An exhaustive and entertaining study of the superhero genre, SUPERHERO: THE SECRET ORIGIN OF A GENRE traces the roots of the superhero in mythology, science fiction, and the pulps, and follows the superhero's development to its current renaissance in film, literature, and graphic novels.

GRAPHIC NOVELS
US $15.95
$19.95 CAN

"Anyone who has a taste for fantasy-melodrama, or plain, old-fashioned escapism, can be entertained by super heroic deeds, in any medium. But for those who want more than entertainment, who want to go further, Mr. Coogan's work is immensely rewarding. Read his book and you will understand what makes the superhero unique, a genre unto itself, and understand exactly what superheroes are, and where they came from, and how they have evolved, and maybe where they're going."

DENNIS O'NEIL
from his Introduction

SUPERHERO: THE SECRET ORIGIN OF A GENRE PETER COOGAN



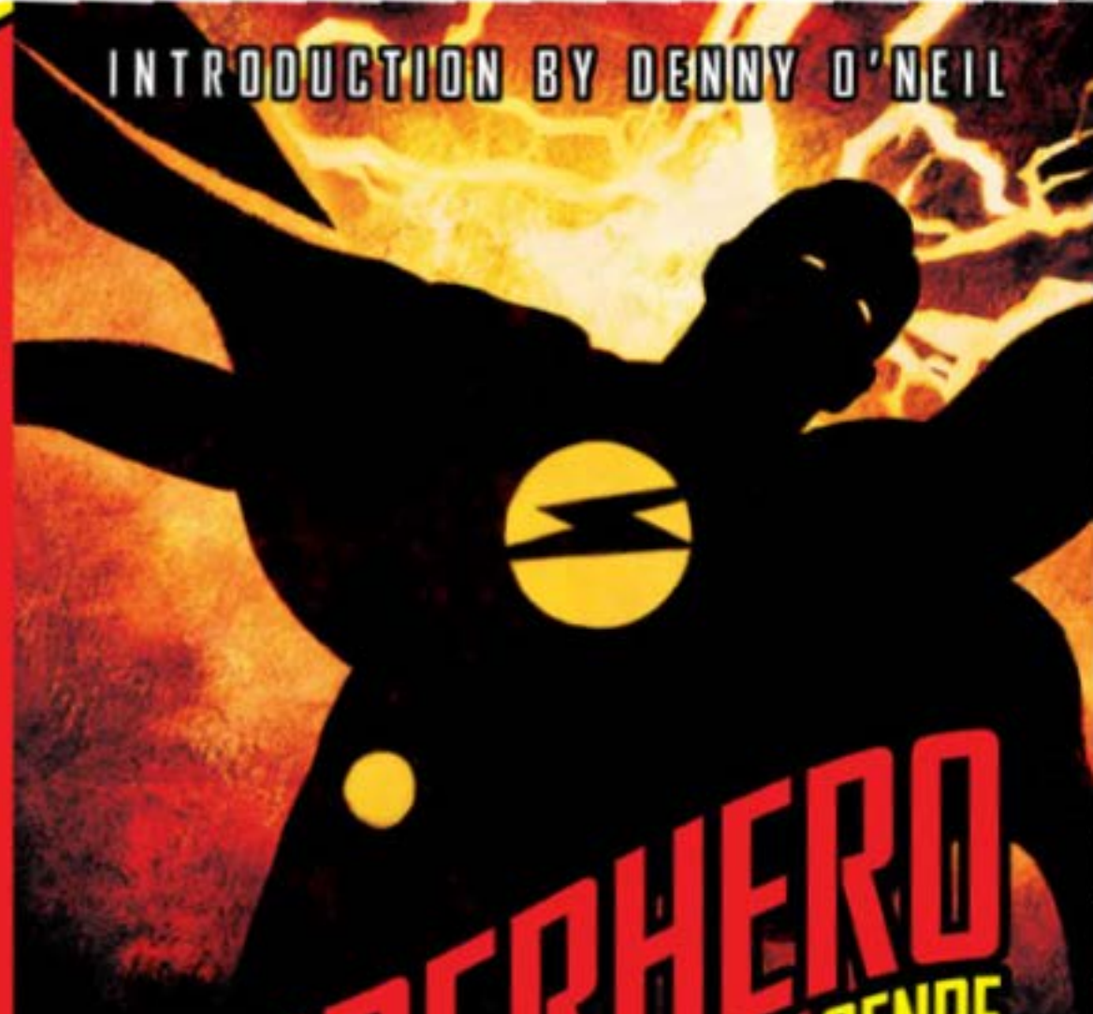
MONKEYBRAIN BOOKS
www.monkeybrainbooks.com

Cover Illustration & Design by
JOHN PICACIO

ISBN-13: 978-1-932265-18-7
ISBN-10: 1-932265-18-X
51595
9 781932 265187



INTRODUCTION BY DENNY O'NEIL



SUPERHERO
THE SECRET ORIGIN OF A GENRE
by PETER COOGAN

SUPERHERO:
The Secret Origin of a Genre

SUPERHERO
The Secret Origin of a Genre

Peter Coogan

Introduction by Dennis O'Neil



Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre
Copyright © 2006 Peter Coogan.

Introduction © 2006 Dennis O'Neil.

Cover illustration and design © 2006 John Picacio.

DC Characters: TM & © 2006 DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

Marvel Characters: TM & © 2006 Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

All other art and characters are TM and © their respective owners.

A MonkeyBrain Books Publication
www.monkeybrainbooks.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the publisher.

MonkeyBrain Books
11204 Crossland Drive
Austin, TX 78726
info@monkeybrainbooks.com

1-932265-18-X
978-1-932265-18-7

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements i

Author's Foreword iii

Introduction v

Chapter 1: The Superhero Renaissance 1

Chapter 2: The Superhero Genre 24

Chapter 3: The Definition of the Superhero 30

Chapter 4: The Supervillain 61

Chapter 5: The Roots in Myth, Epic, and Legend 116

Chapter 6: The Antediluvian Age 126

Chapter 7: Comics Predecessors 165

Chapter 8: The First Superhero 175

Chapter 9 : The Evolution of the Superhero 193

Chapter 10: The Superhero as Metaphor 231

Chapter 11: The Ideology of the Superhero 235

Works Cited 239

End Notes 253

Index 277

About the Author 290

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several people who contributed to my life-long love of the materials I discuss in this book or who introduced me to various authors and theorists whose work I discuss. First, my mother, who let me and my brothers buy comic books on a family trip to California when I was eight. Her parents didn't let her and her sister read comics when they were children, so she was giving her children something she had never had. My father, a geology professor at Kent State University, who got me a university library card when I was twelve. I used to cut out of Sunday school to go to the KSU library and check out Tarzan novels or read Golden Age comics in the Special Collections room.

My undergraduate advisor, Dr. Vera Camden, who asked me a fateful question when helping me fill in the "Area of Interest" blank on a form for graduate school at Kent State in the English Department. I couldn't settle on an area of academic interest, and these five words changed my life, "Why don't you study comics?" Dr. Marilyn Frye, who assigned Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* in a class on the theory and methodology of popular culture. Dr. Jack Nachbar, who introduced me to Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's vastly under-read and under-appreciated *The American Monomyth*. Dr. Michael Lopez, who suggested parallels between Batman and Robert Montgomery Bird's once popular but now ignored *Nick of the Woods*. Dr. Stephen Arch, who let me write on John Filson's narrative of Daniel Boone's life, *The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke*, instead of George Washington's letters. And Dr. Gary Hoppenstand, whose softball question on my comprehensive exams allowed me to work out a plan for my dissertation, a much-revised version of which you are now reading.

To get this book to the book stage, I have to thank Jess Nevins, for introducing me to MonkeyBrain Books publisher Chris Roberson; Win Scott Eckert for including me in the Wold-Newton book, *Myths for the Modern Age*; my Wold-Newton writing partner Dennis Power;

and Chris Roberson himself, for publishing it. I would also like to thank Randy Duncan, my co-chair at the Comics Arts Conference, which has provided me a public venue for working out my ideas; and Gary Sassaman, Fay Desmond, and the staff of the San Diego Comic-Con International for allowing us to put on the CAC every year. And Gina Misigiroli, editor of *The Supervillain Book*, for asking me to write the "Monologuing and Soliloquy" entry, which metastasized into the supervillain chapter, the longest chapter in the book.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Dr. Karla Armbruster, who doesn't read comics but who read the ream of paper that was my dissertation.

Author's Foreword

This book had its own secret origin as my dissertation. I got the first idea for it when I read Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* and realized that the stages of genre evolution that he put forward neatly matched the ages of superhero comics devised by comics fans. The plan that I developed for a master's thesis evolved into my dissertation. So the book is a revised version of my dissertation—about half my dissertation, with some added material.

On the other hand, this book is not several things. It is not—just to take a walk across my bookshelf—a semiological analysis the superhero, ala Scott Bukatman in *Matters of Gravity*; nor a social history of comic books and superhero comics, as in Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation*; nor a look at superheroes as myth, as in Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's *The Myth of the American Superhero*; nor a cultural analysis of one superhero, as in Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked*; nor an art historical analysis of the graphic design of superhero comic books, as in Arlen Schumer's *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art*; nor a multi-disciplinary critical approach to a superhero, as in Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio's *The Many Lives of the Batman;* nor an ethnography of comic book readers, as in Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Cultures*; nor a discussion of what superheroes tell us about ourselves, as in Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch*; nor the application of literary theory to superhero comics, as in Geoff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. Nor is it a "superheroes and" book of the sort that seems popular at the moment on superheroes and physics, science, philosophy, religion, spirituality, and so forth.

It is not, then, an attempt to address the way the superhero genre narratively animates and ritualistically resolves basic cultural conflicts and contradictions. That is, and I stress this point for reviewers of the book, it is not an examination or explanation of the *meaning* of the superhero genre.

Rather, because the vast majority of work on the superhero (protagonist of the superhero genre) takes the genre for granted, and the vast majority of work on the super hero (hero who is super)

ignores the superhero genre as a genre unto itself, this book is a look at that scholarly lacuna, an examination of the superhero genre as a genre.

In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* I examine how the superhero genre is used in various media (chapter 1), its definition, (chapters 2-3), the supervillain (chapter 4), its prehistory (chapters 5-7), its initiator (8), its evolution (9), how it is used as a metaphor (10), and, though I tried to resist it, a brief glance at its meaning (chapter 11).

What I hope the book is, in the end, is useful.

Introduction

If Peter Coogan had been around when I became professionally involved with comic books, about forty years ago, he would have been considered an eccentric and…well, maybe a figure of fun. Here he is, this personable, very bright young man with a fine education, which includes a doctorate, teaching at a respected institution of higher learning, and he's interested in…*comic books*!

The conventional wisdom, back then, was that at best comics were amusement for the barely literate and at worst a pernicious influence that was corrupting the nation's youth. Gilbert Seldes got it right when he wrote: "Of all the lively arts the Comic Strip is the most despised …Some twenty million people follow with interest, curiosity, and amusement the daily fortunes of five or ten heroes of the comic strip, and that they do this is considered by all those who have any pretensions to taste and culture as a symptom of crass vulgarity, of dullness, and, for all I know, of defeated and inhibited lives."

Notice, please, that Seldes was writing about comic *strips* which, *déclassé* though they may have been, at least appeared in reputable newspapers. But comic *books* were, if anything, even less reputable—the lurid stepchildren of the trashy pulp magazines that decent folk knew were not fit to wrap fish in. Wasn't it obvious? —the only reason the pictures were there was to aid the lip-moving readership in puzzling out the words. And hadn't publications like the *Hartford Courant* and the *Catholic Digest* and a lot—a *lot*—of others editorialized against them? And hadn't a New York psychiatrist named Frederick Wertham written a whole book demonstrating that comics were fostering the juvenile delinquency plaguing post-war America? And hadn't no less a personage than a genuine United States senator, the honorable Estes Kefauver, convened a hearing to investigate the corruptive influence of comic books?

Oh, there were always a few dissenting voices, such as Mr. Seldes, and a bit later Italy's Umberto Eco, who approached comics as a semiotician, and a bit later still Samuel R. Delany, who suggested that academics might find in comic books a new and rewarding area

of study. Then Messrs. Seldes, Eco, and Delany began to seem like prophets, as comics, like jazz and movies—or *film*, or *cinema,* if you prefer—gradually started to be recognized for what they had always been, a unique medium of communication and, in their best moments, an art form. We're no longer the bastard stepchildren of the creative community, we comics people. We are—heaven forefend—respectable. We are even *mainstream*.

Don't take my word for it. Go to your nearest big bookstore: if it's like mine, you'll find a section devoted to Graphic Novels, which are sometimes reprints of material that first appeared as plain old comic books and sometimes longer, more complex narratives that use comic book techniques. Or get your computer's search engine busy and you'll find a hefty number of serious works devoted to comics studies that will no doubt get heftier between the time I type these words and the time that you read them.

This book will surely be added to the list of histories and exegeses of comics, and rightfully so. But comics, *per se*, are not Peter Coogan's main concern. Rather, he examines the form's most prominent progeny, the superhero. He demonstrates that, first in Superman and then in his imitators, comics found their ideal subject and in comics these costumed demigods found their ideal means of expression, and the dialectic between form and content that Mr. Coogan describes, how one shapes and informs the other, is fascinating.

Superheroes did not remain long in the pulpy ghetto of comics publishing. They migrated from comics to other media very early in their existence. Superman was a radio show by 1940 and in Saturday afternoon theaters shortly thereafter, as were Captain Marvel, Batman and Captain America. The entertainments that featured them were not exactly A-list productions; rather, the early cinematic super doers appeared in serials—continued stories stretched out over nine, twelve, even fifteen installments, with an intended audience of children and meant to accompany other kids stuff, mostly cartoons and cheap westerns. Superman found his way into early television in the 1950s, and into big-screen, megabudget respectability in four theatrical films. Wonder Woman starred in her own television series in the 1970s. Batman, too, had been the lead character of a popular TV show, a serialized comedy that lampooned comic books and their conventions and spawned a quickie theatrical version in

1966. Batman later appeared in theaters in what was decidedly *not* a quickie, but a major production, which took the characters, their genre, and their world absolutely seriously. It was a huge hit that has had, at this writing, four sequels, all of them also successful. Since *Batman* appeared in 1989, there have been big screen renditions of Spider-Man, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four, and The Punisher, all born in the pages of comics. Many, many more are on the way.

I haven't mentioned Saturday morning cartoons, after-school cartoons, novels, advertising tie-ins…But I don't have to. It's obvious to any interested party that Superman has become an international icon, and a number of his successors are almost equally well known.

Anyone who has a taste for fantasy-melodrama, or plain, old-fashioned escapism, can be entertained by super heroic deeds, in any medium. But for those who want more than entertainment, who want to go further, Mr. Coogan's work is immensely rewarding. Read his book and you will understand what makes *the superhero* unique, a genre unto itself, and understand exactly what superheroes are, and where they came from, and how they have evolved, and maybe where they're going.

Nothing in this book contradicts my long experience with the practical aspects of laboring to create superhero stories, and much of it augments that experience. My understanding—and, yes, my appreciation—of what I've been doing all these years is deepened. That's one reason I'm grateful to Peter Coogan. There are others. You'll probably find your own reasons for gratitude in the pages that follow.

Dennis O'Neil
December, 2005
Nyack, N.Y.

Chapter 1
The Superhero Renaissance

The superhero is going through a renaissance in the early twenty-first century. After a dark age of anti-heroes like the Punisher and the death of superheroes like Superman and Captain Marvel, superheroes are back—back on the big screen, in literary fiction, and in graphic novels that reach beyond the melodrama of the 1960s to tell human stories of superhuman beings.

In comics, this renaissance has its roots in two central texts of the adult treatment of the superhero—Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1985) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *The Watchmen* (1986). These two works, particularly the treatment of Rorschach in *Watchmen*, opened the superhero up to a more complex psychological approach and demonstrated that a more adult, serious readership existed for superhero narratives. The influence of *Dark Knight* on Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and the rumored *Watchmen* film promised a surge of movies that respected their comic-book origins. But the *Watchmen* film never materialized, the Batman franchise fizzled into camp after two films, Marvel Comics' film rights were locked in legal limbo, and superhero cinema seemed dead. Likewise in the comic books, less visionary imitators picked up the grim-and-gritty surface of Moore and Miller's deconstruction of the superhero but failed to deliver on the psychological complexity of Rorschach and the older Bruce Wayne, and a dark age descended on the superhero. Further, after a flurry of media interest in the graphic novel—abetted by Art Spiegelman's masterpiece *Maus*—the comics industry failed to deliver stories that grabbed the interest of the general public and media reviewers. The speculation bubble of the late 1980s and early 1990s burst, and it seemed that the comics industry and the superhero were on hard times.

But those days seem to be behind us. The superhero is the current golden boy of Hollywood. *X-Men* (2000) earned $150 million at the box office, and comics fans' reaction to the film was, "It didn't suck," which was meant as high praise after the disastrous *Batman & Robin* (1997) made it seem as if Hollywood was simply incapable of

producing good superhero movies and was insensible to superhero fans' desires. The Spider-Man films and *X2* followed, and despite detours such as *Daredevil*, *The Hulk*, and *Catwoman* it seemed as if Hollywood had solved the problem of adapting superheroes from the page to the screen. *The Incredibles* showed that original superhero fare—even from a writer/director who claimed not to read comic books—could be just as good as films based on forty years of accumulated stories.

What made the change? Technology played an important role. Obviously, advances in computer-generated imagery made superhero fights and powers look as realistic and seamlessly integrated as they do on the comic page. Costuming improved vastly as well—one only has to compare the Spider-suit worn by Nicholas Hammond in the failed TV show of the late 1970s to the one worn by Tobey Maguire to realize how far costumes have come in twenty years. But perhaps more important than technology is respect for the source material. Although the Superman and Batman television shows from the 1950s and 1960s clearly reflected the comic books of their times, the producers did not draw too deeply on their source material and do not seem to have had deep personal connections to the characters—they obviously could not have grown up reading comics, but they also did not have the attachment to the heroes' stories that creators such as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster did. The story is different today. Successful superhero cinema tends to come from directors and writers who express and demonstrate respect for the source material.

