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Lost [and Found] Girls: Teaching a College Course in Alan Moore

Matthew J. Smith, Ph.D.
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Introduction

“You’re actually teaching *Lost Girls*?!” was the surprised reaction from one of my colleagues after examining my list of readings for a summer topics course focused on the works of Alan Moore. Had I lost my mind in including such a controversial work in my reading list? After all, shortly after I requested a copy for our campus library’s collection, *Lost Girls* raised eyebrows among the acquisition staff and even went missing from the shelves (only to turn up a week later in a forlorn corner of the stacks). Yes, I explained to my colleague that I felt I had to include this particular text. Working in collaboration with artist Melinda Gebbie, Moore sought to produce a work of pornography—not for its sensational value but because it represented an important step in the evolution of the writer, demonstrating the risks he was willing to take as he explored yet one more unorthodox storytelling venue in a career characterized by atypical stories.

Strangely, I found it more comforting that peers, librarians and eventually students were more interested in a dialogue about my selection of specific works than in any sort of second guessing the subject of the course itself. After all, never before had someone at my institution offered a stand-alone course devoted to the works of a single comic book creator.. No one seemed concerned that such a course could stand alongside our institution’s other courses focused on individual genius (e.g., Shakespeare, Hemingway). Perhaps I had softened up overt resistance through having taught a survey course in Graphic Storytelling for the past half decade. Or maybe it was the way in which people already knew Moore for his influence on culture, albeit through the adaptation of his works that have made their way to the silver screen or his own distinctive media presence (as evidenced by his cameo appearance on *The Simpsons*). But for whatever reason, I was delighted that people were more intrigued by the specific contents of the syllabus than the larger idea that a comic book writer could be the subject of a college-level course.

Of course, anyone familiar with Alan Moore is well-aware that the breadth and depth of his body of work makes him, arguably, the most likely of any English language comics creator to justify a course-length treatment. Not only does his career stretch over a span of more than three decades, but his body of work moves across genres and has garnered acclaim both within and beyond the comics industry. Moore has not only produced superhero narratives (*Top Ten*) but science fiction (*Halo Jones*), horror (*Swamp Thing*), and historical fiction (*From Hell*), among other genres. His efforts have won him recognition such as multiple wins of the Eisner Award,

the comics' industry's equivalent of the "Oscars," and even a World Fantasy Award. In fact, it was Moore's very reputation for effective storytelling that inspired this course. Having read *Watchmen*, Moore's seminal collaboration with Dave Gibbons, a sizeable group of students in my fall Graphic Storytelling course indicated an interest in doing term projects focused on additional works by Moore.

Because so many of them had listed Moore as an author whose works of which they wanted to read more, I jokingly suggested that we should form a topics course to explore them more thoroughly. A handful of them called me on my offer, and thereafter I began to plan the course for the next summer. I started by assembling as complete a bibliography of Moore's oeuvre as I could compile and began to read those works that I had not previously. Several works were out of print at the time, including the collected editions of early works done in the United Kingdom for 2000 A.D. such as *The Ballad of Halo Jones* and *D.R. and Quinch*. Figuring out just which works to include was a chore.

For instance, *Promethea* gets very interesting the further along it goes, but covering all five trade paperbacks would mean sacrificing coverage of other works. I decided to keep this as a survey of Moore's career and so had to cut short covering something like *Promethea* in depth. Then I began to actively recruit students from my previous courses to sign up for the summer session on Moore. I had expected that handful, and maybe a few more students to join us, but I was pleasantly surprised to have seventeen students enroll for the course (where most summer offerings top out at five participants)! I had underestimated Moore's appeal but I found myself gladly adapting to the challenge of managing a popular course, one that ultimately included *Lost Girls* and so many more of Moore's masterful works.

Explanation of Materials

As one can see in the syllabus below, my approach to teaching the works of Alan Moore relied on a number of strategies. Such a knowledge-building approach has similarly been suggested in James Bucky Carter's pedagogy for teaching *Watchmen*. For my part, the variety was inspired by the need to keep the class format diverse and lively, as we met for a three-hour evening session, twice a week. My curriculum included five regular features:

- 1) Discussions over readings of Moore's major works, from *V for Vendetta* to *Lost Girls* (and while I guided the flow, students were assigned to bring in questions that they wanted to address each session);
- 2) Student-led research presentations providing context for either Moore's cultural exigency (e.g., Margaret Thatcher's U.K.) or details on his collaborators (e.g., Eddie Campbell), which I called the "Even Moore Presentations" with tongue pressed firmly in cheek;
- 3) Readings of supplemental scholarly critiques of Moore's work to help students see how sophisticated interpretations of the works could be performed;

- 4) Introduction of basic comics theory (e.g., Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*) since I could not assume everyone had already taken Graphic Storytelling and knew the difference between a panel and a word balloon); and
- 5) Multimedia representations of Moore and his works.

This last consideration was perhaps the most enjoyable to assemble and ultimately led me to use everything from cartoon adaptations of Moore's stories (e.g., "For the Man Who Has Everything" from *Justice League*) to playing a CD of "Snakes and Ladders," a performance piece Moore recorded on stage. The results kept the regular sessions engaging and spoke to different learning styles. These choices were guided by an attempt to be cognizant of the lessons in multimodality that comics embody (see Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila, for further exploration).

Above and beyond our evening sessions, I asked the students to develop a conference-style essay addressing some thematic issues across the works. I turned our final class session into a celebration of these efforts and organized a conference style set of panels, invited faculty and students from across the campus to attend, and convinced my dean to buy some donuts for refreshments. The session was a welcomed coda to our exploration of Moore and his works, and I've included the titles of the student projects organized into panels. The students really seemed to enjoy sharing their insights with one another and a wider audience of about a dozen guests composed of their fellow summer session students and a few of my faculty colleagues, and two students later joined me in the fall for a panel presentation over Alan Moore at the Champion City Comic Con, a local comic book convention.

I had approached the course acknowledging that I did not fully understand Alan Moore or his works, and I let my students join me on a journey of discovery. While there was always a risk that we might get lost in the milieu of Moore's mind, I was pleased with what we found: A deeper appreciation not only of the author and his works, but the ability to examine unapologetically a creator working in the comics medium.

Works Cited

- Carter, James Bucky. "Teaching *Watchmen* in the Wake of 9/11." Teaching the Graphic Novel. Ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick. New York: Modern Language Association, 2009. 99-108. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993. Print.
- Schwartz, Adam, and Elaine Rubinstein-Avila. "Understanding the Manga Hype: Uncovering the Multimodality of Comic-Book Literacies." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 50 (2006): 40-49.

Syllabus: The Graphic Novels of Alan Moore

Course Description

This is a course examining the works of British graphic novelist Alan Moore, who has earned international recognition for his storytelling ability. In fact, Moore's *Watchmen* (created in collaboration with artist Dave Gibbons) is the only graphic novel considered by *Time* to be among the one hundred best works of fiction in the twentieth century. Alongside notables such as *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman and *Sin City* creator Frank Miller, Moore is often cited as one of the driving talents in maturing comics from juvenilia to literary repute. Within the medium itself, his influence is undeniable, as colleagues and fans acknowledge him as one of the most accomplished—if not *the* most accomplished—storytellers of his generation.

We will examine key selections from Moore's oeuvre, or body of work, as well as biographical and critical examinations to come to a better understanding of Moore, his creations, and his legacy. Class meetings will be conducted in seminar style, with discussion driven by student inquiry.

Course Objectives

This course makes available to you the following opportunities:

- to apply several aesthetic principles that guide comics criticism
- to develop an appreciation for the creativity and expression exhibited in comics
- to sharpen your ability to ask and answer critical questions about literary expression
- to understand the works of Alan Moore, including the major themes, storytelling techniques, and messages of his oeuvre

Texts

Khoury, G. (2008). *The extraordinary works of Alan Moore: Indispensable edition*. Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing. ISBN 1-6054-9009-1. \$29.95.

Moore, A., & Gibson, I. (2005). *The ballad of Halo Jones*. New York: DC Comics. ISBN 1-4012-0590-9. \$17.99.

Moore, A., & Lloyd, D. (2008). *V for vendetta*. New York: Vertigo. ISBN 1-4012-0841-X. \$19.99.

- Moore, A., Bissette, S. R., & Totleben, J. (2009). *Saga of the Swamp Thing, book one*. New York: Vertigo. ISBN 1-4012-2082-7. \$24.99.
- Moore, A. (2006). *DC universe: The stories of Alan Moore*. New York: DC Comics. ISBN 1-4012-0927-0. \$19.99.
- Moore, A., & Gibbons, D. (1995). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics. ISBN 0-9302-8923-4. \$19.99
- Moore, A., & Zarate, O. (2003). *A small killing*. Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press. ISBN 1-5929-1009-2. \$16.95.
- Moore, A. (2003). *Alan Moore's writing for comics*. Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press. ISBN 1-5929-1012-2. \$5.95.
- Moore, A., & Campbell, E. (2000). *From hell*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions. ISBN 0-9585-7834-6. \$35.00.
- Moore, A., & O'Neill, K. (2002). *The league of extraordinary gentlemen, vol. 1*. New York: America's Best Comics. ISBN 1-5638-9858-6. \$14.99.
- Moore, A., & Cannon, Z., & Ha, G. (2003). *Top ten: The forty-niners*. New York: Wildstorm. ISBN 978-1-4012-0573-7. \$17.99.
- Moore, A., Williams, J. H. III, Gray, M. (2001). *Promethea, book 1*. New York: Wildstorm. ISBN 1-5638-9667-2. \$14.99.
- Moore, A., & Gebbie, M. (2009). *Lost girls*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions. ISBN 1-6030-9044-4. \$45.00.

In addition those listed above, a number of required readings will be available on Moodle.

Assignments

Attendance and Participation

This is a discussion-based learning experience requiring you to talk through the material in order to promote understanding of it for yourself and the benefit of others. Consequently, you have the opportunity to earn points for your participation on the evenings that we meet. However, these points are not automatic but rather awarded based on your engagement with the material and the other participants in the class.

Reading Comprehension Quizzes

In order to encourage and reward you for keeping up with the assigned readings, a reading comprehension quiz will be administered at the start of each class. Preparing for these quizzes should help you begin to learn the material and consequently promote informed class discussion. These quizzes are also an incentive to be present in class, as there will be no make-ups (should you be absent) or time extensions (should you arrive to class tardy) with them. However, I will drop your two lowest scores (including any missing scores) before averaging for your grade.

Discussion Questions

With each of the twelve major works that we will read, I will ask you to bring to class a set of five discussion questions. These questions should be open-ended discussion prompts that pierce beyond a superficial reading of the text. In other words, they should not be comprehension questions (e.g., "Where do we first meet V?") but queries that prompt discussion (e.g., "Why is the Professor the perfect villain for the

League?"). These questions may address issues that you are genuinely unclear about or they may be related to issues you already have tentative conclusions about but wish to discuss with others.

Please bring two typed copies of your questions to class: one to hand in to me as we begin our session and one for you to reference during our opening discussion of the text. These questions are due at the start of class and will not be accepted for credit thereafter. However, if you are absent because of serious illness or a death in the family, I will accept these for credit if I can receive them sufficiently in advance of the class session for me to present them to your peers.

Even Moore Presentation

In order to help us understand some additional context for the works we read, you will conduct research into and present information about a supplemental topic related to Alan Moore to the rest of class. These topics may include collaborators, historical contexts, characters, or other topics that help us flesh out our understanding of Moore. You will need to consult a minimum of six (6) sources in researching your topic. Of these, only a third may come from the internet (e.g., two of six); however, you can use the computer to access previously published sources indexed in databases. This material should appear in the session and be orally cited. I will ask you to submit a working bibliography at the start of the second week of classes to be sure that you are working diligently on this research.

Please prepare either a handout or PowerPoint presentation to share with the class (you need not do both). On the day of the presentation, please be sure to provide me with a copy of your handout or a print-out of your PowerPoint before you begin presenting.

Feel free to be creative and inventive with this session, employing the most engaging teaching techniques you've seen from other instructors, including—but not limited to—incorporating a sample reading, showing a video clip, performing a skit, engaging the class in an exercise, leading a discussion, providing supplemental reading, etc. Let your inventiveness for engaging the class guide you, but be sure to communicate substantial information about your topic by the time you are done.

Your presentation should have an essential message (i.e., thesis) that you want your audience to take from the session. It would also be helpful to have a structure that suggests key points that help organize the "take aways" that you want everyone to learn about the topic.

You should time your presentation to last no less than 10 minutes and no longer than 20 minutes. Time permitting, we may have time for some questions and answers to follow. Students missing their presentation date may forfeit the opportunity to earn credit on this course requirement.

