

3-21-2013

## Is there a new kind of hero in comics?

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### Recommended Citation

Bramlett, Frank, "Is there a new kind of hero in comics?" (2013). *English Faculty Publications*. 26.  
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# Is there a new kind of hero in comics?

As a linguist, I am professionally devoted to the scientific study of language. But I have a confession: I used to be a literature major. As an undergraduate, I studied in a traditional English department, and I only accidentally found out about linguistics when I took a grammar class. In those literature courses, professors lectured about the different kinds of hero that have been discussed for thousands of years. In Greece, Aristotle wrote about the hero, and in the Middle Ages, the hero was construed differently. In the twentieth century, the notion of the anti-hero became possible, and writers in the postmodernist style exploded the notion not just of hero but of narrative as well.

Of course, this was the 1980s, and my professors weren't talking about comics, and they weren't talking about superheroes. They talked about John Milton, Geoffrey Chaucer, Alice Walker, Eudora Welty, Jane Austen, and Walker Percy, among others. As in the world of literature, the list of heroes in comics is quite long, of course, and stretches across a wide range of character types.

Several months ago, I picked up a trade paperback of *No Hero*, by Warren Ellis and Juan Jose Ryp (Avatar, 2009). In many ways, this book reiterates other interrogations of the (super)hero construct, and in so doing references *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, among others. For instance, it questions motivations, and it questions the nature of 'good' and 'evil.'



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detail from cover of trade paperback

Notably, on the cover of the TPB, the title is underscored by the epigraph 'How Much Do You Want To Be A Super Human?' In a nutshell, the comic tells the story of how a scientist created a chemical drug that alters human physiology and psychology so that anyone who took the drug was vested with superhuman strength, endurance, flight, or other abilities.

The two central characters of the book at first are seen in a mentor/mentee relationship, but this soon turns to one of struggle, of conflict. The mentee, the most recent human to become a super human, changes physically to such a degree that he becomes unrecognizable. His superhero

uniform makes him look like a hero, not only by functioning similarly to the uniforms the other super humans wear, but also by covering up his disfigurement. The image below shows the super human unmasked.



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### Real Hero Now

The superhumans in this comic book have abilities that no others on Earth possess. It is a world without Wonder Woman, without Superman, without Spider-Man, without Storm. But 'Who Watches the Watchmen?' is a tag line that seems appropriate here.

It seems that in comics we have heroes who are recognizable as heroes only on the surface. They can achieve super human feats, and they pull on tight, form-fitting costumes to signify their membership in the super human club. It is clear, though, both from the comics themselves as well as reviews of the comics and interviews with the artists, that these characters are not in any sense heroic. This type of character wouldn't qualify as an Aristotelian tragic hero, or even a deconstructed postmodernist hero (like 'Rocket Man' Slothrop in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*).

I would argue, instead, that they are much more likely to be substantively villainous creatures masquerading as heroes. I would argue that Warren Ellis may have named something that comics readers have been looking at for a while: the no-hero. The epigraph of the book doesn't use the term 'super hero,' but instead uses 'super human.' The no-hero is the character who looks like a hero only under certain circumstances, only in a certain light, only when subjected to a kind of rhetorical stance that makes it seem so.

Is there such a thing as a no-hero? And does this kind of character exist in other places, outside comics?

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## About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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