The first superhero film to embody this sort of respect was *Superman: The Movie*, although the respect seems to have been an accident. Producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind planned the first two Superman films as a single production, as they had their earlier pair of films, *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers*. The accidental respect arose from hiring comic book fan Richard Donner as director due to his success on *The Omen*. Donner rejected campy aspects of scriptwriter Mario Puzo's original screenplay and shaped the film into a classic evocation of an American icon. Donner was fired in part for arguing against the Salkinds' campy vision of the character, which is clear from the treatment afforded the last son of Krypton in the parts of *Superman II* shot by replacement director Richard Lester and the wreckage of *Superman III* and *Superman IV*.

Camp killed the franchise and prevented Superman from developing along the profitable lines of the James Bond model—a new film every few years and a new star every decade.

The respect accorded Batman in the Tim Burton-directed films was no accident, but unfortunately it was not due to any wisdom at Warner Brothers. Even before the Superman film was envisioned, Michael Uslan, a comic book writer and longtime fan, had a vision of a Batman film that was true to the dark origins of the character and to the best of the Batman comics—the Batman before Robin and the Dark Knight Detective who emerged in response to the campy Adam West television show. Uslan gained the film rights to Batman in 1979 and spent a decade fighting to realize it. Though Tim Burton satisfactorily brought Uslan's Batman to the screen, Burton was no Donner. He even bragged, in reference to a charge that he had stolen his ending for *Planet of the Apes* from a Kevin Smith comic book, "Anybody that knows me knows I do not read comic books" (Johnson 6). Then, as had happened with Superman, camp killed the Batman franchise as Joel Schumacher took over and nearly buried the superhero film forever.

But just a few years after Schumacher's disastrous *Batman & Robin*, superhero cinema sprung back to life with *The X-Men*, a serious and respectful treatment of Marvel's mutants. Marvel had seen disaster with licensed versions of Captain America and the Fantastic Four—the latter so bad that it was never released—and under Avi Arad, CEO of Marvel Studios and a fan himself, Marvel took a much more directive hand in its films. *X-Men* director Bryan Singer—hired on the heels of his critically acclaimed *Usual Suspects*—knows how to balance Hollywood's desire for big profits with the fans' desires for fidelity to the characters. A technique Singer uses to satisfy both the general audience encountering the X-Men for the first time and the comics fans who know the characters is to fill the film with inside jokes and obscure references to the characters and history of the X-Men. Of this technique Singer says, "To a non-fan, it's just texture. To a fan, it's a very special moment. By just adding that, it all makes sense in the universe" (Pille 2003).

The success of the X-films seems to have taught Hollywood a lesson; as Michael Uslan put it, "There's no point in doing a 'comic book movie,' if you are going to ignore decades of history and mythology and create something out of a whole new cloth just for

the sake of creating something out of whole new cloth" (Ramey 2005). In fact, Uslan thinks we are in a "Golden Age of comic book movies" because Hollywood has learned that comic book movies are not a film genre but instead comics are an "ongoing source of stories and characters the same way screenplays and plays and novels are," and that comic books no longer automatically mean superheroes: "They finally understand, thanks to *Road to Perdition*, thanks to *Men in Black*, thanks to *Constantine* and *Sin City*, that no matter what you're looking for—war, Western, humor, horror, fantasy—you can find it in the comic books." Uslan locates this sea change in a generational shift, "The new generation of execs, agents and the talent pool are people who grew up with comics, they respect comics, they respect the artists and the writers and the editors," and so they can treat the characters with respect and integrity (Douglas 2005, part 2) .

The result seems to be an influx of comics fans into the roles of director, writer, and sometimes—though this last is purely coincidental—actor. Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man*), Michael Chabon (*Spider-Man 2*), Tim Story (*Fantastic Four*), and David Goyer (*Batman Begins*) are all vocal proponents of comics and superheroes and all have shown that they can stay true to the characters' roots and still make money. Though actors cast for superhero roles get them for the usual reasons—Jessica Alba's appeal as Susan Storm is obvious—actors who are comics fans like Nick Cage (Ghost Rider) or Michael Chiklis (The Thing) proclaim their geeky pasts and sometimes fight to get their roles because of their desire to embody the heroes they love.[1]

Further, the studios seem to have evolved a sense of trust in talented artists to work with the source material. David Goyer, scriptwriter on *Batman Begins*, recalls working with director Christopher Nolan,

> Batting ideas around thinking there's no way they're going to let us do this. Not that we were breaking any great rules, but it just seemed like we were doing the sort of story that I certainly had always wanted to see. And DC and Warner Bros. were great. They just embraced it. It's actually the best experience I've ever had working with a studio because they truly trusted us and just said, "You guys know what you're doing. We're going to let you run with it." (Murray 2005, part 1).

Nolan, who is not a comics reader, felt such a sense of responsibility to the character and history of Batman for the material that he specifically brought in Goyer to co-write the script because of Goyer's expertise in comics, and as a sign of respect for fan opinion. Nolan explained, "You know that you're never going to please every individual interpretation of what Batman should be, but I felt strongly that what fans needed to see in a Batman film was somebody's most sincere attempt to convey the greatness of the character on film" (Axmaker 2005).

The idea of appealing to the fans, of the fans having a legitimate stake in the production of superhero films, has become commonplace in the marketing buildup to the release of films, whether it be Kirstin Dunst or Jessica Alba assuring the fans they are going to dye their hair appropriately to play redhead Mary Jane Watson or blonde Sue Storm, or Michael Chiklis discussing his visit to the San Diego Comic-Con International in an interview with the fan site *ComicBookMovie.com*:

> Yeah, and then when I went to Comic-Con it was just an eye-opener for me, it was just like, WOW! Some of these folks really put the FAN in fanatic. Just watching Imperial Storm Troopers walk past; folks are into it. It was a little daunting actually, because it made me go, well, you know what, I've got a major responsibility here to these fans. (Littler 2005).

Even with terrible films that do not stay true to the material there still seems to be an obligation to stress a respect for the fans' vision of the material. During a panel on the Fantastic Four film at the San Diego Comic-Con International, Marvel Pictures' head Avi Arad showed a brief video featuring fight scenes from *Elektra* with Jennifer Garner in costume. In a clip, Garner claims, "We're doing this for the fans. We really only want the praise of a select group of people, the ones who grew up reading *Elektra*. I don't want to screw this up!" (Tabu 2004). Screw it up they did, but the fact that the producers felt obligated to woo the fans indicates some respect for fans and their

opinions, if only as a form of word-of-mouth marketing.

In fact, the San Diego Comic-Con International has become an important place to gauge fan reaction and to generate buzz. David Goyer explains:

> Comic Con has become the place to sort of initially mount a campaign, whether it's for a comic book announcement, a video game, a genre film. So it made sense [to do a panel on *Batman Begins*]. And I think had we not had a presence here it would have been a kind of glaring omission. And I think first and foremost everyone would have been, "Are they trying to hide something?" (Murray 2004, part 2).

San Diego's proximity to Hollywood may ease the logistics of putting on these presentations, but being able to expose tens of thousands of motivated and interested people to a film—whether in the planning, production, or release stage—and flatter them with inside information, advance footage, and the opportunity to meet the film's stars and creative personnel makes Comic-Con an economical way of producing buzz among the people most likely to buy tickets and promote the film to their friends and on the Web.

Respect for the material comes through superhero films in another way. When a novel is adapted into a film, there is a specific text against which the film can be judged. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is a fairly literal translation of the first Potter novel. The film can be compared to the novel and the relationship between the two provides a concrete basis for evaluation. Even when a film greatly reworks the setting, characters, and themes of a novel—as *Apocalypse Now* does with its source *Heart of Darkness*—there is still congruence between the two because both are discrete, specific texts. But superhero films are not based on specific texts. Tim Burton's *Batman* is not a film adaptation of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*; instead it draws upon fifty years of comics history. The difference between the first two fairly successful Batman films and the second two less successful films—and the basis of successful superhero cinema generally—is the use of resonant tropes.

Every superhero, particularly the ones who have been around for decades, has certain tropes—familiar and repeated moments, iconic

images and actions, figures of speech, patterns of characterization—that have resonance; that is they embody or symbolize some aspect of the character, and have gained this resonance through repeated use by storytellers. For Batman, one of these moments occurs during his origin, when the robber reaches for Martha Wayne's pearls.



Batman #1 © 1940 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

In the original telling, the pearl grab serves purely narrative purposes. It provides the threat that drives Thomas Wayne to defend his wife and the robber to fire his pistol in response. Over the years this moment was repeated in the retellings of Batman's origin. Frank Miller in *Dark Knight* magnified this incident and gave it greater resonance.



Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1© 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Miller plays the scene in slow motion, and the pearls spill off this broken strand. The spilled pearls represent Bruce Wayne's shattered childhood. Tim Burton's *Batman* retains this trope and plays it for the same effect, and it has remained a resonant trope in the subsequent retellings of Batman's origin.

Superhero films can also change the details, but retain the

resonance of the character's tropes. The Fortress of Solitude in *Superman: The Movie* is a crystalline palace, reminiscent of the film's crystal world of Krypton, and yet just like the comic book version of the Fortress with its big yellow door and giant key, trophy room, and bottled city of Kandor, the movie Fortress fulfills the trope of providing Superman with a miniature version of his home planet.

In a like manner, the film's treatment of Krypton became a new resonant trope and prompted a feedback loop into the comics. The Krypton of the film is a barren, inorganic, crystal world, a far cry from Jerry Siegel's homier, futuristic, old-country Krypton of the Silver Age. But this barren world became the trope adopted by John Byrne when he re-imagined the Superman mythos after the *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. In Byrne's vision, Krypton was not a crystal world, but a rocky, alien, and inhospitable world in which children had to be born in incubation chambers. This sense of Krypton as truly alien is another new resonant trope that emerged from the first Superman film. When Jor-El tells Lara that he will send their son to Earth, Lara responds "But why Earth, Jor-El? They're primitive, thousands of years behind us." Jor-El sees advantages in sending Kal-El to Earth as he will gain superpowers there and look like the inhabitants. But, Lara retorts, "He won't *be* one of them...he will be odd, different...isolated, alone." The image Lara has of Kal-El's life on Earth indicates how different Krypton is from Earth. She believes her son will be radically separate from human beings. This vision of the radical separateness of Earth and Krypton had previously only been expressed by Ro-Zan, a member of Krypton's ruling Council of One Hundred in George Lowther's 1942 novel *The Adventures of Superman* but it was used in the novel to make Ro-Zan unsympathetic, a haughty official who could declare, "Death is preferable to life in a world of such inferior people" (11). It is quite a different thing to have Lara expressing these sentiments. Lowther's vision of Kryptonian superiority did not catch on with comics creators and faded as *The Adventures of Superman* fell out of print. The profound sense of alienation expressed by Ro-Zan and the movie version of Lara does fit with the frustration expressed by Hugo Danner in Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, one of the inspirations for Superman, at his inability to find a field of endeavor in which to exercise his superpowers. But the alienness of Krypton did not become a trope in Superman comics until the film

reintroduced the idea and John Byrne picked up on it.

Byrne intensifies Lara's concern over Kal-El's future on Earth into a loathing fear of the primitive planet. Lara says of the Kansas farmer whose image Jor-El has just shown her to indicate where their child will go, "Th-that savage! He…he bares his naked flesh… his hairy flesh…bares it to the air! He…touches unprocessed soil! Oh, Jor-El, what kind of hell do you seek to send our child into?" (*Man of Steel* #1 1986, 6).

Byrne returns to this vision of Krypton as alien with Jor-El's frightening appearance to a young Superman.



Man of Steel #6 © 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Superman here expresses a tension that will become a resonant trope in the coming years: that exposure to Krypton, allegiance to Krypton, makes him less human. Superman processes the infusion of images and concludes, "The message of Jor-El is clear, my birthright lies in the stars!", but then he rejects this "last gift of Jor-El to his son" as "meaningless" because "it was Earth that gave me all that I am. All that matters" (*Man of Steel* #6 1986, 21-22). In the post-Crisis era, Krypton and its value systems seemed inimical to the America Clark Kent grew up in. Clark identifies with Earth, and Krypton's alienness served to bind him to his adopted planet. In the close of Byrne's *Man of Steel* series introducing the new, post-Crisis version of the character, Superman says, "I may have been **conceived** out there in the endless depths of space…but I was **born** when the rocket opened on **Earth**, in **America**" (#6 1986, 22). The trope of the alien and hostile Krypton remained in the comics version of Superman until Jeph Loeb in "Fathers" (*Superman* #166, March 2001) reincorporated this new vision into the old one by proposing that Jor-El implanted false memories and visions of Krypton in his

son's birthing matrix to prevent Kal-El from suffering the emotional maelstrom of remembering his lost birth-world. But the alien Krypton was retained in both television shows *Lois and Clark* and *Smallville* and the theme of Superman having to choose between his homey, humble, wholesome Clark Kent identity and his alien, superior, and threatening Kal-El identity, and the consequent allegiance to either Earth or Krypton, became the focus for a long story arc on the first show and a central tension of the second.

Another aspect of successful adaptation of superheroes from comics to film is concision. Mary Jane Watson in *Spider-Man* is a composite of several characters from the Spider-Man comics. She comprises the roles of Liz Allen as Flash Thompson's high-school girlfriend, Betty Brant as Peter Parker's first girlfriend, Gwen Stacy as the kidnap victim of the Green Goblin, and Mary Jane Watson herself as an actress and the object of romantic competition for Peter and Harry Osborne. The film thus retains a version of each of the romantic relationships Peter Parker experienced in the first decade of Spider-Man's history, all rolled into one character.

Similarly, in *Batman* the robber who kills Thomas and Martha Wayne—traditionally identified as Joe Chill—is re-imagined as Jack Napier, who later goes on to become the Joker. On the steps of Gotham City Hall, Bruce Wayne spots the resemblance between his parents' murderer and the Joker as the mad clown kills a rival mobster. Later during their climactic fight in the bell tower of a cathedral, the Joker himself makes the same connection, telling Batman, "You made me, remember? You dropped me into that vat of chemicals." Batman agrees, but adds that since the Joker murdered his parents, "I made you, you made me first." Folding together the murderer of the Waynes and the Joker gives a dramatic unity to the Batman film and helps the story loop back on itself. This concision makes for good storytelling, but it has not fed back into the comics, which have to maintain continuity with the earlier versions of the characters and their stories.

Failed adaptations abandon the resonant tropes built up over years of storytelling. In *The Hulk* (2003), Bruce Banner's transformation into the Hulk is linked to an experiment on the human immune system and cellular regeneration conducted by Dr. Brian Banner, the effects of which only come to fruition when his son Bruce grows up to conduct similar experiments and is caught in

a gamma-radiation accident. A contemporary movie could not use the Cold War atmosphere and the open-air nuclear testing of the Hulk's comic book origin, so clearly changes had to be made to bring the movie up to date. But the original transformation of Bruce Banner comes about because Banner decides to rescue Rick Jones, who has driven out on the atomic testing range on a dare. Banner instructs his assistant Igor to delay the detonation while he saves the teenager. But Igor—a Soviet mole—lets the test go forward so that Banner will be killed, enabling Igor to steal the gamma bomb for the U.S.S.R.



The Incredible Hulk #1 © 1962 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Banner's act of selfless heroism turns superpowers from a blessing into a curse, an innovation of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the Silver Age. Without that heroic sacrifice, the Hulk is just a monster, and so the Hulk film is not a superhero film but a monster movie. Ang Lee imposed a vision on the Hulk material that takes it out of the superhero genre, and in so doing undermines the genesis of the Hulk. As Stan Lee put it, "Think of the challenge it would be to make a hero out of a monster" (Lee 1974, 75). But Ang Lee did not take up that challenge, and did not make a superhero movie; as he said, "I think *The Hulk* is different. It's a monster movie. The Hulk doesn't have a cause and he doesn't come out to save the world; he's not a superhero—he's a monster who comes out to make a mess (Sever 2003). Abandoning the central resonant trope—the hero who is a monster—removes the core of the character, abandons what drew both the Hulk's creators and fans to him, and betrays the Hulk in service of a failed vision.

The problem faced in removing the Hulk's origin from its Cold War context is one that bedevils adaptations of Marvel superheroes

generally. The origins of DC heroes tend to be fairly timeless—Krypton can blow up in any decade and street crime in Gotham will always be out of control—and so filmmakers can retain the resonant tropes of the DC heroes' origins. With some Marvel heroes the updating actually improves the story, as with the genetic alterations of the spider that bit Peter Parker in place of the original unspecified radiation. The Fantastic Four film faced this problem but, unlike the Hulk film, retained enough resonance to be successful. In the comics, Reed Richards, Sue Storm, Ben Grimm, and Johnny Storm steal a rocket that lacks adequate shielding to protect the crew from the unknown effects off cosmic rays in order to win the space race against the communists. The four risk their lives for patriotic reasons. In the film, they similarly risk their lives to perform experiments in a cosmic ray shower with the noble hope of curing disease, but both Richards and Victor von Doom seek financial gain—Richards to stave off bankruptcy and Doom to bolster his already impressive balance sheet. This shift in motive risks undermining the sacrifice of risking inadequate shields and shifting the heroism of that sacrifice to a hubristic carelessness. The heroes are victims of a tragic accident instead of being patriotic pioneers who advance the frontiers of knowledge before the nation's enemies can do so. Conversely the film improves on the comic-book origin by offering a realistic reason for Sue Storm—a brilliant scientist instead of a mere girlfriend—and her brother Johnny—an ace pilot instead of a pesky kid—to accompany Richards and Grimm on the mission. But perhaps more importantly in a visual medium, the film retains the trope of the cosmic rays penetrating the ship.



Fantastic Four #1 © 1961 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Resonant tropes are not limited to superhero origins. One of the

central tropes of the Fantastic Four that pushed Marvel ahead of DC in the Silver Age was the pathos of the Thing's creation. Prior to the Fantastic Four, superpowers had consistently been portrayed as an unproblematic blessing. The Thing was the first superhero for whom powers were a burden, a cost to be paid. Ben Grimm was trapped in the Thing's body; he was the hero you did not want to be. The pathos of the character is captured brilliantly in the cover to *Fantastic Four* #58 (1966) by Jack Kirby:



Fantastic Four #51 © 1966 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The film retained this trope and Michael Chiklis in his portrayal of Ben Grimm captured the tragic vision of the Silver Age Fantastic Four—superpowers are not a blessing but a burden. Heroism emerges from sacrifice and Ben Grimm is the sacrificial goat of the foursome—Reed, Sue, and Johnny can all turn their powers on and off, they could have secret identities if they chose. The Thing—his very name marks him as inhuman—can only wear an overcoat and slouch hat to hide his hideousness. The film version kept the most telling trope of Ben Grimm's transformation—the reversal of his condition leaves him powerless to save his friends and he must become the Thing again without hope of recovery, but this time by choice. Thus the Thing's irreversible otherness is a sign for superheroism—a willing exile from humanity in order to serve humanity. Lee and Kirby originated this trope of the superhero genre, and producers of the film rightly retained it.

Not all resonant tropes come from comics of decades ago. A new resonant trope can develop whenever a creator finds a way to embody a character or a relationship between characters in an image. Most resonant tropes in comics originate in single images—whether panels or covers—that encode a great deal of meaning. A new resonant

trope that has emerged in the post-Crisis world of DC Comics is the image of Superman floating outside Lex Luthor's office window high above the streets of Metropolis. The Luthor Tower represents Lex Luthor's power over Metropolis. He rules the city from on high, no one is above him. But Superman has a superior power, independent of Luthor that Luthor cannot control and cannot affect. Thus the image of Superman floating outside Luthor's window embodies their relationship—the struggle to represent Metropolis. And it is a malleable trope, able to be presented from either Superman's point of view—Luthor as the corrupt businessman lording over the city—or Luthor's—Superman as the false prophet and threatening alien who will crush humanity's spirit.



Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #1 © 2005 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The contemporary superhero renaissance has flourished outside the traditional media of comics and film. While serious treatments of superheroes have been done in comics like *Watchmen*, *Miracleman*, and *Marvels*, these have primarily been analyses of the superhero genre focusing on the meaning of the superhero and so have limited universality as literature and limited appeal to the larger public or the audience for serious literary fiction.

But in recent years the superhero has emerged as a controlling metaphor in literary fiction. A central conceit of the superhero genre is the superhero's metaphoric nature. In the superhero genre itself, superheroes stand as metaphors for freedom—the freedom to act without consequences and the freedom from the restrictions of gravity, the law, families, and romantic relationships. Perhaps this is why so many superheroes are free of their families as unmarried adult orphans. Superheroes are also a metaphor for efficacy—they can accomplish anything they set out to do—and they are often used

in this sense in advertising.

The superhero origin is a metaphor for adolescence—a boy becomes a man, figuratively in the case of Peter Parker and Spider-Man and literally in the case of Billy Batson and Captain Marvel. Specific heroes take on specific metaphoric meaning. The Superman/Lois Lane/Clark Kent triangle is easily read as a metaphor for adolescent boys' conflicted feelings about girls—if the girls could only see the true man behind the nerdy façade, they would flock to the skinny, social outcast. Captain America stands as a metaphor for patriotism—particularly in WWII—and its doubts—particularly in the immediate post-Watergate era when Steve Rogers abandoned his flag-clad identity and took off to explore America as the Nomad. The X-Men are ready metaphors for adolescent alienation and also for bigotry, standing in for any "other," whether racial, ethnic, sexual, or foreign. The Hulk makes a neat metaphor for male potency—when soft, flabby, small Bruce Banner gets excited he swells into the hard, strong, large Hulk, a walking erection.

In literary fiction this metaphoric malleability is put to use as a device for developing character. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), Michael Chabon matches his characters to superheroes and comments on the character through the metaphoric nature of the super-self. Comics artist Joe Kavalier is matched to the Escapist. Kavalier is constantly escaping, both literally and figuratively. He escapes from Prague before the Nazis annex Czechoslovakia, he escapes death in Antarctica, he escapes romantic entanglements, he escapes into his art, ever isolating himself until the end of the novel when he abandons this isolation to accept domestic responsibilities as father and husband. Comics writer Sammy Clay plays the role of sidekick to his handsome and talented cousin Joe and to Tracy Bacon—star of the Escapist radio program, who himself embodies both the child secret identity of Tom Mayflower and the adult superhero the Escapist. Bacon dubs Sammy, "Clayboy," and Sammy's polio-withered legs draw on the similar disabilities of Freddy (Captain Marvel Jr.) Freeman and Dr. Donald (Thor) Blake. Sammy breaks free of this sidekick role in the end to go to Hollywood and pursue a writing career of his own, free of the shadows of his cousin Joe and his pulp mentor George Deasey, whom he served as a ghostwriter. Rosa Saks, Joe's girlfriend and later Sammy's wife, is matched with Luna Moth, a superheroine

who has "only to imagine something to make it so" (272). Rosa is an artist who creates dreambooks that tell stories through collage—she uses imagination to turn reality into art; Luna Moth creates reality out of her imagination. Luna Moth's sexual attractiveness—Chabon based her on Golden Age good girls like the Phantom Lady—has a great effect on the male readers of her comic book, a metaphor for Rosa's own sexual attractiveness for Joe and the other comic book artists.

In a larger sense, Chabon uses superhero comics' status as escapist literature to explore the value of escapism as a form of literary experience and appreciation, and to expound on American identity, through a series of analogies, each one of which reinforces and comments on the others: comics is to art as the immigrant is to the native-born, as queer is to straight, as Jews are to Christians, as the secret identity is to the superhero. A final analogous pairing is at the heart of the novel, escapist entertainment and literary fiction. The novel itself illustrates the way that the marginalized element in each pairing deserves respect and consideration from the mainstream element because of its intrinsic value or contribution to the larger whole. The richness of *Kavalier and Clay* comes from the depth of the plunge into Golden Age comics—crude, formulaic, simple as they might have been. *Kavalier and Clay* is literary fiction—a claimant to the title of "great American novel"—yet it rests on a bed of escapism. Likewise, America is at its best when the mainstream admits the marginal and becomes enriched by it—what would America be without the Jew, the immigrant, the queer, the comics? The marginal infuses the mainstream with life—what would Superman be without Clark Kent?

Chabon deals directly with the issue of escapism and the value of escapist entertainment. The comic-book artist Joe Kavalier considers, "the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*... [as] a powerful argument on their behalf" (575). He suffers a number of losses—of family, country, friends, identity—and the "pain of his loss...was always with him...a cold smooth ball lodged in his chest, just below his sternum," but after the war while "reading *Betty and Veronica*, the icy ball had melted away without him even noticing. *That* was magic...the genuine magic of art" and yet such art was universally despised by the arbiters in the 1950s (576). Following WWII, Joe

returns to New York and hides himself in the Empire State Building while producing a 2,256 page comic book, *The Golem*, that allows him to heal and to return to his rejected love Rosa and his never-seen son, Tommy. The Golem is a project to demonstrate the "power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression," the elusive goal of artists from Windsor McKay and George Herriman to Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman—comics as art (579).

The golem is itself a metaphor for art—whether mimetic or escapist, and the golem-maker for the artist:

> In literature and folklore, the significance and fascination of golems… lay in their soullessness, in their tireless inhuman strength, in their metaphorical association with overweening human ambition, and in the frightening ease with which they passed beyond the control of their horrified and admiring creators. But it seemed to Joe that none of these—Faustian hubris, least of all—were among the true reasons that impelled men, time after time, to hazard the making of golems. The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something—one poor, dumb, powerful thing—exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. (582)

All art is an attempt to reach beyond the self, to connect with another. And art offers its reader or viewer entrance into another's being, another's world, and hence escape from one's own, at least for a time. Hence, all art is escapist at some level. And Joe feels the charge of escapism is therefore invalid:

> The newspaper articles that Joe had read about the upcoming Senate investigation into comic books always cited 'escapism' among the litany of injurious consequences of their reading,

> and dwelled on the pernicious effect, on young minds, of satisfying the desire to escape. As if there could be any more noble or necessary service in life. (582)

Art—whether serious or comic, realistic or escapist, painting, literature, comics, or film—is thus a worthy pursuit. Chabon could have told his epic story and dealt with many of the same themes using similarly quintessential American art forms such as jazz, Hollywood movies, or baseball, but he chose comics—superhero comics—perhaps because of the threat they once seemed to embody. The bonfires of the 1950s in which comic books were indiscriminately hurled have too many parallels to the ovens of Auschwitz, the lynchings of the Klan, or the hate-crime crucifixion of Matthew Shepard. Prejudice against the marginalized manifests itself in many ways, and by building literary fiction from the detritus of escapism Chabon argues for tolerance, a tolerance embodied in the American creed based in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—a tolerance that like superhero comics is organically American.

Other leading writers similarly pull on superhero comics for metaphorical resonance. Jonathan Lethem draws on Superman's Fortress of Solitude in his appropriately titled *Fortress of Solitude* as a metaphor for childhood. The protagonist Dylan Edbus escapes into comics from his threatening childhood in Brooklyn in the 1970s. As an adult music journalist and reviewer, he similarly escapes into the rock and roll of his youth and the preceding generation, living in a fetishistic nostalgia for the cultural products of the past. He cannot connect with other people generally nor commit to women specifically; he uses his traumatic childhood as a shield against intimacy. His childhood is his Fortress of Solitude, he escapes to it as Superman did to his—to live among the relics of his past, frozen away from the confusion of contemporary adulthood.

Rick Moody in *The Ice Storm* (1994) uses Fantastic Four comics as an alternative universe of reference for the teenage children of a dysfunctional family in an affluent but suffocating and vapid Connecticut suburb in 1973. Wendy Hood, a fourteen-year-old girl just beginning to explore her sexuality, is caught by her father in a neighbor's basement with a boy. As she and her father walk home on the slushy December streets, Wendy struggles to comprehend

a world that seems to reject meaning, she "wanted to know why conversations failed and how to teach compassion and why people fell out of love and she wanted to know it all by the time she got back to the house....Wendy wanted her father to make restitution for his own confusion and estrangement and drunkenness" (50-51). Instead of making these demands on her father, she responds to him with warmth when he lifts her off her frozen feet and carries her the last quarter mile to home, "she thought it was fine. She would put off her journey to the Himilayan kingdom of the Inhumans for now. She would stay with her family for now" (51). The Inhumans offer her a fantasy model of meaning, belonging, and identity—a metaphorical family she could flee to.

For her brother Paul, the Marvel Universe itself offers a refuge of meaning and connection. In Marvel comics, "events were linked" and

> *The Submariner* #67 was folded between two panels in *F.F.* #140, which itself contained information primarily available in *F.F.* annual #6. The imaginary world and its inhabitants coexisted with the so-called real inhabitants of the so-called real world.... In the world of Marvel, his parents were off exposing the malfeasance of a local political figure whose daughter was the girl Paul would one day marry, while his sister, meanwhile, was seducing an art collector and amateur nuclear physicist who would one day be Paul's employer. (83-84)

Paul goes on to weave several more residents of his town into this fantasy of continuity—a world unified and therefore meaningful in a way that the messiness of the quotidian world cannot match. For both siblings the Marvel Universe offers a model that the real world fails to live up to.

The real world, though, is the place that superhero comics never seemed to explore. How would it feel to be an ordinary person living in the Marvel or DC Universe? Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons took on this idea to some degree in *Watchmen*, but it was Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross' *Marvels* (1994) that gave birth to the subgenre of "bystander stories."[2]

Bystander stories decentralize the superhero. The bystander protagonists are generally not members of the hero's supporting cast—these stories are different from those told in *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* or *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* or stories of Pa Kent gaining superpowers—in those stories the title characters are centrally involved in the superhero action. In bystander stories, the tellers (and usually these stories are told in the first person) are peripheral to the superhero action; they are witnesses to it, but usually to only a small part of it. *Marvels* tells the story of the Marvel Universe from the perspective of news photographer Phil Sheldon, who took pictures of many of the major events of the Marvel Universe, from the unveiling of the Human Torch in 1939 to the death of Gwen Stacy in 1973.



Marvels © 1994 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The cover to the *Marvels* trade paperback perfectly captures the way bystander stories help to reconstruct the superhero genre and bring it to life. The cover features Phil Sheldon behind the camera—he is an observer of, not a participant in, the Avengers' fight. The camera lens captures Giant Man striding over buildings on his way to battle the Masters of Evil. The cover encapsulates the magnitude of superheroes and reawakens the delicious sense of awe that draws readers to superhero comics and that is difficult for a story to generate under the weight of decades of superhero stories.

Marvels conveys what it would be like to live in the midst of superheroes. The world is not deformed by them—the technology of the superheroes and supervillains does not find commercial application as it does in *Watchmen*—but the emotional feel of the world does change. Through Sheldon, Busiek and Ross perfectly capture the psychological shift that superheroes bring to ordinary

life. After witnessing the debut of the Human Torch firsthand and hearing about the Sub-Mariner secondhand, Sheldon muses, "Marvels, I called them—and that's what they were. Next to that—what were we? Before they came, **we** were so big. So Grand. We were **Americans**—young, strong, vital! We were the ones who got things done. But we'd gotten smaller. I could see it in those same faces—faces that had once been so confident, so brash. We weren't the players anymore. We were spectators" (chapter one). Superheroes decentralize ordinary humanity and become the motive force of their world, but bystander stories reverse this feeling, placing ordinary human beings at the center of the stories.



Deadline #1, *Alias* # 1© 2002, 2001 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.
Gotham Central #2 © 2003 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Other bystander stories create a similar effect by crossing genres, taking an existing genre and setting it within a superhero universe. *Deadline* tells reporter stories from the perspective of Kat Farrell, who reluctantly covers the "capes" as the Daily Bugle's superhero-beat reporter. *Alias* deals with Jennifer Jones, a one-time superheroine who has hung up her tights but uses her powers to eek out a living as private detective. *Gotham Central* tells stories of police officers that could come straight from a police drama like *Hill Street Blues* or *NYPD Blue*—straight cop-genre stories—but with the complication of trying to police the streets of the mean city while superheroes soar above and supervillains plot from below. Decentralizing superheroes in this fashion has a revitalizing effect on the superhero genre. Arune Singh raises this very point regarding *Gotham Central* in an interview with the series' writers Ed Brubaker and Greg Rucka (2005). Singh says that the costumed villain is one convention that stretches the bounds of the realism that drives the

series. "It's hard for some to take comics seriously when a crazy clown is the deadliest villain conceivable," but Brubaker and Rucka make the costumed villains work as frightening and chaotic elements. As Brubaker says, "I think that's what really sets it apart, because you focus on these cops, and it can seem like a straight procedural, but suddenly Mr. Freeze is whacking some cop and the whole world spins in a different direction. Then you have a character exploration of a crime that could only happen in Gotham." Focusing on the very human police officers makes the supervillains truly frightening and weird, and the superheroes as well—Batman is not the cop on the beat's chum, and the paperwork resulting from dealing with the Caped Crusader is no favor either.

J. Michael Straczynski's *Supreme Power* (2003) stands as one of the best current superhero comics, placing superheroes within a recognizable political, commercial, and cultural world. Unlike more formulaic stories in which real-world politics flatten out to stereotypical and cliched depictions, *Supreme Power* portrays a convincing simulacrum of the contemporary world, plus superheroes. This real-world grounding comes suddenly in the first issue, which depicts a Superman-style origin story—a young couple driving a pickup truck finds a crashed spaceship at the center of a crater in a cornfield with an apparently human baby safe in the wreckage. The wife says, "It's like he was sent to us… like God sent him to us," and it seems we are in *Smallville* or any other retelling of the Superman story (4). They take the baby to their farmhouse and settle into parenting, when a sudden knock comes at the door.



Supreme Power #1 © 2003 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Heavily armed troops in gas masks arrive to take the alien child to a government facility, where President Carter pronounces the boy a

ward of the state and declares, "He's a child of the United States. See to it he's raised like one" (5). Conditioned to be the perfect citizen, the boy grows up to serve the interests of the military-industrial state until he learns of his extra-terrestrial origins and comes to realize he has been lied to and used his entire life. He finds he must answer the question that Hugo Danner, hero of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, put to himself:

> I would scorn the universe and turn it to my own ends. I would be a criminal. I would rip open banks and gut them. I would kill and destroy. I would be a secret, invisible blight. I would set out to stamp crime off the earth; I would be a super-detective, following and summarily punishing every criminal until no one dared to commit a felony. What would I do? What will I do? (129)

As of this writing Mark Milton has not answered this question, but has merely sought refuge—or solitude—in an arctic retreat to explore his options, and humanity has taken action against him in preemptive strike against his potential alien hostility.

Conclusion

With all this attention in films, novels, and comics, it would seem a propitious time to investigate the source of this activity, the superhero genre itself. Despite the attention currently given to superheroes, the superhero genre is little studied. Typically it is either taken for granted or dismissed as a genre and marked as subset of other genres—science fiction primarily. This confusion of the superhero genre with other genres comes out of a misperception of the genre's distinctiveness and definition. It is my argument that the superhero genre is a genre unto itself, with its own definition and prehistory, and which follows the cycle of generic evolution common to other well-established genres. The current superhero renaissance shows that the superhero is a popular character type, an interesting protagonist, and a useful metaphor, but does the genre stand distinct from others? Is the superhero genre a genre unto itself?

Chapter 2
The Superhero Genre

Just what is a superhero? On the face of it, it seems pretty obvious. Superman is a superhero; Captain Marvel is a superhero; Spider-Man is a superhero. On the other hand, it also seems pretty obvious which characters are not superheroes. The Virginian is a cowboy, not a superhero. Sherlock Holmes is a detective, not a superhero. Rico "Little Caesar" Bandello is a gangster, not a superhero. But the question that arises is, how do we know which of these characters are superheroes and which are not?

We know these things because of conventions. Conventions—particularly those of plot, setting, character, icon, and theme—combine to create genre. Once the conventions of a genre are enumerated, isolated, and reduced to their minimum, the definition of a genre, and its hero, can be adduced.

Defining the superhero character is a necessary part of defining the superhero genre because the genre takes its name from the character. Other genres —the Western, the mystery, the soap opera—take their designation from other elements like setting, plot, and sponsor, while some similarly focus on the hero-type—the police procedural, the detective story, the gangster genre. The definitions for these latter genres also tend to focus on their respective heroes.

Defining a genre can serve as the basis for examining how the genre narrative animates and ritualistically resolves basic cultural conflicts and contradictions (Schatz 1981, 29-31). In the case of the superhero, one of the cultural conflicts the genre animates and resolves is the problem of binding adolescent males to the larger community. Hero stories traditionally have fulfilled this function by narrating the adventures of young men who learn to apply their strength to benefit their social group. Superhero origin stories tell of selfish boys made into selfless men—literally in the case of newsboy Billy Batson's transformation into Captain Marvel, and figuratively in the case of Peter Parker becoming Spider-Man. After gaining his powers, Peter Parker turns them to profit by becoming a professional entertainer. When leaving a television studio, he refuses to stop a fleeing thief,

telling the security guard whose pleas for help he ignores, "From now on I just look out for number one—that means—me!" (Lee, *Origins* 1974, 147). Later, this very thief murders Uncle Ben, and Spider-Man comes to realize that "with great power there must also come great responsibility" (150). Superhero stories like that of Spider-Man's origin explore the conflict between self and society and show the dangers of selfishly withdrawing from the group and refusing to use one's abilities to help others.

According to Thomas Schatz, a genre is a privileged story form, "part of a limited number of story forms that have been refined into formulas because of their unique social and/or aesthetic qualities" (16). As such, it is a coherent, value-laden narrative system that has emerged through a process of commercial selection and repetition into "a familiar, meaningful system that can be *named* as such" (16). A genre has a "specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction," which operate to provide a "range of expression" for its producers and "range of experience" for its consumers (19, 22). That range is determined and can be identified by a genre's "cultural context, its community of interrelated character types whose attitudes, values, and actions flesh out dramatic conflicts within that community" (21-22). So the way to define a genre is to reduce this context to its absolute minimum—the conventions that lie at the center of a genre and that must be present for a specific story or character to be considered an example of the genre.

Naming

Using Schatz's criterion that a genre is a privileged story form by virtue of being named, we can determine roughly when the superhero genre came to be perceived as such. However, this point in time should not be considered the genre's starting point. As John Cawelti points out, a genre "will be in existence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived of by its creators and audience as a genre" (*Adventure* 1976, 8). Once we have established when *superhero* became common currency among comics creators and readers, we can work backwards to find the genre's origin and construct its definition. The clearest example of the word *superhero* being used to identify a comic book is *Adventure Comics* #247 (April 1958), which features the first appearance of the Legion of Super-Heroes and their name on the cover.



Adventure Comics #247 © 1958 DC Comics. All rights reserved.
Journey Into Mystery #83 © 1962 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Specific genre identification came with *Journey into Mystery* #83 (August, 1962), the cover of which specifically identifies Thor as "The Most Exciting Super-Hero of All Time!!" The Avengers, the X-Men, and Iron Man receive similar billing on their debut covers, which suggests that Marvel Comics intended them to be seen as superheroes and felt confident that their audience knew what *superhero* meant and were actively looking for such characters. This marketing evidence indicates that the genre's conventions had "imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicle of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect" (Warshow 1964, 85). So by the Silver Age,[3] the idea of the superhero was clearly established, as evidenced by the existence of the term *superhero*.

Clearly, though, the producers of comic books knew what a superhero was in the Golden Age. Abner Sundell, a Golden Age writer and editor at MLJ and Fox Publications, wrote a guide to selling superhero scripts called "Crash the Comics" that appeared in *The Writer's 1942 Yearbook*. In it he discusses the hero and how he should be treated, how to create good villains, how to plot a story, and how to submit scripts. More importantly for my purposes, Sundell never defines the term *superhero*, and he uses it throughout the article without explanation or qualification; moreover, all the heroes he discusses are clearly superheroes—Batman, Captain America, the Flag, Samson, Magno and Davey, the Wizard and Roy the Superboy, etc. So the name of the genre, as understood and used by its producers, can be dated to 1942.[4] But Sundell's casual use of *superhero* indicates that the public understood what the term meant

because his audience was not comics creators, but potential comics creators—people who might be interested in selling their work to comics publishers. Sundell must have been certain that his audience would understand what a superhero was and what *superhero* meant.

Parody

A second type of evidence for the existence of a genre is successful parody. According to Schatz, successful parody is a sign that the conventions and straightforward message of a genre have saturated the audience (39). Unsuccessful parody can indicate that the audience is not yet familiar enough with a genre to appreciate the subversion of its conventions. Thus parody—successful parody—clearly indicates that a genre has been fully established in the minds of the producers and consumers.

The first superhero parody—and the first superheroine, by the way—came in *All-American Comics* #20 (November 1940) with the Red Tornado's appearance in Sheldon Mayer's boy-cartoonist strip, "Scribbly." Mayer was responsible for editing the All-American Group of comics, which featured the Flash, the Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the other members of the Justice Society, so he clearly knew the superhero genre well. The first two pages of this "Scribbly" story feature many of the conventions of the superhero genre, but played for laughs. The limited authorities—represented by police chief Gilhooley—can do nothing when Tubbs Torpino's gang kidnaps Dinky and her playmate Sisty, daughter of neighborhood busybody Ma Hunkel, although readers know that the children are in no real danger because of the feature's humorous orientation. The costume convention is foregrounded when Ma Hunkel's neighbor Scribbly claims, "I betcha if th' Green Lantern wus on th' job we'd have th' kids back in a minute!" and then explains that Green Lantern is "a guy who just waits for somethin' like this to happen, an' then he puts on his mysterious costume so nobody'd recognize him, an'..." "An Zingo! He comes to th' rescue," finishes Ma Hunkel's son (42). Ma Hunkel focuses on the idea of the costume, mentioning it in the next two panels before disappearing "in a trance" (42).



All-American Comics #20 © 1940 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

She appears in the final panel of the story as the Red Tornado, dressed in red flannel long underwear and a helmet made from a stockpot. The ensuing adventures make fun of every element of the superhero genre, particularly the identity convention. In "his" secret identity the Red Tornado is Mrs. Hunkel, a housewife, and "he" is frequently referred to as the Red Tomato. The villains this superhero takes on include a shoplifter, a neighborhood bully, storekeepers who overcharge their customers, and a newspaper editor who will not give Scribbly a raise. The Red Tornado works as a parody of the superhero generally, not as a specific parody of Superman and not as a parody of pulp mystery men. The Red Tornado therefore suggests that the superhero genre clearly existed and was perceived as a genre by 1940.

Imitation and Repetition

Another important element of genre, and of popular culture generally, is imitation and repetition.[5] High culture values originality and individual works that cannot be easily imitated. Early experimental-stage genre products can easily be imitated, but without subsequent repetition there can be no genre. Genres fail to emerge when culture-industry workers fail to imitate successful individual pieces, or when audiences fail to respond to such imitations. Richard Slotkin writes, "The primary audience for any cultural production in modern society consists of those who do the same work [creating cultural products], or who participate in its production, reproduction, marketing, or distribution" (*Fatal* 1985, 30-31). This primacy is grounded in the fact that only if culture workers see a character, novel, film, or comic

book as worth imitating because of potential sales will they create more offerings for consumers to accept or reject.

Superman was quickly imitated in this way, as is shown by the lawsuits brought against the publisher of Wonder Man.[6] Wonder Man's first and last appearance came in *Wonder Comics* #1 (May 1939). Wonder Man's creation was catalyzed by Victor Fox, who somehow stumbled onto the financial bonanza of comics.[7] In late 1938, he contracted the Eisner-Iger shop to produce a knockoff, saying, "I want another Superman" (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 22). DC's publisher Harry Donenfeld immediately struck back with a lawsuit claiming copyright infringement and easily won. In the case *Detective v. Bruns* Judge Learned Hand ruled that Wonder Man closely copied and therefore infringed upon DC's Superman.



Action Comics #1 © 1938 DC Comics. All rights reserved.
Wonder Comics #1 © 1939 Fox Comics

This imitation was quickly followed by repetition. The next two years saw a deluge of superheroes hit the market as publishers began to emerge, all eager to get in on the gold rush of comics.

Conclusion

It seems plain that the superhero genre is a genre unto itself, like the Western, science fiction, romantic comedy, the musical, and the detective and gangster genres. But other than the Stewart test[8]—"I know it when I see it"—how do we know which stories are superhero stories and which character are superheroes? As noted above, we identify superhero genre stories through the recognition of conventions. But which conventions are crucial? In other words, what is the definition of the superhero genre?

Chapter 3
The Definition of the Superhero

> **Su•per•he•ro** (soo'per hîr'o) *n*., *pl*. -roes. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. —**superheroic**, *adj*. Also **super hero**, **super-hero**.

The Primary Conventions

In his ruling that Wonder Man copied and infringed upon Superman, Judge Learned Hand provided a kind of definition for the superhero. The definitional characteristics of mission, powers, and identity are central to Hand's determination that Wonder Man copied Superman and provide the basis of my definition of the genre presented above.

Mission

Hand refers to both Superman and Wonder Man as "champion[s] of the oppressed" who combat "evil and injustice," thus summing

up the heart of the superhero's mission. The superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda.

The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero. But it is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed...sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need," i.e. to "benefit mankind" (Siegel, *Action Comics* #1 June 1938, 1). This mission is no different from that of the pulp mystery man Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it" (Robeson, *Man of Bronze* 1964, 4). Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of the dime novel or pulp and radio heroes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[9] Without this mission, a superhero would be merely an extraordinarily helpful individual in a crisis (like Hugo Hercules, the eponymous super-strong hero of J. Kroener's 1904-05 comic strip, who might set a train back on the tracks or lift an elephant so that a lady could pick up her handkerchief), someone who gains personally from his powers (like Hugo Danner, the superpowered protagonist of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, who uses his super-strength to earn a living as a circus strongman), or a supervillain (if he pursued his interests at the legal, economic, or moral expense of others, like Dr. Hugo Strange, an early foe of Batman).

Powers

Superpowers are one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre. Hand identifies Superman and Wonder Man as having "miraculous strength and speed" and being "wholly impervious" to harm. He cites instances when they each crush guns in their hands, rip open steel doors, stop bullets, and leap around the buildings of modern cities. He notes that each is designated the "strongest man in the world." These abilities are the heroes' powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—and they are the first area of real difference between Superman

and his pulp and science fiction predecessors. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner in *The Gladiator* was fairly bullet-proof and had super-strength and super-speed. In the first issue of *Action Comics*, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner does. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as SF supermen's powers had done.

Identity

The identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename. Hand notes that *Action Comics* and *Wonder Comics* portray characters with heroic identities—Superman and Wonder Man—who conceal "skintight acrobatic costume[s]" beneath "ordinary clothing." Hand here identifies the two elements that make up the identity convention of the superhero: the heroic codename and the costume. The identity convention most clearly marks the superhero as different from his predecessors. Characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro established both the heroic and the secret identities that were to become hallmarks of superheroes. However, the heroic identities of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography. The Scarlet Pimpernel does not resemble the little roadside flower whose name he takes, except perhaps in remaining unnoticed in his Percy Blakeney identity; Zorro does not resemble the fox whose Spanish name he has taken, except perhaps in his ability to escape his pursuers. These minimal connections between heroic codename and character are not foregrounded in the hero's adventures, but those adventures did serve as models for the creators of superheroes in their portrayals of their heroes' foppish alter egos.

The connection of name to inner character or biography came with pulp mystery men like the Shadow and Doc Savage. The Shadow is a shadowy presence behind events, not directly seen by his enemies or even his agents; thus his name expresses his character. Doc Savage's name combines the twin thrusts of childhood tutelage by scientists—the skill and rationality of a doctor and the strength

and fighting ability of a wild savage, thus embodying his biography. The heroic identities of Superman and Batman operate in this fashion. Superman is a super man who represents the best humanity can hope to achieve; his codename expresses his inner character. The Batman identity was inspired by Bruce Wayne's encounter with a bat while he was seeking a disguise able to strike terror into the hearts of criminals; his codename embodies his biography.

Costume

The difference between Superman and earlier figures such as the Shadow or Doc Savage lies in the element of identity central to the superhero, the costume. Although Superman was not the first costumed hero, his costume marks a clear and striking departure from those of the pulp heroes. A pulp hero's costume does not emblematize the character's identity. The slouch hat, black cloak, and red scarf of the Shadow or the mask and fangs of the Spider disguise their faces but do not proclaim their identities. Superman's costume does, particularly through his "S" chevron.[10] Similarly, Batman's costume proclaims him a bat man, just as Spider-Man's webbed costume proclaims him a spider man. These costumes are iconic representations of the superhero identity.

The iconicity of the superhero costume follows Scott McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification" (30). In *Understanding Comics* (1993), McCloud argues that pictures vary in their levels of abstraction, from completely realistic photographs to nearly abstract cartoons. Moving from realism to abstraction in pictures is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (30). This stripping-down amplifies meaning by focusing attention on the idea represented by the picture. McCloud explains, "By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (41). The superhero costume removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume. The chevron especially emphasizes the character's codename and is itself a simplified statement of that identity. Pulp hero costumes do not similarly state the character's identity. The Shadow's face—the most common way

the character is identified on pulp covers—while somewhat abstract because of the prominence of the hawk nose and burning red eyes, contains too many specific details to reach the level of the chevron's abstraction.



Superman #75, *Shadow* #3, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* #3 © 1993, 1974, 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Color plays an important role in the iconicity of the superhero costume. In his chapter on color, McCloud shows the way the bright, primary colors of superhero comics are "less than expressionistic," but therefore more iconic, due to their simplicity. Specifically with reference to costumes, McCloud says, "Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to symbolize the characters in the mind of the reader" (188). To illustrate this point, he shows a boy reading a comic book with two thought balloons, each containing three horizontal blocks. In the first Batman is represented by blocks of blue, yellow, and gray; and the Hulk by blocks of purple and green.



Understanding Comics © 1993 Scott McCloud.

The flatness of the colors in traditional four-color comics also has a

"tendency to emphasize the shape of objects," thereby simplifying the objects (188). This simplification makes the superhero costume more abstract and iconic, a more direct statement of the identity of the character. The heroes of pulps, dime novels, and other forms of heroic fiction are not similarly represented as wearing such abstract, iconic costumes. The costume then, as an element of identity, marked the superhero off from previous hero types and helped to establish the genre.

Some pulp heroes stand as exceptions that test the rule that their costumes do not embody their identities, but they represent detours, and the connection of inner character, biography, and identity expressed in a costume did not become a convention for pulp mystery-men as it did for superheroes. Johnston McCulley's Crimson Clown (1926-31) wears a clown outfit as he robs criminals and wicked wealthy men of their ill-gotten booty; thus his costume does proclaim his identity. But wealthy socialite Delton Prouse, the Crimson Clown, did not grow up in a circus, nor did a clown jump through his window as he sought a disguise in which to practice wealth redistribution. He does not seem to have had a good reason for choosing the clown identity, but McCulley's characters rarely needed such reasons.



Black Book Detective 9:3, 11:1 © 1939, 1940 Better Publications.

Both the Bat and the Black Bat wore bat costumes. The Bat (*Popular Detective* 1934), who may have also been created by Johnston McCulley, was Dawson Clade, a private detective framed for murder who faked his death in the electric chair and took up the Bat identity to gain revenge on the crooks who framed him. He wore a bat costume and wielded the ever-popular sleep-gas gun, as did so many of McCulley's heroes. The Bat's identity came to him when

he sought a way to transform himself into a terror to gangland and a bat flew in his room and was silhouetted by a lamp. He saw the bat and adopted it as his totem just as Bruce Wayne would a few years later.

The Black Bat (*Black Book Detective* #1, July 1939), who premiered a month after Batman's first appearance, wears a black body suit and a scallop-edged cape with a bat cowl. Blinded by acid-throwing crooks, district attorney Tony Quinn adopts the Black Bat identity after training himself to peak physical condition and regaining his sight in a secret operation. His identity emerges from his biography—the acid left him blind as a bat, and his bat cowl expresses that identity. His costume is essentially a superhero costume, but crucially it lacks a chevron. The convention of the mystery-man genre was not to connect inner character or biography with the costume. Although the Crimson Clown, the Bat, and the Black Bat demonstrate that the costume could express inner character, biography, or heroic identity before the debut of Superman, they stand as exceptions to the general rule of mystery-man costumes.[11]

In contrast to most pulp-hero costumes, Superman's outfit does proclaim his identity. This difference between superheroes and mystery-men is immediately apparent on the cover of *Action* #1 with Superman in primary colors holding a car over his head and smashing it into an embankment. The "ridiculousness" of the scene on the cover so concerned publisher Harry Donenfeld that he banned Superman from the cover of *Action*, restoring him after five issues because of an increase in sales due directly to Superman's presence in the comic book (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 17). The covers of *Action* #2-5 show scenes of intense action, but none match the striking quality of the first one. The characters featured on these covers all fit into existing adventure genres and none feature so striking and particular an outfit as Superman does. Science fiction and hero pulps frequently featured scenes of outlandish action, and early comics share in this tradition. So the ridiculousness of *Action* #1 that struck Donenfeld had to be located in something different from the fantastic scenes of earlier pulps and comics. Most likely, it was Superman's costume in conjunction with the display of superpowers within the contemporary setting. This setting did not distance the action as a more exotic setting, such as an African jungle or an alien world, would have done. The costume was a crucial, early marker of the

genre.



Action Comics #2, 3, 4, 5 © 1939 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The importance of the costume convention in establishing the superhero genre can be seen in characters who debuted without costumes or with mystery-man costumes but went on to develop regular superhero costumes. In 1974 Martin Goodman, former publisher of Marvel Comics, and his son Charles started Seaboard Publications and inaugurated a short-lived line of comics under the Atlas banner. Atlas first attempted to break out of a sole focus on superhero comics, beginning its line with a variety of genres: superhero, war, horror, science fiction, barbarian, private detective, adventure, and teen humor. However, Atlas quickly moved toward the more commercially viable superhero genre. The Scorpion, created by Howard Chaykin, exemplifies this shift. The Scorpion's adventures were set just before WWII, and the character himself was a pulpy soldier of fortune with some science fiction elements. The Scorpion debuts without a costume, wearing a leather jacket, flight scarf, riding boots, and armed with pistols. A new creative team was brought on after the second issue, and the Scorpion was made over,

appearing in the third and final issue in a blue-and-orange cowled affair sporting a large scorpion chevron.



The Scorpion #1,3 © 1974 Atlas Comics/Seaboard Publications.

Another Atlas title, *Targitt*, began as the formulaic story of a man seeking revenge against the Mob for killing his family. He dresses in ordinary clothing. With the second issue, he becomes "John Targitt, Man-Stalker," attired in a blue union suit with a full-face mask and a red, white, and blue target symbol as his chevron. The full-face mask changes into a cowl for the third and final issue. In its attempt to compete with Marvel, Atlas shifted toward the familiar superhero formula and did so specifically through the costume.[12]

The Sandman and the Crimson Avenger fit the second category—characters who begin with pulp-hero costumes and adopt superhero costumes. Both heroes first appeared between the debut of Superman and that of Batman, before the conventions of the superhero genre had been fully implemented and accepted by the creators.[13] The Crimson Avenger begins with a Shadow/Green Hornet-inspired costume of a slouch hat, a large domino mask, and a red cloak. In *Detective Comics* #44 (October 1940), his costume changes to red tights with yellow trunks and boots, a smaller domino mask, a hood with a ridge running from his forehead backward, and a chevron of an eclipsed sun. He is present at the formation of the Seven Soldiers of Victory in *Leading Comics* #1 (Winter 1942), a superhero team designed to capitalize on the success of the Justice Society of America (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 169). His ward and sidekick Wing acquires an identical costume with a reversed color scheme.



Detective Comics #32,*Leading Comics* #1 © 1939, 1942 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Sandman debuted in a double-breasted green suit, a purple cape, an orange fedora, and a blue-and-yellow gas mask.[14]



Adventure Comics #44, 77 © 1939, 1942 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

When Jack Kirby and Joe Simon took over the character in *Adventure Comics* #69 (December 1941), his outfit was changed into a standard yellow and purple superhero suit. That both these characters debuted before the superhero genre had fully been established, that both were tied more to the style of the pulp mystery men (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 23, 27; Goulart, *Encyclopedia* 1990, 13, 318), and that both moved into standard-issue superhero garb indicates that DC Comics felt that they needed to be in step with their counterparts and that costumes such as these signified superhero status.

Generic Distinction

These three elements—mission, powers, and identity, or MPI—establish the core of the genre. But, as with other genres, specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and heroes from other genres may exist who display

all three elements to some degree but should not be regarded as superheroes. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. In his attempt to define the genre of romantic comedy, Brian Henderson quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of games to show that universal similarity is not necessary to define a genre. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote:

> For if you look at [games] you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that [...] we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail [...]. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances" (ellipses in Henderson 1986, 314).

The similarities between specific instances of a genre are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.

For example, the Hulk can be said to be a superhero without a mission. At times he seems absolutely anti-social, and he frequently finds himself in conflict with the U.S. Army, which in the Silver Age was not presented as corrupt or malign but with the welfare of citizens as its motivating force. Stan Lee claims the Frankenstein monster as an inspiration for the Hulk, "He never wanted to hurt anyone; he merely groped his tortuous way though a second life trying to defend himself, trying to come to terms with those who sought to destroy him" (*Origins* 1974, 75). The Hulk was Lee and Kirby's attempt to make a "hero out of a monster" (75). The green-skinned goliath's adventures do not arise from his attempts to fight crime or to improve the world. In early adventures, Bruce Banner moves to stop the Metal Master and the invasion of the Toad Men, but as the Hulk, he offers to join forces with the Metal Master and once in control of the Toad Men's spaceship thinks, "With this flying dreadnought under me I can wipe out all mankind" (Lee, *Hulk* 1978, 42). The Hulk eventually loses his calculating intelligence and wanders the planet primarily seeking solitude while being drawn, or stumbling, into the plans of supervillains. The Hulk fights primarily for self-preservation but inadvertently does good. He acts effectively as a superhero but does not have the mission or motivation to do so. His tales, though, are suffused with the conventions of the superhero genre: supervillains—the Leader, the Abomination; superhero physics—the transformative power of gamma rays; the limited authorities—General Thunderbolt Ross; a pal—Rick Jones; superteams—the Avengers and the Defenders; and so forth. These conventions keep the Hulk within the superhero genre.[15]

Regarding the powers convention, Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers (Kane, *Batman and Me* 1989, 99). His mission of vengeance against criminals is clear, and his identity—represented by his codename and iconic costume—marks him as a superhero. While he has no distinctly "super" powers, his physical strength and mental abilities allow him to fight crime alongside his more powerful brethren. As with the Hulk, Batman operates in a world brimming with the conventions of the superhero genre: supervillains—the Joker, the Penguin; the helpful authority figure—Police Commissioner Gordon; the sidekick—Robin; superteams—the Justice League and the Outsiders; and so forth.

The Fantastic Four illustrate how elements of the identity convention can be absent or weak and yet the characters remain superheroes. In the first issue of *The Fantastic Four*, the powers and mission conventions are clear. After their space ship is exposed to cosmic rays, each manifests a superpower. The ship's pilot, Ben Grimm, declares their mission: "We've gotta use [these powers] to help mankind, right?" (Lee, *Origins* 1974, 32). The heroes then place their hands together and proclaim their superidentities: Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and the Thing. These codenames fit with the powers they have received and are expressions of the characters' personalities.[16]

The secret identity and costume elements of the identity convention are absent from the debut of the Fantastic Four. Stan Lee claims that he wanted to do away with these aspects of superheroes:[17]

> I was utterly determined to have a superhero series without any secret

> identities. I knew for a fact that if I myself possessed a super power I'd never keep it a secret. I'm too much of a show-off. So why should our fictional friends be any different? Accepting this premise, it was also natural to decide to forgo the use of costumes. If our heroes were to live in the real world, then let them dress like real people. (17)

The secret identity is a typical, but not necessary, convention for the genre. It clearly has great importance to the genre as its stable presence in superhero stories shows. Lee and Kirby were trying to be inventive and so chose to disregard aspects of the genre that they felt held them back. But the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* is clearly a superhero comic book, as is evident from the characters' powers and mission, the superhero physics, and the supervillain Mole Man with his plot to "destroy everything that lives above the surface" (42). And it is so without costumes. Significantly, although the Fantastic Four initially wore ordinary clothes, they quickly acquired costumes.



Fantastic Four #3 © 1962 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The cover of issue #3 announces, "In this great collectors'-item [sic] issue, you will see, for the first time: The amazing Fantasti-Car, the colorful, new Fantastic Four costumes, and other startling surprises!" According to Stan Lee:

> We received a lot of fan mail. The kids said they loved [the Fantastic Four]. We knew we had a winner, and we were on our way now. But, virtually every letter said, "We think it's the greatest comic book, we'll buy it forever. Turn out more, but if you don't give them colorful costumes, we won't buy the next issue. (qtd. in Gross 2000)[18]

As the Scorpion and the Crimson Avenger also demonstrate, characters are often given costumes to assert their superhero genre identification.

The codename, the other aspect of the identity convention, is nearly omnipresent among superheroes. One example that comes quickly to mind of a superhero without a codename is Arn "Iron" Monroe, Roy Thomas' substitute for Superman in the *Young All Stars*, which came out in the post-Crisis period when Thomas was not allowed to use Superman in the WWII era. Even Arn gets a superhero moniker of sorts, being referred to as "Iron" and "Ironman," a nod to Marvel's armored hero. The lack of a separate heroic name is a bit more common among sidekicks. Some sidekicks retain their ordinary names, a tradition that probably derives from Tonto and Kato, sidekicks of the Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet respectively. Captain America's partner Bucky, the Crimson Avenger's houseboy Wing, the Human Torch's companion Toro, the Star-Spangled Kid's chauffeur Stripsey, and Magno the Magnetic Man's boy partner Davey all fit this pattern. Ever since the Shadow re-established the single-hero magazine in 1931, mystery-men and superheroes have needed codenames for marketing reasons. Sidekicks can keep the same name for both their super and ordinary roles because they are secondary heroes and rarely achieve their own magazines.

Luke Cage, A Case Study

Other definitions of the superhero overlook the idea of generic distinction, that is the concatenation of other conventions that Henderson calls family resemblance.[19] Generic distinction can be used to divide superheroes from non-superheroes. Basically, if a character fits the MPI conventions, even with some significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre, the character is a superhero. On the reverse side, if a character largely fits the MPI qualifications of the definition, but can be firmly and sensibly placed within another genre, then the character is not a superhero. Typically, the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to

rule characters in or out.

Luke Cage serves as an excellent example of the importance of generic distinction in defining a character as a superhero and placing him within the genre.[20] Luke Cage clearly has superpowers. He is invulnerable and super strong. But such a character could operate a detective/security agency within a science fiction or horror/SF milieu and not be considered a superhero.[21] The editors and writers at Marvel Comics took great care to place Luke Cage within the superhero genre by surrounding the character with superhero conventions and foregrounding these conventions. These conventions mark Luke Cage as a superhero and not as a detective or adventure hero who has superpowers. The cover of the first issue proclaims it a "Sensational origin issue!"



Hero For Hire #1 © 1972 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Superheroes have origins, whereas characters in other genres may go through similar transformations but these are not referred to as origins. Lucas is a wrongly convicted prisoner at Seagate Maximum Security Prison, who volunteers for a medical experiment that, in formulaic fashion, goes awry and empowers him. After Lucas uses these powers to escape from prison, he works his way back to New York City and reflexively stops a criminal's getaway after the man robs a diner. The diner's owner proclaims "You dodged that shot an' nailed him like a real super-hero!" (Thomas, "Out of Hell" 1972, 21). This comment gives him an idea for a career, and he goes to a costume shop and rejects both a Captain America and a Captain Marvel outfit as too expensive, settling instead for an open yellow shirt, blue pants, blue and yellow boots, a steel headband and bracers, and a chain belt. This costume does not proclaim his identity as the costumes of Spider-Man or Batman do, but it is intended to be

seen as a costume and the chain embodies his biography by serving as a reminder of his prison days (Goodwin August 1972, 7). After changing into his new outfit, Cage muses, "Yeah! Outfit's kinda hokey...but so what? All part of the super-hero scene. An' this way when I use my powers, it's gonna seem natural" (Thomas, "Out of Hell" 1972, 22). As with the cover and the explanation of his actions, the idea of the costume as a convention of the superhero genre is here foregrounded by being identified as such in the text itself.

Cage's superpowers enabled him to escape from prison where he had been incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. His former best friend, Willis Stryker, framed him for the murder of a woman who was killed by a rival gang in an attempt to assassinate Stryker. To revenge himself upon Stryker, Cage sets himself up as a hero for hire and begins to harass Stryker's underlings, a revenge-fantasy motif common to the overall action-adventure meta-genre. But Stryker is given the accouterments of a supervillain instead of those of an ordinary crime boss, again foregrounding the placement of this story within the superhero genre. Stryker is consistently depicted in a green snake-skin suit with a yellow shirt, and he goes by the name "Diamondback."



Hero For Hire #3 © 1972 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

He has no explicit superpowers, but has trained himself in knife-throwing and possesses specially-designed knives, which can deploy gas, give off damaging sonic waves, or explode. While Cage initially faces blaxploitation criminal types, he soon finds himself running up against opponents with powers, codenames, and costumes, such as Mr. Luck, Lion-Fang, and Stiletto. Costumes are again foregrounded as an element of the genre when two of Cage's prison buddies, "Comanche" and "Shades," escape in order to revenge themselves

upon Rackham, a prison guard who has been fired for his brutality. In order not to be recognized while attacking Rackham, the escaped convicts steal costumes.



Hero For Hire #16 © 1973 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Comanche dresses in a masked outfit with a black muscle shirt and a yellow 'C' chevron, buckskin pants, and a candy-striped headband similar to the one he wore in prison; this costume is accented by two large knives, a bow, and a quiver full of arrows. Shades sports a big-collared white muscle-shirt white boots, blue pants, oversized sunglasses, and carries two pistols in large red holsters. Ironically, although they adopt these costumes to disguise their identities, a stool-pigeon named Flea, who has read brief mentions of them in the journal kept by the scientist who transformed Cage, recognizes them easily, "Considering one wore dark goggles and the other had a big yellow 'C' on his chest" (Isabella December 1973, 3). In no other genre would wearing such costumes be presented as reasonable for escaped convicts seeking to hide their identities.

Continuity, another convention of the genre, is brought into play by showing Cage interacting with the rest of the Marvel Universe. Existing Marvel supervillains like the Owl and the Ringmaster's Circus of Crime face off against Cage. Other Marvel superheroes cross over into his adventures, such as Iron Man, Black Goliath, and the X-Men. Beginning with issue #17, Luke Cage takes on the cognomen "Power Man" because of a lack of coverage of his feats by the *Daily Bugle*, which covers the heroics of Spider-Man and Captain America. He wonders, "Why, blast it? What've they got that I don't? Super-powers? Nope—I got me those. A flashy costume? These threads'll do fine. A fancy name? A fancy...name? Yeah—maybe that's it. Maybe 'Hero for Hire' just don't cut it" (Wein, "Rich

Man" February 1974, 1). He comes up with his codename while facing off a villain who declares, after seeing him break into the advanced armored airship he is stealing, "This ship's construction makes what you've done impossible!" Cage responds, "Just chalk it up to black power, man."



Power Man #17 © 1974 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

He realizes that "Power Man" sounds good and settles on it for his new identity. Therefore, his codename arises out of an incident in his life, expresses his powers, and includes a racial subtext that has been present in the series since its inception. In fact, the cover of issue #17 (February 1974) proclaims him "The first and still the greatest black superhero of them all!" even though the Black Panther obviously preceded him at Marvel, which may be why the cover of issue #19 (June 1974) describes him as "America's first and most startling black super-hero!"[22] As with these other aspects, Marvel foregrounded the conventions of the genre so as to declare *Hero for Hire* a superhero comic book, distinct from other genres.

Ruling In and Ruling Out

While generic distinction can be used to define some characters as superheroes, it can just as easily be used to establish that some characters are not. If a character to some degree fits the mission-powers-identity qualifications of the definition but can be firmly and sensibly placed within another genre, then the character is not a superhero. Typically the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to rule characters in or out of the genre. While ruling characters in or out of the superhero genre is a bit of a parlor game, it has value in

highlighting the superhero genre as a distinct genre of its own and not an offshoot of science fiction or fantasy.

A leading candidate for this sort of exclusion by genre distinction is Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Superficially, Buffy could be seen as qualifying as a superhero. She has a mission: to fight and slay vampires and other demons who threaten humanity. She has superpowers; her training raises her to the level of Batman in fighting ability and her strength is greater than the chemically enhanced strength of Riley Finn, an agent of the U.S. military's demon-hunting Initiative, or the supernaturally enhanced strength of Angel, a vampire. Buffy has an identity as the Slayer. But this identity is not a superhero identity like Superman or Batman. This identity is not separate from her ordinary Buffy identity the way Superman is from Clark Kent, whose mild-mannered personality differs greatly from Superman's heroic character. The Slayer is not a public identity in the ordinary superhero sense; even the well-financed and government-sponsored Initiative views the Slayer as a myth, a boogeyman for demons. Buffy does not wear a costume; and while such a costume is not necessary, it is typical.

Finally, and more importantly for the purpose of demonstrating that generic distinction is a crucial element of the superhero, the Slayer is a hero-type that predates the superhero, fitting firmly within the larger horror genre and specifically within the vampire sub-genre. Literarily, the vampire hunter descends from Dr. Van Helsing in *Dracula*. Historically, the hero-type descends from actual vampire hunters, including the *dhampir*, the supposed male progeny of a vampire who is particularly able to detect and destroy vampires.[23] Thus, though the writers of *Buffy* draw on superhero conventions, the stories are generically distinct from the superhero genre.

Genre distinction can also be seen as playing a role in self-definition. The producers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* do not seem to regard it as a superhero show. They clearly draw on elements of the superhero genre and make references to it. They also make references to *Scooby Doo* and the show fits within the Scooby Doo formula.[24] Perhaps more telling is that Buffy has an origin much in line with the superhero origin, but it is not identified as such as is usually the case in superhero comics. This lack of self-identification with the genre helps to establish that Buffy is not a superhero.[25]

But Buffy is a super hero, as are heroic characters from other

genres that have extraordinary abilities such as The Shadow, the Phantom, Beowulf, or Luke Skywalker. They are superior to ordinary human beings and ordinary protagonists of more realistic fiction in significant ways. When they are called super heroes, super is used as an adjective that modifies hero; but they are not superheroes, that is they are not the protagonists of superhero-genre narratives.

An excellent way to understand this distinction is through Northrop Frye's theory of modes. Frye sets up a system of classification of fiction "by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (1957, 33). According to his scheme, in myth the hero is "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment" and is a divine being. In romance, the hero is "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment" but is identified as a human being, and "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (33). The other categories are high mimetic—the hero, a leader, is "superior in degree to other men but not his natural environment"; the low mimetic—the hero is "one of us" and "superior to neither men nor to his environment"; and the ironic mode—the hero is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves" (33, 34). Thought of in this way, heroes who are super—all those characters who are referred to as super heroes but do not fit the generic definition of the superhero presented herein—are romance heroes. Referring to these characters as romance heroes, though, given the contemporary use of *romance*—stories of couples whose love relationship develops to overcome all obstacles—would be confusing; instead it makes sense to refer to them as super heroes.

A useful analogy is that *hero* is to *super hero* as *model* is to *super model*.[26] A super hero is a hero who is super or superior to other kinds of heroes (typically by virtue of physical abilities), just as a super model is superior to other types of models (typically by virtue of superior attractiveness and charisma). The distinction between super hero and superhero is analogous to the distinction between every day (i.e. every single day) and everyday (i.e. ordinary). One might wear everyday clothing every day, so the two terms are related but they have distinct meanings.

This distinction gets muddied by characters from other genres who operate in a superhero universe, such as spy chief Nick Fury who occasionally teams up with established and clearly defined

superheroes like Captain America, Spider-Man, or the Thing to battle some menace.



Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD #4 © 1968 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

His mission is obvious from the name of the counter-intelligence spy agency he heads, S.H.I.E.L.D.: Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division. He has no superpowers, although another character with access to his stock of weaponry and equipment could operate as a superhero. He has no secret identity and no separate heroic identity, nor any costume that announces such an identity. Although he occasionally opposes the schemes of Marvel Universe supervillains, his enemies typically take the form of traditional spy villains, primarily similarly-equipped organizations like Hydra or Advanced Idea Mechanics, who wear outfits more in line with those of Klan-influenced pulp villains than with inverted-superhero supervillain costumes.[27] Nick Fury fits neatly within the spy/secret agent genre, which has deep roots going back to the early twentieth century in characters like Operator #5 and the Diplomatic Free Lances.

A third example is DC Comics' spaceman Adam Strange, who might seem to fit into the superhero genre as a sometimes ally, but not a member, of the Justice League of America. In this allegiance, he is somewhat akin to "pal" characters, like Jimmy Olsen or Snapper Carr, who accompany superheroes and even help them to fight villains but are not superheroes themselves. Adam Strange's mission is to protect his adopted world, Rann, from alien invaders and other threats.



Mystery In Space #90 © 1967 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

His jetpack and ray guns give him quite an offensive capacity. But he has no identity other than the one with which he was born. His red and white space suit does not announce his identity and it does not stand out from the futuristic clothing worn by everyone on Rann. More importantly, Adam Strange clearly falls within the science-fiction genre and was created in the mold of John Carter, Buck Rogers, and Flash Gordon. Like these three heroes, Strange finds himself transported to a strange and distant world where he fights unearthly monsters, madmen, and despots, and finds love with a beautiful maiden.

John Constantine, Hellblazer, is a straightforward trench-coat-wearing horror investigator, like DC's earlier hero Doctor Occult, characters out of H.P. Lovecraft's tales, or a non-governmental X-Files operative, and he exists within the DC Universe and therefore occasionally interacts with its superheroes.



Trenchcoat Brigade #1 © 1999 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Like Nick Fury and Adam Strange, John Constantine's placement in a superhero universe might mistakenly be seen as marking him

as a superhero. But to do so would be to overvalue the continuity convention and to undervalue the mission, powers, and identity conventions and also to ignore the importance of genre distinction.

Overlooked here is the existence of a liminal genre status, which includes characters that cross genres or fall at the borderline of the superhero genre and another one. It could be argued that Buffy, Adam Strange, and John Constantine should be considered cross-genre or genre-borderline superheroes because of the way Buffy's adventures contain significant elements of the superhero genre or the way Strange and Constantine operate in the DC Universe. But their strong ties with other genres, it can be argued, should exclude them from this cross-genre or borderline-genre status. As I have argued, the identity convention often works to signify whether a story with some superhero elements falls within the superhero genre or within another genre, and these heroes lack the identity convention. Strong identity markers are the clearest way to place a story within the superhero genre, although such markers need to be backed up by the presence of other equally clear conventions.

The most successful cross-genre superhero comic book series is the Legion of Super-Heroes. This feature blends the superhero and the science-fiction genres. It is set in the thirtieth century and features futuristic technology, space travel, alien races, other worlds, and a variety of other SF elements, the strength of which allow it to be considered SF. But it is clearly a superhero comic book as the title indicates. The characters all have superpowers, wear costumes, have codenames, and the group's founders sought to emulate the legendary twentieth-century heroes Superboy and Supergirl.



Ghost Rider #4 © 1951 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The Phantom Rider (originally the Ghost Rider and later the Night Rider) straddles the borderline between the superhero and Western genres. He has no powers, but like the Lone Ranger fights frontier crime and, unlike the Lone Ranger, wears a fairly unequivocal superhero costume. Without the costume—an all-white luminescent outfit with a full-face mask—he would clearly be considered a typical Western hero like the Ringo Kid or Kid Colt. But his villains occasionally have supervillain codenames and costumes,[28] and therefore serve as inverted-superhero supervillains, one of most significant markers of the superhero genre. Additionally, the Phantom Rider's adventures have been retroactively included in the Marvel Universe, i.e. a publisher-certified genre signifier.



Ghost Rider #4 © 1951 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Ka-Zar is a bit more problematic than Adam Strange or Nick Fury. Although he clearly is a jungle hero, he interacts with superheroes and villains in a manner similar to Strange or Fury, but more directly. He is essentially a non-superhero adventure-hero who crosses genres. He was created as a pulp knock-off of Tarzan in 1936, but because Marvel had retained the rights to the character from their earlier incarnation as Timely, Ka-Zar could be introduced into the Marvel Universe (*X-Men* #10, March 1965). Like the Sub-Mariner and Atlantis, Ka-Zar fights to keep the Savage Land free of incursions from the outside world, and he fights to oppose the schemes of inverted-superhero supervillains like Magneto. His physical abilities allow him to interact as an equal with characters like the X-Men, Spider-Man, and Daredevil. Ka-Zar crosses genres, but also operates at the borderline of both the jungle and superhero genres.



X-Men #10 © 1965 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The Punisher began as a vigilante, killing criminals, but gradually was transformed into a superhero as he became popular with readers. He fits directly into "aggressor" formula (Kettredge 1978, xxix).[29] Unlike many of his brethren, he does not work for any government agency. This independent operating pushes him toward the superhero camp. He has no superpowers, but his level of weaponry and physical skills let him operate among superheroes like Spider-Man. Like Batman, his family was killed by criminals, which similarly supplies him with a mission.



Amazing Spider-Man #129 © 1974 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

He has both the costume and codename aspects of the identity convention. Within the Marvel Universe, he is fairly clearly a superhero, but his allegiance with the aggressor hero-type pushes him out of the center of the superhero formula. As he became popular in the 1980s and was featured in multiple series, the Punisher switched back and forth between the aggressor formula and the superhero genres depending on whether he appeared in his own comics or made guest appearances in superhero stories, that is his definition as

a superhero varied depending upon the concatenation of conventions in any particular story.

This ability to switch back and forth marks the current incarnation of Shang-Chi. As originally developed in *Master of Kung-Fu*, Shang-Chi was a martial arts hero operating in an older pulp-style universe as the son and enemy of Dr. Fu Manchu. But when he was revived for the Marvel Knights superhero team, he became a superhero, though a formula shift could throw him back into his original adventure genre. Shang-Chi can be thought of metaphorically as a planet orbiting a genre sun. In *Master of Kung-Fu* he was a pulp-hero, but the gravity of the Marvel Knights series pulled him toward the sun of the superhero genre.



Master of Kung Fu #51, *Marvel Knights* #1 © 1977, 2000 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

A solar system can serve as a useful metaphor in thinking about genre-switching characters like the Punisher and Shang-Chi. At the center of the genre system, the formula burns hottest and the gravity is strongest, keeping conventions and formulas rigid. At a comfortable distance—like Earth and Mars—the light and heat of the sun provide an environment conducive to life and evolution. As one moves out to the gas giants, the genre shifts and the formula carries less influence (just as Jupiter sheds more light on its moons than the sun does), but the stories are still recognized as being within the genre. Some planetoids, such as Shang-Chi, are in empty space between solar systems or are part of another system, but get pulled by the gravity of writers and publishers into the superhero genre solar system and out of their own genre systems.[30]

Man-Thing and Swamp Thing offer their own definitional challenges. Because of his mindlessness, Man-Thing is pretty clearly a monster character, unwittingly doing good. He interacts

with superheroes, but cannot be said to be operating with much volition, thereby negating the mission convention. He does have superpowers, but no separate identity—his human self having been destroyed in the creation of the Man-Thing form, and his change from Ted Sallis to the Man-Thing fits more with the horror genre than with the transcendent transformation of a superhero origin. Primarily his lack of volition, which is similar to the Hulk's lack of mission, place him outside the superhero genre, but his presence in the Marvel Universe could arguably place him at the borderline.



Man-Thing #1 © 1974 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.
Swamp Thing #7 © 1974 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Swamp Thing has powers and identity elements similar to those of Man-Thing, although his powers expanded when Alan Moore shifted the character away from being a human being whose body had taken on properties of the swamp to a plant that had taken on a dead human being's personality. His self-consciousness is unambiguous, so he has the potential for a mission. Depending on the interests of the writer, Swamp Thing falls more or less within the SF/horror genre or the superhero genre. Initially he pretty clearly fell into Cawelti's altered states meta-genre, which includes horror (*Adventure* 1976, 47-49), albeit with some generous helpings of the adventure meta-genre, such as the revenge fantasy and the supervillain. Over time, Swamp Thing became more embroiled within the DC Universe and faced costumed opponents and interacted with DC's superheroes. Alan Moore took a more primal horror approach, retaining superhero elements because of his fascination with the artistic and storytelling possibilities of the DC Universe.[31]

Another way to clarify the issue of cross-genre or genre borderline category is to look at characters clearly identified with other genres

or who are otherwise excluded from being superheroes, but who operate in a superhero universe. Detective Harvey Bullock, Gotham PD, is a police officer. He is a normal human being and falls into the "loose cannon" cop stereotype. If he accompanies Batman on a raid or even tracks down a supervillain like the Penguin on his own, does he suddenly become a superhero?



Batman Adventures #1 © 1992 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

When Ben Urich, reporter for the *Daily Bugle*, shares information with Daredevil that helps the hero bring down the Kingpin, does that interaction transform him into a superhero? Does the ear-wiggling ability of Willie Lumpkin, the postal carrier whose route includes the Baxter Building, count as a superpower because he is a friend of the Fantastic Four and occasionally sees supervillains while delivering mail?



Fantastic Four #11 © 1963 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Are these interactions as transformative as radioactive spider bites? All these questions can be answered easily with a firm "No." The same is true for characters from the other genres that fit into the larger adventure meta-genre established by John Cawelti (*Adventure* 1976, 39)[32] and are sometimes found in superhero comics, such as spies, cowboys, knights, and ninja.[33] Generic distinction marks

these characters as non-superheroes even though they may have the missions and powers requisite to be superheroes, and might even possess elements of the identity convention.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued for a definition of the superhero comprising mission, powers, identity, and generic distinction. Clearly the superhero has been studied previously without this definition in place, so the question arises, why do we need it? The answer to this question is that we already have it and it is already in use. My definition brings forth the unstated assumptions that generally guide the study of the superhero and the production of superhero comics. As the ruling of Judge Learned Hand shows, recognition of the mission-powers-identity triumvirate as the necessary elements of a definition of the superhero existed very early in the superhero's history. Generic distinction merely accounts for the "family resemblances" of the other conventions that mark the superhero genre off from the rest of the adventure meta-genre. As Abner Sundell's use of *superhero* demonstrates—and as the examination of other definitions in Chapter Four will show—the definition argued for in this article lies behind most other discussions of the superhero and the examples used in those discussions fit the definition proposed here.

Another proof for the definition offered here is the way that the ages of superhero comics neatly parallel the stages of genre evolution set out by Thomas Schatz—discussed in depth in Chapter Eight. In *Hollywood Genres*, Schatz puts forward a four-stage evolutionary cycle for any genre:

> A form passes through an experimental stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a classic stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of refinement, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a baroque (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work (Schatz 1981, 37-38).

These stages match the progression of ages: Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. This progression of stages and ages does not encompass the mystery-men pulps—which followed their own genre progression—science fiction, legends, epics, or any of the other source genres whose characters are proposed as superheroes but who fall outside the genre definition presented in this chapter. The neat fit between Schatz's theory of genre evolution and the ages of superhero comics bolsters the claim that superheroes debuted in 1938 with Superman at the start of the Golden Age and evolved in superhero comics, therefore reinforcing the mission-powers-identity-generic distinction definition.

This lengthy and detailed discussion is also necessary because of the nature of genre study. Genre tales are some of the most important of cultural products because of the way they embody and promulgate cultural mythology (Cawelti, *Adventure* 1976, 35-36). All genres have boundaries. Some are narrow, like the superhero, and others are broader, like science fiction or horror. A well-defined genre can be studied for the way the culture industry interacts with popular taste. It can be seen as a way of examining the resolution of cultural conflicts and tensions that audiences regard as legitimate. A poorly defined genre that includes characters from other genres as superheroes or fails to distinguish between the genre definition and the metaphoric use of *superhero* renders the term becomes meaningless as tool for genre criticism and analysis.[34]

A parallel can be made with the Western. If the definition of the Western is limited to Cawelti's man-in-the-middle convention (*Six-Guns* 1984, 74), then *Casablanca* and *Slingblade* are Westerns as they both feature men standing between savagery and civilization who protect and advance the values of civilization through savage violence. If the definition is limited to the Western setting, then both *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Frasier* are Westerns; additionally both feature characters from the East moving westward on voyages of personal discovery and renewal, a common convention of Westerns. If these examples were counted as Westerns, the whole project of Western scholarship would collapse because the broad range of examples would defy analysis of common elements.

A sloppy definition of the superhero makes it more difficult to

examine the way the superhero genre embodies cultural mythology and narratively animates and resolves cultural conflicts and tensions. A tight definition enables scholars to focus specifically on the genre itself, separate it from related genres, and compare it with other genres. This chapter—and the whole book—should provide a basis for the study of superheroes and help to make more studies possible in the future.

With the definition of the superhero genre established, the question arises, what about the supervillain? What is the definition of the supervillain? Are they unique to the superhero genre? What drives and motivates them?

Chapter 4
The Supervillain

The supervillain is one of the significant markers of the superhero genre, but as with the secret identity, it is not unique to the genre. When it is used as a defining element of the superhero, it artificially expands the genre to include character types who fight supervillains but are super heroes (heroes who are super) instead of superheroes (protagonists of the superhero genre). The discussion that follows explores the broad spectrum of genres that employ the supervillain trope, particularly in the discussion of supervillains from the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming. Fleming might be called the poet laureate of supervillainy because many of his novels feature the villains discoursing on their criminal careers, so his works are very useful in developing theories about and explanations of supervillains.

The Five Types

Supervillains come in five types: the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted-superhero supervillain. These types are non-exclusive, that is, a supervillain like Spider-Man's foe the Lizard is both a monster and a mad scientist. Dr. Doom, ruler of Latveria and scientific genius, is an enemy commander and a mad scientist. But most supervillains fit pretty firmly into one of these categories. All these types—except the inverted-superhero supervillain—predate the superhero. Just as a hero represents the virtues and values of a society or culture, a villain represents an inversion of those values. But more than that a supervillain has the ability to enact that inversion, to bring the normal activities of a society to a halt and force a hero to arise to defend those virtues.

The Monster

The oldest type of supervillain is the monster. The monster is monstrous because it figures as the inverse of humanity and typically appears in some sort of beast form—thus a werewolf or giant reptile

is a monster. When a monster has a human form, it is monstrous morally—it has no moral sense of right or wrong, or a perverted one, which is symbolically expressed by the monster's lack of a soul. Thus vampires and Frankenstein's creature are monsters as they lack the divine spark—the soul—that separates man from beast. This is also why a serial killer, who is a human being, is referred to as a monster—he lacks human compassion, he seems to lack a soul.

The oldest mythological supervillains to oppose heroes were monsters, whether Khumbaba—Guardian of the Cedar Forest— or the gigantic Bull of Heaven, both of whom Gilgamesh kills and both of whom were set in place by the gods to limit mankind's reach, or the Nemean Lion or the Hydra, both of which terrorize the Greek country side and prevent the people from using the land.

Grendel is the classic image of the monster as supervillain. Like Milton's Satan, Grendel is a very different adversary from most epic or mythological monsters. The Celestial Bull that Gilgamesh fought or the Harpies that the Argonauts defeat are monsters set upon mortals by the gods for displeasing them. Grendel has a personal motivation and is not merely the instrument of divine vengeance. He is not a mindlessly destructive beast like the Calydonian Boar, or a creature of another order living a separate existence from humankind without interaction like Medusa and the Gorgons. Grendel has real motivation, like a supervillain. Stan Lee, in introducing a collection of supervillain stories *Bring on the Badguys*, wrote that supervillains have "also got to be unusual, exciting, provocative, and surprising, [...] we always try to motivate our miscreant as much as we do our hero. We have to have a varlet doing evil just for the sake of being naughty. We try to indicate why he does the things he does, what made him the way he is" (1976, 8). Grendel fits this characterization. One indication of his motivation and interests as a character might be the fact that John Gardner was able to write the novel *Grendel* about him—a rarity among monsters from heroic epics.

In the Viking epic *Beowulf*, the hero is called by King Hrothgar to defeat the monstrous Grendel who besieges the Danish king's mead hall, Heorot. As the supervillain is the inverted image of the superhero, so too is the outlaw Grendel the inverted image of the heroes of Heorot. Grendel lives a bitter and lonely exiled existence, jealous of the crowded warmth of the Danish feasting hall with its singing bards. He descends from Cain, the first murderer, who

inverted family relations and turned brotherly love into fratricide. Grendel's invulnerability and preternatural strength make him invincible against the attacks of Hrothgar's warriors, just as the supervillain's power defies the limited abilities of the authorities. He refuses to pay *wer-gild*, the man-price, for his murders, "offering no truce, accepting no settlement, no price in gold or land, and paying the living for one crime only with another," thus flouting and denying the norms of Viking society (1973, 28). When he makes feasting and fellowship impossible, Grendel conquers the world of the Danes and rules their mead hall.

A contemporary monster, with a dash of mad scientist thrown in, is the Lizard. He is Dr. Curtis Connors, a surgeon who lost an arm in WWII. He synthesizes a serum from lizards that duplicates their rejuvenative abilities in an attempt to regenerate his arm. He is successful—his arm regrows—but perhaps too successful as the lizard nature of the serum takes over and he acquires the physical characteristics of a lizard—tough green skin, long strong tail—and a measure of its antipathy to humankind. He plans to use his serum on other lizards, crocodiles, and alligators and create a lizard army—the fact that he says "other lizards" indicates that Dr. Curtis Connors no longer affiliates with humanity (*Amazing Spider-Man* #6).

The Enemy Commander

The second oldest type is the enemy commander. An enemy commander has the resources of a state behind him and is in a position of legal authority within that society. He might be the king, tyrant, dictator, or other absolute ruler, or the true power behind the throne, or a military commander. Satan—John Milton's Satan from *Paradise Lost*—might be said to be the very model of the enemy commander supervillain. He rules the kingdom of Hell, commands numberless demons, and stands in absolute opposition to the will of Heaven and God.

The tyrant as enemy commander appears in epics such as *The Song of Roland* in the person of Marsile, King of Sarraguce and the last Muslim ruler in Spain, and in stories of the Spartans facing down Xerxes and the Persians at Thermopylae. A variation on the enemy commander is the tyrannical ruler, like the Norman Prince John in tales of Robin Hood. Often these rulers are members of a conquering culture; but because they represent the government of

the hero's land, the hero is posited as a rebel and therefore represents the virtues of the conquered peoples—Saxons in the case of Robin Hood.

Enemy commanders represent alien societies whose values are at odds with those of the culture producing the stories. But they are not viewed as villains in their own lands. In America Adolph Hitler was considered a supervillain, which is why he is so often featured on the cover of WWII-era comics.



Captain America #2 © 1942 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

But in Nazi Germany Hitler was the heroic ruler, the savior of the German *volk*, and the founder of the Thousand-Year Reich. In contemporary times, Osama bin Laden plays a similar role—President George W. Bush figures bin Laden as absolutely evil, yet a significant body of Muslims view him as a courageous jihadist, fighting to drive the infidel crusader from the Holy Land.

In American literature, the Native American enemy commander figures as the first supervillain. Native Americans represent an alien culture, constantly threatening apocalyptic violence. Richard Slotkin develops the notion of "savage war" to describe and define the attitude of white settlers towards conflict with natives. Savage war allows the projection of guilt on to the victims of development, displacement, and genocide. It depends on a belief in the inherent violence of the enemy "other." The savage-war doctrine requires picturing the enemy as capable of extreme violence, which is seen as fundamentally different from civilized warfare engaged in by European armies. Instead, the native is seen as the absolute opposite of the white settler, an enemy who cannot be appeased or converted only exterminated. The contest between the two forces is proposed as a zero-sum game in which the outcome can only be complete

devastation or complete victory because of the implacable nature of the enemy. The native is seen as possessing overwhelming force and numbers and is responsible for initiating and escalating the violence of the conflict. Finally, the enemy native is portrayed as invading land held rightfully by the white settler; the native is the interloper and invader. Thus responsibility for all acts is projected upon the victim of genocide. (Slotkin, "Massacre"; *Fatal* 53-54, 59-61).

Native enemy commanders are thus positioned as commanding an endless and potentially overwhelming supply of savage warriors who threaten the extermination of American—or white—culture. The classic literary native enemy commander is Magua from James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.



The plot of *Last of the Mohicans* is driven by Magua's thirst for vengeance against the British Colonel Munro who once had Magua whipped for drunkenness while Magua was serving the British army as a scout. In Cooper's construction of Indian culture, Magua embodies the best and worst of Indian virtues and vices, what Cooper referred to as "gifts." Natives in Cooper's fiction value honor above all. "The American Indian always deemed his moral victories the noblest" (*Deerslayer* 465). Thus honor, not money or territory, is at the center of nativewarfare. A consequence of valuing honor is that Cooper's Native Americans prize vengeance. As Magua puts it, "The memory of an Indian is longer than the arm of the palefaces; his mercy shorter than their justice" (*Mohicans* 1962, 127). In the view of Natty Bumppo, hero of the Leatherstocking Tales, revenge is lawful to Native Americans and is one of their "gifts." Similarly, scalping, which is committed for purposes of both honor and revenge, is "the gift and natur' of an Indian" but would be "a cruel and unhuman act for a whiteskin" (162). Magua seeks revenge on Colonel Munro

through his daughters, and achieves it when Tamenund, the ancient Delaware chief, rules that Magua may rightfully keep the kidnapped Cora Munro as his wife. Cora rejects this verdict, and it seems monstrous to the white characters, but within the Native American society Cooper has established, it is right and proper.

Darth Vader is an excellent example of the enemy commander as supervillain. He is not the emperor, but commands the emperor's forces and has the weight and resources of the Empire behind him, besides his own Jedi power. Vader is a hero of the Empire. Luke Skywalker and the rebels violate the primary virtue of the Empire, obedience to the Emperor, but embody the values of self-reliance, individualism, and democracy that are at the mythological core of American culture, for which *Star Wars* was produced.

In superhero comics, the two foremost enemy commanders are Dr. Doom and the Red Skull. Dr. Doom commands the resources of Latveria and as its ruler maintains diplomatic immunity, allowing him to flout the rule of law that is central to democratic culture. But Doom leans significantly toward the inverted-superhero supervillain because Latveria itself is not at war with the United States and Doom is a totalitarian tyrant who suppresses his people's yearning to be free. The Red Skull is a purer example of the enemy commander in superhero comics. As developed in the Silver Age by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the Red Skull is second only to Hitler in power in Nazi German, and even Hitler fears him. He commands the scientific and military resources of the Third Reich and is actively involved in the attempt to defeat and subjugate America and its allies.



Tales of Suspense #66 © 1965 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Racist, genocidal, and totalitarian, the Nazi ideology stands in stark contrast to the American creed of life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness. Captain America embodies that creed, so battles between him and the Red Skull are symbolic of the literal battles between American and German forces.

Mad Scientist

The mad scientist's provenance is grounded in science fiction in the character of Dr. Victor Frankenstein. Shelley subtitles her work *The Modern Prometheus*, and it is in Prometheus that the Western idea of excessive pursuit of knowledge finds mythic embodiment. Peter Goodrich finds a parallel between Prometheus's gift of fire to man and the mad scientist's pursuit of knowledge, "In his quest for insight into the laws of nature, however altruistic, the mad scientist, too, often misinterprets or altogether fails to perceive the full moral dimensions of his experimentation; and this failure in foresight radically flaws his forethought" (1986, 110). The lineage of the mad scientist extends back beyond Frankenstein to medieval alchemists, like Doctor Faust, Doctor Pretorius, John Dee, and Roger Bacon, because "the mad scientists insight suggests a supernatural power, which links him to the world of magical practitioners...and especially to black magic or sorcery because the application of his principle threatens human society" (111). Alchemists thus bridge the mad sorcerer and mad scientist figures—both are types of wizards "who possess either empirical or magical knowledge" and the "archetypal figure who has been the touchstone for the lineage of wizards since the Middle Ages is Merlin" (112). Merlin is thus a "significant forerunner of all mad scientists...a marriage of creative idealism" in his dream of Camelot "and corrupting lust" in his pursuit of Nimue, which takes him away from his oracular role as Arthur's advisor (112-113).

"Mad scientists are typically characterized by obsessive behaviour and the employment of extremely dangerous or unorthodox methods. They often are motivated by revenge, seeking to settle real or imagined slights, typically related to their unorthodox studies" (Wikipedia). The pre-Crisis Lex Luthor is the foremost comic book mad-scientist supervillain, but the Ultra-Humanite is particularly important to comic book superheroes as he was Superman's first supervillain and Luthor's baldness recalls the Ultra-Humanite's baldness and links them.

Criminal Mastermind

The criminal mastermind has also been around much longer than the superhero. John Cawelti traces the criminal mastermind to Poe's Minister D in "The Purloined Letter" (*Adventure* 1976, 92). In Cawelti's view, the criminal mastermind offers a trap for the writer of mystery stories as well as the hero, he is "too fascinating, too surrounded with ambiguous fantasies, and therefore extremely difficult to keep subordinated to the detective" (92-93). Minister D. is Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin's mirror image—"brilliant, aristocratic, eccentric, both poets and men of the sharpest reasoning powers" (92). He is a worthy adversary for the great detective, and because such villains offer a challenge for their heroes, they recur both as types throughout the meta-genre of crime fiction as well as individuals, rising again and again to threaten the stability and safety of the hero and his world.

Dr. Jack Quartz returned time after time—after apparently being shot, hung, burned, and blown up—at least twenty-five times to face dime-novel detective Nick Carter. More a master criminal than a crime lord, Quartz debuted two years before Dr. Moriarty, in *The Nick Carter Library* #13, October 31, 1891. Quartz is an amoral, skilled hypnotist and vivisectionist who most enjoys slicing up living women and playing against Carter with lives as pawns in his twisted game of chess. In many ways he presages the fictional villains and real serial killers of the twentieth century. Like the Joker or the Riddler, Quartz sends Carter boastful clues about his crimes. Like many later villains, he keeps his word and has a sense of honor about the rules of the game—rules he himself sets, but which he nonetheless follows scrupulously. Like nearly every arch-enemy, he values his adversary's life highly because playing against an equally skilled opponent brings him one of the greatest pleasures of his life. Carter's description of Quartz has many echoes—particularly in Holmes' description of Moriarty and Nayland Smith's of Dr. Fu Manchu—and serves as a useful index of the supervillain personality:

> Intellectually, he is the most remarkable man I have ever known. His intelligence is quite the most profound of any person I have ever known. In education, he is thoroughly versed in every branch of science. I believe that he speaks, fluently, every language that is worth speaking at all—many more of them than I do, myself, and I have mastered twelve. Physically, he is a stronger man than [turn of the century strongman Eugen] Sandow, or I. His manners are perfect. He is at home amid any surroundings, in any costume, under all circumstances. He has always seemed to know everything, and to be ready to make use of anything whenever the occasion should arrive. He is handsome of feature, and has the most wonderful eyes that ever looked out of a human head... .
>
> He is totally without two qualities possessed by other humans.... Morality and conscience. The man recognizes no moral responsibility, and he has no conscience at all. Compassion, in any form, is a meaningless term to him. Consideration for another, or for the sufferings of others, he does not know. The only law he recognizes at all is the law of power, of might, of attainment, of succeeding in whatever he undertakes to do. He worships beauty, as beauty alone, but destroys it with the same lack of compunction that he would manifest in plucking a blade of grass from the ground. He loves women, but only just so far as they can serve him, and that done, he destroys them just as he would do with that same blade of grass I have mentioned." (From *New Nick Carter Weekly* #692, qtd. in Nevins, "Dr. Quartz" 2005).

These characteristics are used repeatedly in describing supervillains, and much of Ian Fleming's descriptions of Bond's villains' motives, intellectual prowess, and physical capabilities seems cribbed from this description; that is not to say that Fleming did so, but that Frederic Dey so neatly anticipated (or perhaps established) the tropes of the criminal mastermind in his dime novels.

While Jack Quartz stood at the summit of fictional criminals in dime novels, a real man stood at the apex of actual crime in London, the real-life Napoleon of Crime, Adam Worth. Worth was the greatest criminal of the late nineteenth century and controlled or influenced much of London's underworld in his heyday. Interestingly, Worth's life bears many of the marks of the fictional supervillain's existence as laid out in the definition discussion below. Many supervillains suffer a wound—typically psychological and emotional but often with a physical component—that shapes their lives and which they are unable to recover from. Worth's wound was a literal one. Worth's parents were German Jews who emigrated to the United States when the boy was just five years old to set up a tailor shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When Worth was six, a schoolmate traded him one bright new penny for two of Worth's old ones. Showing his father the fruits of his trade earned him a vicious whipping. And, in the words of the great detective William Pinkerton, "From that day until his death, no one, be he friend or foe, honest or dishonest, Negro or Indian, relative or stranger, ever got the better of Adam Worth in any business transaction, regular or irregular" (qtd. in Macintyre 1997, 9). Worth developed a kind of mania to never again be poor andcontempt for legal authority. He stole the *Duchess of Devonshire*—a painting by Thomas Gainsborough of Georgiana Cavendish, wife of the Duke of Devonshire, and one of the most celebrated and wicked beauties of eighteenth century London—and held on to it for twenty-five years, all the while living a double life as both a master thief and a respectable man about town under the alias Henry J. Raymond, a name stolen from Henry Jarvis Raymond, founder of the *New York Times*. As much as he desired money, Worth desired to stick his thumb in the eye of the upper crust of society. His biographer Ben Macintyre sums him up thus:

> In some ways Worth was an archetypal product of his time: determined to better himself, caring little what moral compromises were made along the way, at once utterly upright and utterly corrupt. But while he was clearly in thrall to society and its rules, he was at the same time bitterly, implacably at war with them. He aped his bourgeois contemporaries, and stole from them, and all the time he despised them. (77)

Worth was a real-life criminal mastermind, but he was also the basis for the character most-often touted as the archetype of the crime lord, Sherlock Holmes' nemesis, Dr. Moriarty.

That Worth was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's primary model for Moriarty is not in doubt—the phrase "Napoleon of Crime" made famous in Holmes' introductory description of Moriarity was first used by Scotland Yard detective Robert Anderson in reference to Worth (Mcintyre 1997, 222). But what is odd about Moriarty is how little was actually written about him by Doyle. He appears in only one story, "The Final Problem," and is mentioned again only in the novel *The Valley of Fear*. All claims about him seem to be based upon two paragraphs from "The Final Problem":

> For years past I have continually been conscious of some power behind the malefactor, some deep organizing power which forever stands in the way of the law, and throws its shield over the wrong-doer. Again and again in cases of the most varying sorts–forgery cases, robberies, murders–I have felt the presence of this force, and I have deduced its action in many of those undiscovered crimes in which I have not been personally consulted. For years I have endeavoured to break through the veil which shrouded it, and at last the time came when I seized my thread and followed it, until it led me, after a thousand cunning windings, to ex-Professor Moriarty, of mathematical celebrity.
>
> He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order. He sits motionless, like a spider in the centre of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them. He does little himself. He only plans. But his agents are numerous and

> splendidly organized. Is there a crime to be done, a paper to be abstracted, we will say, a house to be rifled, a man to be removed—the word is passed to the professor, the matter is organized and carried out. The agent may be caught. In that case money is found for his bail or his defence. But the central power which uses the agent is never caught–never so much as suspected. This was the organization which I deduced, Watson, and which I devoted my whole energy to exposing and breaking up.

From these paragraphs come the impression that Moriarty's rich life off the page is worth pursuing on the page, and so he has become the standard for the criminal mastermind and the often-unseen presence lurking behind the scenes in Holmes pastiches.

The criminal mastermind is the most common supervillain in the pulps, where they tend to wear Ku Klux Klan-inspired robes and hoods. Doc Savage and the Shadow faced numerous such villains—the Roar Devil, the Midas Man, the Black Master, and Q. Sometimes the criminal mastermind is blended with the enemy commander type, as in the Red Menace, a corrupt Soviet agent who faced off against the Shadow and lost in 1931. In comics the Kingpin and post-Crisis Lex Luthor stand as best known examples.

The Inverted-Superhero Supervillain

The inverted-superhero supervillain is limited to the superhero genre, primarily because they have superpowers, codenames, and costumes. Although there are earlier costumed supervillains in comics—such as the vampiric Monk, whose schemes Batman ruins in *Detective Comics* #31—the Joker and Catwoman are probably the best, early examples of inverted-superhero supervillains. Prior villains like the Monk draw on masked and robed pulp predecessors and mad scientists like Lex Luthor or the Hugo Strange have a long lineage outside of comics. But the Joker and Catwoman mark an innovation in villainy because they are such direct responses to the superhero by creators looking to expand the superhero genre.

What makes the inverted-superhero supervillain different from other types of supervillain is that they can become superheroes.

Marvel Comics features many supervillains who join the good guys—Hawkeye, the Black Widow, Quicksilver, the Scarlet Witch, and even the Sandman. This ability to switch from villain to hero can be traced back to the Sub-Mariner, who debuted as an outsider figure, a bitter enemy of the surface world. He could then be positioned as a superhero investigating crimes, an ally of the United States fighting Nazis alongside the Human Torch, or an enemy of mankind taking on the Torch in an epic battle that threatened New York City's existence. The Sub-Mariner's mixed heritage and the tensions in identity it produced allowed him to be treated as an anti-hero, neither hero nor villain but one whose allegiance and loyalty to American society could fluctuate with the times.

Marvel's other reformed villains are typically reluctant villains, tricked or forced into evil, so their reformations are plausible. Hawkeye is forced into crime by his circus mentor, the Swordsman, and later fights Iron Man as a way of serving his lover, Soviet agent Madame Natasha, the Black Widow.



Tales of Suspense #64, *Avengers* #16 © 1965 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Hawkeye joins the Avengers after the Black Widow's supposed death. His former villain status is a useful plot device as it contrasts him with the Avenger's noble, straight-arrow leader Captain America. The Black Widow was herself forced into the life of a spy by Soviet commissars who threatened the destruction of her village and held her husband hostage. She comes to serve SHIELD as a double agent, but truly turns her back on supervillainy when the death of Soviet superagent the Red Star, who turns out to be her husband, reveals that her husband had been an active part of duping her into working as a spy. Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch debut as members of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, but time reveals them to be just

confused and misled teenagers who reform once they are freed of Magneto's evil influence.

In all these instances the supervillain's reformation is built on an ambivalence that is part of the villain's character. Not so in the case of the Sandman, a hardened criminal who gains superpowers while escaping prison. His reversal into a hero is sudden and without any historical basis, which may be why John Byrne found it so easy to retcon[35] away, something that would be much more difficult to do convincingly with Marvel's other reformed miscreants.

Four Sub-Types

There are four additional sub-types of supervillain—the alien, the evil god, the femme fatale, and the super-henchman. These sub-types are character tropes that appear in any number of genres. In superhero stories they serve as supervillains, and typically toward one of the main types in their characterization.

