articles or drawn comics concerning him during this presidential election. The topic of censorship surfaces around literature or art that conveys a controversial message or evokes a strong reaction from its audience. The fact that comics are routinely used by artists to express political views and comment on the world puts them on par with literature.

Comics such as *The Smurfs* are as valid a piece of literature as the ever controversial and banned Huckleberry Finn. Most people know *The Smurfs* today as a children's show featuring cheerful little blue people. However, the cartoon was originally drawn by Belgian cartoonist Peyo as a thinly veiled commentary on the sociopolitical state of Belgium at the time. *The Smurfs* 1972 publication that ran in Spirou magazine centered around the issue of the "correct" use of the word Smurf in the village. This conflict being a veiled jab at the linguistic, political and cultural divide between the

Dutch-speaking Flanders in northern Belgium and French-speaking Wallonia in the south (Johnston, "How Comic Journalism Grew Up"). The overall perception of *The Smurfs* as a silly children's comic devalues the underlying messages that it sends about society and speaks to the general public's opinion of comics as a whole. Stories are created as a way to relate our experiences to one another, to hold society accountable for those issues that have long gone unresolved and to provide entertainment. *The Smurfs* as an example, fit all of these criteria, being able to tell compelling stories that present society's issues in ways that allow the reader to draw their own conclusions about the topic. So, why is the status of comics as literature still under debate for some?

What, then, qualifies as literature? Simply put, literature can be quantified as writing that is considered to have artistic or intellectual value. This can be taken to mean writing that holds complexity, leads one's imagination or alters one's perceptions of the world. The opposition towards comics' status as literature stems from the public's preconceptions and fears that reading comics rather than novels will lead to laziness, incite aggression in their children or expose their children to inappropriate content. A major critic of comics as a medium for complex storytelling, John Walsh, claims that "It's cruel but true: illustrations in novels are for children, or those who have trouble keeping up." (Gravett, "Comic Books: A Freakish Kind of Writing"). However, comics are actually one of the most effective educational tools, the pairing of text and visuals being the most effective method of teaching information and getting it to stick. As well as, being a much more accessible form of 'literature' for people of all levels of education.

In conclusion, comics should be considered literature and afforded recognition. Further examination of the messages portrayed in comics such as *The Smurfs* show vibrant characters, and stories that have a purpose and message. They don't deserve the current stereotypes that serve to detract from their messages and steer people away from reading.

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Research Paper Rubric:

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Focus	There is little or no sense of argument, and the paper wanders as a result. Generalizations and inconsistencies disorient the reader.	Central question(s) and thesis statement are present but fairly obvious. Argumentative focus is not consistently maintained or suffers from generalizations. The purpose and relevance of the discussion are not consistently clear for the audience.	Writer establishes central question(s) about the topic and a clear thesis (although it could be more complex). Writer typically maintains this argumentative focus throughout the paper. The audience gets a sense of purpose and relevance, although the argumentative structure could be better defined.	Writer establishes compelling central question(s) about the topic and a clear, argumentative thesis; this argumentative focus is honed throughout the paper. Writer communicates a clear purpose, making the relevance of the argument distinct for the audience.
Content / Organization	Introduction neither hooks the reader nor establishes appropriate context for the thesis. Body paragraphs are underdeveloped or lacking. Conclusion is missing or does not clearly bring closure to the paper. Transitions are incorrect or missing. Quotations are missing or are dropped into the text. Sentence structure and vocabulary are in need of serious improvement.	A hook is attempted, but ineffective. Context for the thesis is either thin or overdone. Body paragraphs might show some of the writer's original thinking about the topic, but they are underdeveloped or inconsistent. Conclusion basically restates the main argument but does not bring a meaningful sense of closure to the discussion or leave a lasting impression. Transitions are effective sometimes, but in other places they are incorrect or missing.	Introduction hooks the reader and establishes context for the thesis, although these elements could work more effectively. Body paragraphs develop the writer's thinking about the topic, but more varied patterns of development would improve the breadth and depth of the discussion. Conclusion makes clear how the central question(s) have been resolved, but could do more to add closure to the discussion and leave a lasting impression. Transitions are used effectively.	Introduction hooks the reader powerfully and efficiently establishes context for the thesis. Body paragraphs demonstrate breadth and depth of thought about the research topic through varied patterns of development. Conclusion is memorable, leaving the reader with a distinct sense of how the central question(s) have been resolved. Transitions link sentences and paragraphs smoothly and quotations are smoothly integrated into the

		Quotations are mostly dropped into the text or are not integrated smoothly. Sentence structure and vocabulary clearly need more development.	most of the time and most quotations are integrated smoothly into the text. Sentences tend to demonstrate sophistication in a couple of the following areas: variation, flow, creativity, mature vocabulary.	text. Sentences are consistently sophisticated (varied, smooth, creative, mature vocabulary).
Use of Sources / MLA Citation	<p>Research sources are lacking or off-topic.</p> <p>Writer may string together quotations without taking time to paraphrase, comment, or analyze.</p> <p>Works Cited page is missing or shows no attention to MLA format.</p>	<p>Research sources are fairly one-dimensional, focusing on a single perspective.</p> <p>Writer's own words are not consistently balanced with quoted material.</p> <p>Works Cited does not include all required sources and/or it has multiple errors in MLA format.</p>	<p>Research sources establish a couple of perspectives on the topic, but could be more thorough/varied.</p> <p>Writer does a good job of maintaining a balance of own words and quoted material.</p> <p>Works Cited page includes all required sources and is close to meeting MLA standards, with only a few errors.</p>	<p>Research sources are thorough and varied, establishing different perspectives on the topic.</p> <p>Writer balances own words (paraphrasing, commentary, analysis) and quoted material compellingly.</p> <p>Works Cited page includes all required sources and is perfect by MLA standards.</p>
Mechanics	Writing is seriously obscured by spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.	Writing contains many errors. Errors affect reader's understanding.	Writing contains some errors, but not at the expense of understanding.	Writing is polished, free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

See draft for comments

Grade:

