



Comic Books and The Classroom: Exploring the Genre

Introduction

Comic books are full of colorful images, unique characters, and fantastic stories. They can also be a great educational tool for students, providing them with an engaging way to learn more about the past and hone their critical thinking and analytical skills. Throughout the 20th century and beyond, comic books have reflected the economic, social, and political dimensions of society. Through rich illustrations and catchy narratives, comics have captured the social and political context in which they were written. By thinking carefully about comic books, students have the opportunity to absorb information about a wide range of topics while learning more about this distinct and vibrant artistic form.

Vocabulary

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms.

allegory
archetype
censorship
commentary
context
counterculture
genre
illustration
metaphor
surrealism

Discussion Questions

1. Do you read comic books or watch television shows or movies involving comic book characters? If so, which characters do you like or dislike, and why?
2. Why do you think people enjoy comic books and stories about superheroes?
3. Talk to your parents, grandparents, and neighbors about their memories of comic books and superheroes. What did they read as children? What kinds of stories and characters do they remember?

4. Comic books, as opposed to strips in newspapers, became popular in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Why do you think superheroes were popular at that time? What problems were people living with, and how might superheroes make them feel?
5. Comic book superheroes became more popular during the World War II era. Why do you think people liked to read about them during the war? What kinds of messages or meaning do you think they imparted during this era?
6. During the 1950s the comic book industry was criticized by a psychiatrist named Frederick Wertham who studied negative behavior in young people. He visited juvenile offenders in prisons, and found that they read comic books. He then claimed that comic books were responsible for their behavior. What do you think of his logic? Do you think he was correct in blaming comic books? Do people make similar claims today about other forms of media? Do you think they are accurate? Why or why not?
7. How do you think comic books differ from novels and other kinds of writing? What are some of the things that are unique about the genre of the comic book?
8. While comics have a written story, they are primarily a visual form of media. How does the artwork in comics tell a story?
9. Stan Lee created *Spiderman*, who learns early on that “with great power must also come great responsibility.” What do you think this phrase means? Discuss.
10. While some U.S. federal government officials criticized comics in the 1950s, later on officials recognized the ability of comics to reach a young audience. During the 1960s, 70s and 90s, comics were used to raise awareness of the dangers of drugs, guns and land mines. What other dangers or problems do you think comics and superheroes might teach young readers? Are there other forms of popular culture that come with power and responsibilities?

Extended Activities

1. Online or at the library, research the history of comic books. Make a timeline beginning in the 1930s when comic books and superheroes became popular through today. These timelines can be illustrated with images of popular comic book characters throughout the decades. Or, you can also pick a comic book superhero from the past and write a short essay about its history, characteristics, and storyline. These projects can also be presented in PowerPoint format.
2. Design a superhero. What is his or her name and story? Does he or she wear a costume, have super powers, or use technology? How did they obtain their skills, and what is their motivation for being a superhero? What problems does your superhero address? Draw a picture of your superhero with a description of his or her background, goals, and skills. Or stage a skit in your class in which each person pretends to be the character they created!
3. Make your own comic book! On your own or in a group, invent characters, a problem, and a story about how they will solve it. Draw a few scenes and write the dialogue. Share these projects with younger students, or with your larger class or group.

4. You don't have to be an artist to show how art can tell a story. Read a comic book to see how the artist uses color, contrast between light and dark, shading, lines to indicate movement, and other techniques to bring a story to life. Then try drawing two or three pictures of the same image or item, but in different styles. What kind of drawing styles did you choose? What techniques do you think are more entertaining or effective, and why?

Additional Resources

Books

Barry, Lynda (editor, et al.) *The Best American Comics 2008*. (Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

Sanderson, Peter, et al. *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia: A Complete Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe*. (DK Press, 2006).

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. (HarperCollins, 1994).

Wallace, Daniel, et al. *DC Comics Encyclopedia: Updated and Expanded*. (DK Press 2008).

Wright, Bradford. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Websites

Comic book timeline:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002488,00.html>

Official Marvel Comics site:

<http://marvel.com/>

Official DC Comics site:

<http://www.dccomics.com/dccomics/>