

# More Than Heroes

## An Examination of Comic Book Heroes as Modern Mythologies.

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### Abstract

*This paper looks at heroes and the modern creation of the superhero. It follows superheroes from their inception in the early 1900s to their status as worldwide icons. By examining art, writing, and belief systems involved, the paper parses out the critical aspects of these new mythologies and why they continue to remain popular, even outside their originating medium.*

Hercules, Samson, Odysseus, and Arthur are mythological figures passed down through the ages. They are icons of heroism, justice, betrayal and lost chance. We follow their stories and listen on with wide eyes and open ears. Heroes like these are fixed within their time, they cause us to imagine the world in which they existed and the values they stood for. These ideals can instill a strong sense of what certain virtues are, and where they come from. These heroes are ancient, but there is a new guard that has been created, and they are not mere heroes, no they're something more – they're *superheroes*.

Batman, Superman, Spider-man and others have become our modern mythologies. They embody hopes and dreams and represent a part of a culture but stand for something more, something that crosses boundaries. Unlike the old heroes, these superheroes are still being written, and are subject to alterations in character and design. Danny Fingeroth explains that:

*There is no “Moses for the 1940s,” no “John Henry for the 1950s,” no “swinging sixties Gilgamesh.” Yet superheroes keep being reinvented. The superheroes of the 1940s were re-imagined as the heroes of the 1960s, which exist to this very day. They had the same names, often similar powers, yet otherwise bore no connection to them. [...] But there’s no Thin man for the new millennium. There’s no Sam Spade in space. There’s no Lone Ranger riding a 4 X 4.*

A short 70 years they have enthralled audiences, yet in that time they have changed drastically. Examining them from the beginning and understanding where these superheroes came from is important, and to do this one must acknowledge the ancient myths they were originally based on.

The origin of the superhero can be traced to one particular character – Superman. His creation set the initial archetype for what would define superheroes. His initial attitude was very similar to those of detectives in popular comics of the time, but his powers and costume made him a star. He was no mere mortal, he wasn’t shooting magic bullets – he was the supernatural element personified. Ironically while Superman follows the ideals of truth, justice and the American way, he is the prime example of fascism. Even while fighting for the US in WW II stories, the public and writers were just as ignorant as their Kryptonian orphan. He was winning by being superhuman, a higher species of man with incredible strength beyond that of normal men. (Yeffeth, 11)

The depression that gave birth to the superhero genre had vast effects on the heroes’ personalities and world views. These are far removed from the heroes we know today. In the early years of Superman there was a great focus on the corruption and greed infiltrating politics and business. Within the first few issues Superman exposes the plan of a politician who is involved with a munitions dealer to get the US involved in

a foreign war. He saves a miner, then interviews the survivor (as his alter ego) and learns of the poor working conditions caused by the greedy owner, Superman then tosses the negligent owner into the mines to experience a collapse and laughs at his cries for help until he apologizes and promises to change his ways. (Wright, 11)

Superman's actions seem anti-democratic and anti-capitalistic in a sense, yet reviews done of his actions over time prove a different take. Superman has rarely swept through and rounded up organized crime syndicates, even though a task such as that would be simple for him. Nor does he remove drug dealers from the face of the globe. Nearly all, of the Superman adventures in the early years deal with the loss of property. If a piece of private property was being damaged, Superman would stop it. This all occurs while representing the goodness of his character. It is through these limitations that we come to see the shallowness of the character. Though near omniscience and omnipotence are his, he holds back on his abilities even though it would seem his code would dictate otherwise. (Heer, 164)

There was an apparent negligence for depth in these stories, right and wrong were clean cut and superheroes were *right*. Like biblical figures of old they are given human faults but also great power. A further link to the biblical relation to this purity is found by examining a superhero's exclusion from the opposite sex. Superheroes are attracted to someone, fall in love, but are held away from their desire by their power, by their duty. If the hero desires to live a life with their forbidden love, a life of implied sin, they must give up their abilities and crusade. This is perfectly exemplified by the relationship between Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane. (Lawrence, 44)

The identity/secret identity ordeal is commonly a vital element to the superhero. Through the anonymity of the costume the superhero becomes what they truly are, what they intended and meant to be all along. This identity with their costume, more than their regular person is exemplified by their words, their personal statements of who they are: "I'm Spider-Man" or "I'm Batman." The persona behind the mask is not their "mild-mannered" self. Through putting on an outer covering the hero becomes the person they feel more comfortable being, they become who they truly identify with. (Conway, 190)

The focal aspect that seems unique to these "superheroes" is their ability to change with the times. The Batman and Superman of today are not those of ten years ago. These characters change drastically with each age yet they themselves do not grow old. Everything in the past has happened to them in some form, it is a part of their history, so as a result things quickly get complicated when one examines the body contiguous. Plotlines to explain the apparent suspension of ageing, old storylines, and current plots become twisted, and that's when drastic action is taken. Companies have handled this in different ways. DC created a way to clean up their "continuity issues" in 1985 with a storyline titled *Crisis on Infinite Earths* which effectively wiped the slate clean and permitted the company to forget about campy versions of heroes and managing the age issue of their characters. Marvel made their attempt at redefining their characters by establishing a new line of titles with the *Ultimate* precursor. These are efforts done to define the "real" history of fictional characters, to separate the fictional stories about the unreal and the true stories about the made up. (Klock, 21)

How do editors and writers get away with these acts? In television shows and other such serials, such drastic rewrites or lapses of continuity could not be so easily swept under the rug and forgotten, Richard Reynolds explains:

*Any fans worth their salt will be in possession of a pile of back-issues against which to check any current plot development which seems to violate any previous storyline. And the writers are sometimes caught out. At such a juncture their role (or the editor's role) is to save the day by [sp] conjuring up an explanation which smooths over the faux-pas and restores continuity. Sometimes this may not be possible, in which case the editors may frankly admit the error – impossible to imagine in the non-interactive world of TV soaps!*

The fact that comics have a material nature about them cause an audience to be more involved and play a bigger role in voicing concerns over issues with storylines and continuity. This can, in part, be attributed to the magazine nature from which they come and the inclusion of letters to the editor included in many books to this day. In turn this causes comics to be vulnerable to audience opinion more than most forms of entertainment. In the aforementioned DC *Crisis* storyline multiple characters that died off were written with the ability to have them brought back, even though the intent of the storyline was to dissolve the problems created by having multiple universes and timelines. Tom Morris states that, “This much is certain: once you have the multiverse and its resources, they don’t go away, no matter how you write and rewrite the story.”

These alternative looks of heroes are often given over to the idea of a potential future, the heroes grow old or pass the torch onto a new generation. The most notable examples of this are Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight* and the *Kingdom Come* series by Mark Waid and Alex Ross. While *Kingdom Come* looks at the DC (Multi)Universe as a whole,

*Dark Knight* focuses primarily on the fate of Batman. Both takes feature an increasingly cynical caped crusader, and yet they vary on multiple points and at the same time are heralded by fans as incredible takes on the character. Neither of these are touted as the “real” Batman, but they’re strong portrayals of a character in his later years –a character that has ceased to age in the current serials. So these future forms fall in the same line as the film and cartoon adaptations, they are different looks at the same personality, the same ideals, but with a new flavoring and a new audience in mind. (Brooker, 317)

There are versions of Superman and Spider-man for movie buffs, versions for those who are fans of audio dramas, and those who enjoy a novel can find their own rendition of a notable costumed hero. The options these superheroes give us by portraying themselves in so many ways at the same time permits the choice of which version of the hero you really want. This is what defines the iconic superheroes, they know no boundaries and continue to evolve by keeping only the bare minimum of their core sacred.

One of these core items which can also be analyzed is the costume. With comics being a visual medium one would be remiss to simply ignore the visual aspect they offer and only focus on narrative derived from a textual interpretation. The way superheroes have been visually adapted and presented has changed just as much as their continuities, and certain artists have set the stage for the way a character was to be portrayed for years to come, whether it be for better or worse. During the early 1990s Rob Liefeld was given lead of many comics and his artistic style of overly large muscular physiques with belt pouches covering the masculine characters and disproportionate hourglass bodies in the feminine characters that appeared to lack

spinal columns, stayed even after his departure from the titles. Another artist that gained notoriety, who is still wildly popular is Alex Ross. Through his Rockwellian painting style he strives to achieve a photo-realistic comic atmosphere that few jump to replicate, but instead offer minute changes to characters he has been given a cover or feature to. The subtle swoosh in a hairstyle or alteration of a logo in one of his covers has caused characters to be drawn with that change by other artists.. (Dooley, 65)

When one looks at costumes for insight there are often subtle clues that can be found. One of the major insights into the hidden elements of the visual nature of comics comes from Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* where he describes the view/placement of the body to that of calligraphy. By posing a figure in a certain way, visual clues are given to a message that words alone could not do. Additionally, the very bubble that text comes to us in can be used to decipher a feeling or mood, and when one would factor in the lettering style of words, another layer of depth is added. The Pows and Zaps of the Golden-Age heroes influenced the visual take of many television adaptations, an odd transition when one considers that the intent of such effects text was to allude to sound that the medium could not produce. When the “hokey-ness” of these standard effects became too prevalent workarounds and blended methods were developed to feature the sounds while keeping a higher immersion factor in the work.

The process can go in reverse, and artistic trends outside of comics have made their way into the form and affected the way superheroes are written. *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons illustrates how a movie style script can affect a graphic novel's story. Through panel placement the reader is carried through the narrative with cuts similar to those found in a film. The ending of chapter 11 and the start of chapter 12

are such examples of this. There is no text, merely small action followed by small action to illustrate the overwhelming qualities of a massive explosion and the aftermath that follows. Moore expressly wrote segments of *The Watchmen* with movie elements as a major influence. (Hatfield, 156)

Artists whose backgrounds fall outside the traditional comic superhero style have affected the development of heroes just as much as those who got their start in the industry. Many of these artists find themselves moving from CD Covers, character design, or storyboards to the world of comics and bring with them design traits that give characters a more illustrated or dynamic feel to them. (Talon, 42)

With all these changes to look and character qualities, it becomes difficult to define just how these superheroes continue to evoke an emotional response from fans. The essence of the current superhero is one that defies everything save for a small set of traits that support its monumental image and history. The look can change, the attitude, the medium, and age of the character can be altered but the superhero will remain identifiable and will be talked about by whatever audience its inception appeals to.

These superheroes adapt to whatever medium they're in, and take elements from it to heighten those skeletal pieces that make up their core. That core is most often based in a moral structure, a sense of duty or responsibility towards some end goal. For some heroes it is as simple as vengeance, for others it is reclaiming a lost life, yet there are those that merely do good because they feel they must. This concept of utilitarianism is pervasive amongst many heroes, but it is not the only philosophy that rules over the superhero scene. There are Kantian beliefs of following categorical

imperatives with the proper reasons behind them in order for an act to be deemed good. These nonconsequentialists would not hold Peter Parker or Clark Kent to task for hanging up their superhero costumes to pursue a full life with the women they love.

(Morris, 184-187)

Issues of morality are often settled swiftly, in the years since the decline of the comics code superheroes have begun to question their own place in society. This is not just in “alternative” forms such as *Watchmen*, *Kingdom Come*, and *Dark Knight Returns*, but in mainstream fare such as Superman, Captain America, and Wolverine. These superheroes are driven towards asking the question of why they do what they do and if they are correct in their actions. This dilemma is exacerbated by the origin of the superhero’s own villains. Most villains have a very similar origin to their archenemy, but instead of using their powers or traumatic event to turn their life towards one of crime fighting, they turn instead to a life of crime. (Fingerth 156-157)

So the Superman and Batman that fought crime without a moment of hesitation or afterthought now find themselves questioning their chosen lifestyle after so many years of dedication. Spider-Man is in his late twenties and married to a model and at the same time an angst filled teenager dating a teenage version of that same model. The accepted storylines include materials from interviews, articles, books, the comics themselves, and appearances on the big and small screen. The commanding order that decides what is canon is summed up perfectly by a quote from Warren Ellis’s *Authority* and Geoff Klock:

*“Don’t blame me, blame the planet that counts it. Consensus reality. Entire bloody century’s been run by the fish-head majority.” This “consensus*

*reality” is exactly what comic book continuity amounts to, as Ellis’s Authority are more than aware.”*

Superheroes stay current through adapting to the times by using the medium’s remarkable capacity to infuse “real” world events and characters with those of the fictional, they tap into the popular and reproduce what is relevant to the times, ensuring that every age has its own brand of superheroes that ultimately all share the same name and similar ideas, if little else.

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