Final Essay

The final project allows you to develop a conference-ready paper over some aspect of Alan Moore's works, synthesizing the relevant discussions we have read over the course of the summer and augmented by your own research and thoughtful analysis. Ideally, the ability to speak intelligently to the Moore's works translates into an intelligent, original contribution to the scholarly literature.

This essay should be built around a thesis (i.e., an argument) that examines themes within the work and applies aesthetic concepts to it. The thesis should be supported with evidence pulled from primary works (i.e., the graphic novels) as well as some commentary from secondary sources. Your aim is to provide insight into the meanings within Moore's texts.

I would expect this essay should run a minimum of 2,500 words (approximately 10 double-spaced pages). More content is welcomed! Please adapt this paper to MLA or APA style guidelines.

In order to encourage you to focus on this project early on, I will request a one-page proposal from you on Wednesday, May 26. Every week thereafter for the next four weeks I will ask you to add a page to this proposal (“Proposal +1”) adding insight or development based on the new material, our previous week’s discussion, or your own research. At any point, you can change topics if you find that one under development just isn’t working out for you. I will also sponsor a Writing Workshops in class on Wednesday, June 30. Please bring two drafts of your essay to class that day in order to participate and earn credit.

Course Calendar

The following is a plan for moving forward through the course content. Although I will adhere to the below calendar as closely as possible, it might be necessary to adjust dates as we progress through the session.

Date	Class Session	Assignments
Wednesday, May 19	Course Introduction Discussion topic: <i>Greyshirt</i> Supplemental Critique: "Biopic" by Millidge Comics Theory: Basic Definitions Multimedia: <i>The Mindscape of Alan Moore</i>	
Flashbacks and Flashforwards		
Monday, May 24	Brainstorm Themes and Directions for Projects Discussion Topic: Moore's Biography Even Moore Presentation Model: <i>Miracle Man</i> Supplemental Critique: "The Time of Heroes" Comics Theory: Auteur Theory Multimedia: George Khoury Live!	Read <i>Extraordinary Works</i> Even Moore working bibliography due
Wednesday, May 26	Discussion Topic: Moore's Early British Work Even Moore Presentation: N/A Supplemental Critique: "Chronotypes" Comics Theory: Closure in the Gutters Multimedia: <i>V for Vendetta</i> preview	Read <i>Halo Jones</i> & Di Liddo One-page proposal due
From Britain to America		
Monday, May 31	Discussion Topic: <i>V for Vendetta</i> Even Moore Presentation: Margaret Thatcher's U.K. Supplemental Critique: "V's Terrorism" Comics Theory: The Frame Multimedia: <i>Swamp Thing</i> preview	Read <i>V for Vendetta</i> & Keller
Wednesday, June 2	Discussion Topic: <i>The Saga of the Swamp Thing</i> Even Moore Presentation: John Constantine Supplemental Critique: "Analysis of <i>Swamp Thing</i> #20" Comics Theory: Expressive Anatomy Multimedia: Len Wein on the <i>Swamp Thing</i> 's creation	Read <i>Swamp Thing</i> & Bissette Proposal + 1 due
Friday, June 4	Discussion Topic: Early Superhero Comics Even Moore Presentation: Creators' Rights and The Big Two Supplemental Critique: "The House of the Magus" Comics Theory: The Superhero Genre Multimedia: <i>Justice League</i> "For the Man Who Has Everything"	Read <i>DC Universe</i> & Wolk

Date	Class Session	Assignments
Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?		
Monday, June 7	Discussion Topic: <i>Watchmen</i> Even Moore Presentation: Dave Gibbons Supplemental Critique: "Who Watches . . . ?" Comics Theory: Composition & Layout Multimedia: <i>Watchmen</i> extras	Read <i>Watchmen</i> & Hughes Proposal + 2 due
Wednesday, June 9	Discussion Topic: <i>A Small Killing</i> Even Moore Presentation: Moore in Other Media Supplemental Critique: Moore on Writing Comics Theory: Industrial v. Artisan Processes Multimedia: <i>The Simpsons</i>	Read <i>A Small Killing</i> & <i>Writing for Comics</i>
Royal Britannia		
Monday, June 14	Discussion Topic: <i>From Hell</i> Even Moore Presentation: Eddie Campbell Supplemental Critique: N/A Comics Theory: Line Multimedia: <i>From Hell</i> extras	Read <i>From Hell</i>
Wednesday, June 16	Discussion Topic: <i>From Hell</i> Even Moore Presentation: Ripperology Supplemental Critique: "Looking Inside Out" Comics Theory: Adaptations Multimedia: <i>From Hell</i> screening	Read Coppin Proposal + 3 due
Friday, June 18	Discussion Topic: <i>The League</i> Even Moore Presentation: Jekyll & Hyde Supplemental Critique: Nivens' <i>Heroes & Monsters</i> Comics Theory: Inter-textuality Multimedia: <i>LXG</i>	Read <i>LXG</i> & Nivens

Reading Graphic Novels

Get physically prepared. Sit up, get settled (but not too relaxed) to read, and minimize competing stimuli (e.g., turn off the TV or iPod).

Read twice. The first reading should really be to orient yourself to the story. The second reading should be to scrutinize the storytelling techniques.

Discern, not just enjoy. Comics are often pleasurable, and it's okay to enjoy yourself during a read; however, as a critic your task is to discern meaning from the comics and/or apply concepts even while you are enjoying it.

Take notes! As a critic you are *studying* comics. Take notes over relevant passages and most especially observations you make as you consume the comic, especially on that second read through.

ABCs

Monday, June 21	<p>Discussion Topic: <i>Top Ten</i> Even Moore Presentation: GLBT in Comics Supplemental Critique: "America's Best Comics" Comics Theory: Time Multimedia: <i>Hill Street Blues</i></p>	<p>Read <i>Top Ten: The Forty-Niners</i> & Klock Proposal + 4 Due</p>
Wednesday, June 23	<p>Discussion Topic: <i>Promethea</i> Even Moore Presentation: Women in Comics Supplemental Critique: "The Radiant City" Comics Theory: Balloons Multimedia: <i>Snakes and Ladders</i> performance CD</p>	<p>Read <i>Promethea</i> & Lioi</p>

Lost and Found

Monday, June 28	<p>Discussion Topic: <i>Lost Girls</i> Even Moore Presentation: Melinda Gebbie Supplemental Critique: "ImageSext" Comics Theory: Color Theory Multimedia: <i>L. Frank Baum: The Man Behind the Curtain</i></p>	<p>Read <i>Lost Girls</i> & Hatfield</p>
Wednesday, June 30	<p>Discussion Topic: Writing Workshop Even Moore Presentation: TBA Supplemental Critique: "Why Don't . . ." Comics Theory: Cartooning is not Filmmaking Multimedia: Moore at the Movies</p>	<p>Bring Workshop Draft & Read Meskin</p>
Friday, July 1	<p>Final essay due by 6:30 p.m.</p>	

Program for Conference-Style Final Presentations

An Evening with Alan Moore

Welcome and Introduction

Panel #1 Departure Point: Who Is Alan Moore and What Does He Stand For?

“The World According to Alan Moore”

“Alan Moore’s Real Life and His Writings”

“Alan Moore’s Personal Image Shown through His Comics”

“The Influence of Magic on the Life and Works of Alan Moore”

“The Question of Authenticity in Moore’s Works: A Heideggerian Analysis”

Panel # 2 The Alan Moore Narrative: A Compelling Darkness Falls

“Alan Moore and Character Development”

“Be We Evil or Be We Good”

“Themes of Corruption and Violence in the Works of Alan Moore”

“What is Evil? Flannery O’Connor Meets Alan Moore”

Panel #3 Fire, Anarchy, and Pornography: Themes of Innocence and Transformation

“From Innocence to Awareness”

“Bringing Change through Fire and Dreams”

“Anarchy in the Works of Alan Moore”

“Pornographic Art: Lost or Found?”

Panel # 4 Adapting Moore

“Did Video Kill the Comic Book Star? The Impact of Film Adaptations on the Comic Industry”

“Analyzing *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell* from a Film Studies Perspective”

Matthew J. Smith (Ph.D., Ohio University) is a professor of Communication at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. He is the co-editor of *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (Routledge, 2012) and co-author of *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (Continuum, 2009). He teaches courses such as Graphic Storytelling, the Graphic Novels of Alan Moore, and the Field Study at Comic-Con (see www.powerofcomics.com/fieldstudy). In 2009, the Wittenberg Alumni Association recognized him with its Distinguished Teaching Award, the highest honor for teaching at the institution. He is also past president of the Ohio Communication Association. Inquires are welcomed at msmith@wittenberg.edu.