Aliens can be monsters, mad scientists, criminal masterminds, enemy commanders, or inverted-superhero supervillains. The Super Skrull is a monster, but also an inverted-superhero supervillain—with all the powers of the Fantastic Four, he could plausibly defect from the Skrull Empire and defend the Earth, as the Kree Captain Mar-Vell did.



Fantastic Four #18 © 1963 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Evil gods are those characters who due to their unlimited supernatural power are essentially gods, but who act in evil ways. Loki is an evil god, but is an inverted-superhero supervillain—he could start fighting crime on earth as Thor does. Thanos, Darkseid, and Dormammu are all evil gods and enemy commanders—all rule

their own worlds, command massive forces, and threaten the Earth with invasion.



Strange Adventures #126 © 1964 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Galactus and the Anti-Monitor are evil gods, but also monsters—they represent destructive forces of nature, motivated less by a desire for destruction than destruction as an expression of their existence.

Because the femme fatale role requires a certain element of sexual allure, the femme fatale cannot be a physically repulsive monster, and she rarely is a mad scientist as her mania would similarly render her unattractive. The Dragon Lady from *Terry and the Pirates* is a femme fatale, but also a criminal mastermind. The Black Widow was a femme fatale and an inverted-superhero supervillain until she defected from the Soviet Union to become an American superhero.



Amazing Spider-Man #86 © 197 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Super-henchmen are those underlings who are have enhancements, superpowers, or superior abilities and so would seem to qualify as supervillains themselves. But as underlings, they lack the mania and drive of the supervillain. If the assassin Fat Bastard in *Austin Powers: Goldmember* were operating on his own to kill Austin Powers, as

Francisco Scaramanga in the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* does with 007, he would be a criminal mastermind, but because he serves Dr. Evil, he is just a super-henchmen. The same is true of the Bond villains Jaws in the *Spy Who Loved Me* film, and Oddjob in *Goldfinger*. In superhero comics, super-henchmen count as full supervillains because when they are enhanced and given superpowers, they become inverted-superhero supervillains and do not need the mania to qualify. The Absorbing Man is an excellent example of the super-henchmen. To get at Thor, Loki empowers convicted criminal "Crusher" Creel with the ability to absorb the qualities of whatever objects he touches. Touching steel makes him nearly invulnerable; touching silk allows him to slip from a pursuer's grasp. Touching Mjolnir, Thor's enchanted hammer, gives him the power to go toe to toe with the thunder god.



Journey Into Mystery #115 © 1965 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The Absorbing Man has no great mission or plan but just seeks wealth through robbery, so he would not seem to have the mania to be a supervillain. But since he has superpowers and a codename, he could become a superhero. He chooses not to, and so counts as an inverted-superhero supervillain.

Definition

What is a supervillain? The easiest definition is simple, a villain who is super, that is, someone who commits villainous or evil acts and does so in a way superior to ordinary criminals or at a magnified level. But that definition is not satisfying. Another way to look at the supervillain is as the reverse of his foe the superhero, and thus to reverse the definition of the superhero, which appears at

the head of Chapter 3. This is a genre-based definition and so it limits itself, primarily through the fourth element, to protagonists of the superhero genre. But it is important to note that supervillains precede the creation of the superhero genre and in fact oppose superheroes, super heroes, and ordinary authorities; consequently, generic distinction does not play a role in defining the supervillain because the supervillain trope belongs to many genres, certainly those of the adventure meta-genre including the Western, spy/secret agent, superhero, war, science fiction, as well as many varieties of the detective genre. But the superhero's primary triad of mission, powers, and identity is useful in looking at the supervillain, although they operate differently than with the superhero.

Mission

The supervillain has a selfish, anti-social mission. The supervillain seeks something—typically wealth or power, but often fame or infamy in addition—that will serve his interests and not those of others or the larger culture. He works at cross purposes to contemporary society.

It is possible, and even typical, for a monster to act without malice. Destructiveness comes out of its nature—a werewolf is driven by its beast nature to kill; a vampire needs blood to stay alive; the *Astro City* supervillain the Living Nightmare, an externalized distillation of fear, fights superpowered heroes to leech their power to draw on their fears. Most monsters express a force of nature in their destructiveness. They become supervillains when they are set on mankind as a punishment as many mythical monsters were set on humanity by the gods to punish a transgression or to teach mankind a lesson.

Enemy commanders are ideologically motivated to conquer or subvert the nations and societies they are at war with. The mad scientist's mission arises from his desire to pursue knowledge past the point of safety—the Frankenstein myth—which always brings harm because the mad scientist is willing to sacrifice anything for that knowledge. Criminal masterminds are driven by greed and a lust for power.

The mission for inverted-superhero supervillains comes from whatever personal defect a character has before gaining his powers. This defect is what prevents the transformative experience of the

origin from turning him into a hero—his character is already flawed and his new power just magnifies the flaw and give him the ability to inflict harm upon others, to seek revenge for the wrongs—or imagined wrongs—done them. The Red Skull is an abandoned orphan, who was treated badly by others as a child, but is taken up by Hitler and turned into a super-Nazi. He uses his authority to strike back at the world for his suffering. Industrialist Norman Osborne desires wealth and power. He steals the inventions of his business partner Professor Stromm and sets him up on a charge of embezzlement. He suffers brain damage while experimenting with Stromm's formulas, which he hopes to cash in on. He becomes more self-centered and ambitious and creates the Green Goblin identity to pursue even more wealth and power.

Criminal Artistry

The supervillain's dream reaches far beyond the acquisitive scheme off the ordinary crook. The supervillain is an artist whose medium is crime. In *Batman* (1989) the Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, tells photojournalist Vicki Vale about his vision of himself:

> Let me tell you what I'm thinking about, sweetie, I was in the bath one day when I realized why I was destined for greatness. You know how concerned people are about appearances. This is attractive, that is not. Well, that's all behind me. I now do what other people only dream, I make art until someone dies. See? Hee, hee, hee. I am the world's first fully functioning homicidal artist.

The Joker sees his crimes as art. When his gang invades the Gotham art museum and defaces masterpieces, the Joker adds his signature to the destroyed paintings—his destruction, in his view, is a creative, artistic act, as are the murders he commits—he transforms the unhappy living into the eternally smiling and perfect dead.



Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #3 © 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

James Bond's villain Auric Goldfinger shares the view of crime as art. He considers himself a "poet in deeds" (Fleming, *Goldfinger* 2002, 171). To Goldfinger, crime is the unplanted field of human endeavor that he can distinguish himself in:

> Man has climbed Everest and he has scraped the depths of the ocean. He has fired rockets into outer space and split the atom. He has invented, devised, created in every realm of human endeavour, and everywhere he has triumphed, broken records, achieved miracles. I said in every realm, but there is one that he has neglected, Mr. Bond. That one is the human activity loosely known as crime. The so-called criminal exploits committed by individual humans—I do not of course refer to their idiotic wars, their clumsy destruction of each other—are of miserable dimensions: little bank robberies, tiny swindles, picayune forgeries. And yet, ready to hand, a few hundred miles from here, opportunity for the greatest crime is offered. Only the actors are missing. But the producer is at last here, Mr. Bond, and he has chosen his cast. This very afternoon the script will be read to the leading actors. Then rehearsals will begin and, in one week the curtain will go up for this single, the unique performance. And then will come

> the applause, the applause for the greatest single extra-legal coup of all time. And, Mr. Bond, the world will rock with that applause for centuries. (185-186)

Crime here is as legitimate a field of creative expression as exploration, rocket science, or atomic physics. Further, crime is a theatrical art, with actors, audience, and performance and it can be appreciated aesthetically. The great criminal, the supervillain, is the impresario who puts on a show for the world that is far superior to the pecuniary plunderings of ordinary bad guys.

In the film version of *The Man With the Golden Gun*, Francisco Scaramanga is a high-priced assassin who seeks "a duel between titans" with Bond to test and prove himself the best killer in the world. He lures James Bond to his island base and during dinner says that it would have been ridiculously easy to have shot Bond down when 007 first landed on the island, but explains, "You see Mr. Bond, like any great artist I want to create an indisputable masterpiece once in my lifetime. The death of 007, mano-a-mano, face-to-face, will be mine." He sees killing Bond as an artistic act, but added to the typical supervillain view of crime as art is the importance of the hero's greatness. It is Bond's status as a superior killer that makes his death into art.

Mr. Big, a Hatian criminal mastermind whom James Bond seeks to stop in *Live and Let Die* (2003), views crime in this fashion. He suffers from boredom and is "prey to what the early Christians called 'accidie', the deadly lethargy that envelops those who are sated, those who have no more desires" (69). He tells Bond that he is "absolutely pre-eminent in my chosen profession, trusted by those who occasionally employ my talents, feared and instantly obeyed by those whom I myself employ. I have, literally, no more worlds left to conquer in my chosen orbit. Alas it is too late in my life to change that orbit for another one, and since power is the goal of all ambition, it is unlikely that I could possibly acquire more power in another sphere than I already possess in this one" (69).

At the top of his game, he can only "take pleasure now in artistry, in the polish and finesse which I can bring to my operations. It has become almost a mania with me to impart an absolute rightness, a high elegance, to the execution of my affairs" (69). Every day he tries to meet a higher standard "of subtlety and technical polish

so that each of my proceedings will be a work of art, bearing my signature as clearly as the creations" of recognized masters. He is confident, as Auric Goldfinger was, that "the approach to perfection which I am steadily achieving in my operations will ultimately win recognition in the history of our times" (70). Crime in this view will be recognized as an artform and appreciated by critics and historians of the future. He does not concern himself, for the moment, with fame or infamy, "I see myself sometimes as one of those great Egyptian fresco painters who devoted their lives to producing masterpieces in the tombs of kings, knowing that no living eye would ever see them" (70). He seeks a pure art without recognition.

Further, crime can be seen as an activity to be respected, a source of pride, even a source of racial advancement. Mr. Big conceives of criminality as a worthy pursuit, a field of effort just like science, sports, music, and medicine. He tells 007, "In the history of negro emancipation, there have already appeared great athletes, great musicians, great writers, great doctors and scientists. In due course, as in the developing history of other races, there will appear negroes great and famous in every other walk of life. It is unfortunate for you Mister Bond, and for this girl, that you have encountered the first of the great negro criminals" (209-210). He regards himself as "one who has the ability and the mental and nervous equipment to make his own laws and act according to them rather than accept the laws that suit the lowest common denominator of the people. You have doubtless read Trotter's *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace*, Mr. Bond. Well I am by nature and predilection a wolf and I live by the wolf's laws. Naturally the sheep describe such a person as a 'criminal'" (210). The fact that he prospers among sheep is due to his employment of modern measures and his "infinite capacity for taking pains. Not dull, plodding pains, but artistic, subtle pains" (210). The link is again made between criminal and artistic activity. And Mr. Big views his criminality with pride as a natural outgrowth of racial advancement.

Mania

Dr. No makes a similar parallel between crime and other pursuits, and devises a reason for this similarity—it arises from the same source. After James Bond refers to Dr. No as a maniac, No replies:

> You are right. Mister Bond. That's just

> what I am, a maniac. All the greatest men are maniacs. They are possessed by a mania which drives them forward towards their goal. The great scientists, the philosophers, the religious leaders—all maniacs. What else but a blind singleness of purpose could have given focus to their genius, would have kept them in the groove of their purpose? Mania, my dear Mister Bond, is as priceless as genius. Dissipation of energy, fragmentation of vision, loss of momentum, lack of follow-through—these are the vices of the herd. I do not possess these vices. I am, as you correctly say, a maniac—a maniac, Mister Bond, with a mania for power. That is the meaning of my life. That is why I am here [on my island base]. That is why you are here. That is why here exists. (Fleming *Dr. No* 2002, 161)

This mania is what raises a supervillain above the common criminal. It is this mania that allows the supervillain to see what he's doing as art or as analogous to great accomplishments in other fields and also to accomplish (or nearly accomplish as he is almost always stopped by the hero) his great scheme. The blindness that comes from a maniac singleness of purpose permits the supervillain to not see the inhumanity of what he does or to perceive what he does as beneficial to the world.

This blindness is directly related to the selfishness of the supervillain. The supervillain is selfish—he is driven by his ego and even if others would benefit from his mission if he enacts it, he will benefit personally and to the greatest extent—he will gain the most wealth or power of all. This selfishness can be seen in those villains driven by mission to save society from itself. Such ideologically driven supervillains claim a desire to improve the world, such as William Carpenter, protagonist of Philip Wylie's *The Murderer Invisible* (1931). Carpenter seeks to advance social evolution through "forcible emancipation of man from his stupidity, his treachery, his inferiority, his religious follies, his emotional excesses, his tribal system, his politics... .and its magnificent objective will be to leap in one generation the evolutionary processes of hundreds, perhaps

thousands of years" (142). He attempts to force this evolution through a campaign of terror that will kill thousands or millions of people and will end with the utter capitulation of all governments and realization of himself in absolute control of the world, shaping the world by dictat and keeping his quislings in power through fear of assassination; as Carpenter puts it, "Blind submission is necessary. And blind submission I shall have" (174). Doc Savage's foe John Sunlight seeks a similar state of world peace through terror. In *The Devil Genghis* (1938) he has hatched a plan for world conquest using the super-scientific devices he stole from Doc Savage in *The Fortress of Solitude* (1938). After conquering the world, he would disarm humanity—from cannon to revolver—and make possession of a firearm a capital crime. Next he would make everyone in the world speak English, and erase state and national boundaries. "I will make all mankind of one nation, of one language, without arms. There will be no wars because there will be nothing left to cause war" (137). Besides the millions who would be killed in the wars and thousands who would die resisting his rule, the elimination of the world's languages would immeasurably impoverish the world culturally. But Sunlight sees this all as a positive alternative to the messiness of the world's contemporary state. It would be peace, but the peace of the dead, with Sunlight—or Carpenter—sitting on top of the pile of corpses the world would become. So even though peace would be achieved, the process of achieving it is anti-social.

The villain's selfishness is absolute and solipsistic. He sees himself as the center of existence. In *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940), Dr. Zarkov tells Emperor Ming that they must stop him because they are not only trying to save the Earth but the universe. "I am the universe," replies Ming. And to Ming this is true. Any injury to him is an injury to his empire, to the universe as a whole. Ming sees himself as the sun king Louis XIV did when he pronounced "*Je suis l'état. L' état c'est moi*" ("I am the state. The state is me."), because he is the whole of existence to himself, that is his selfishness is so complete that he cannot conceive of anything that falls outside himself.

The Wound

This grandiose self-aggrandizement arises from a sense of victimhood, originating in a wound that the supervillain never recovers from. He

creates a superiority complex that most often emerges as a defense mechanism to make up for feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that arose from maltreatment received when he was younger, often in childhood, that made him feel inferior. But often supervillians are inferior—they are defective physically or socially (or both) and are only superior mentally. They are, as therapists say, in love with the story of their wound, unable to get past whatever happened in their past and turn their energies toward healing or redemptive therapy.

Dr. No blames everything on his parents—a German Methodist missionary and a Chinese girl of good family who paid an aunt to be raise their child—"No love, you see...lack of parental care" (Fleming *Dr. No* 2002, 163). For No, crime represents "revolt against the father figure who had betrayed" him (Fleming *Dr. No* 2002, 163). Instead of learning from his injury and following the golden rule, he inverts it. Dr. No tells 007 he seeks power, "the power, Mr. Bond, to do unto others what had been done unto me, the power of life and death, the power to decide, to judge, the power of absolute independence from outside authority" (Fleming *Dr. No* 2002, 165). Dr. No cannot, will not forgive his parents. Too much of his identity and sense of self is bound up in rejection of his father, in inverting the Christian mission that led to his own birth.

Almost all villains share this early injury and subsequent inability to move past their injury. Hugo Drax, villain of *Moonraker* (1955), was once a Nazi and cannot forgive Britain for defeating the Third Reich. He plans to drop a nuclear missile on London, and when England learns that it has been defeated by a single German, he fumes, "Perhaps they'll stop calling us Krauts—BY ORDER!" (2003, 205). William Carpenter, the murderer invisible, believes that the world has hated him since his birth and he wishes vengeance, "From the day I was born—fourteen pounds of gangling joints—every one I have encountered has laughed at me behind his face. The world has hated me. Women have turned from me. Men have sought to bring my ruin. I have endured every persecution that society, smug in a flabbier and impotent flesh, can contrive" (26). He sees himself as a special and unique victim, and this victimhood justifies his actions.

Mr. Big seems a similar physical horror—he has over-sized features, a great soccer ball of a hairless head with gray-black, taut skin, no eyebrows, no eyelashes, eyes extraordinarily far apart and

slightly bulging with golden irises around black pupils; in Bond's estimation, "They were animal eyes, not human, and they seemed to blaze" (Fleming, *Live* 2003, 59). Bond finds the total impression "awe-inspiring, even terrifying, and Bond could imagine that so ghastly a misfit must have been bent since childhood on revenge against fate and against the world that hated him because it feared him" (60).

The Red Skull carries a similar wound. As an orphan, he was miserable and alone, abandoned to the evil of the world. He turned thief, only to have larger boys prey on him. He idolizes Hitler because the Führer is his "exact opposite! He is power—and I am nothing!" (Lee and Kirby, "Origin of the Red Skull" 1965, 128). He sees himself as worthless and his attempt to fill this void gives him the mania he needs to enact the great crimes that make him a supervillain and raise him above ordinary criminality.

The wound of most supervillains is easy to name and is most often the seed of their origin. Victor von Doom's pride and lust for knowledge leads him to his disfiguring injury.



Fantastic Four Annual #2 © 1964 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

So hideous does he perceive himself to be that he decides to hide his grotesque face behind an iron mask and make war on the world. But his wound goes back further to his boyhood, when his father was persecuted for failing to heal a baron's dying wife. His father dies from exposure attempting to escape the baron's troops and Doom swears on his father's deathbed, "They murdered my mother…when I was but an infant!! And now they have slain my father!! They'll pay for that!! All of mankind shall pay!!" (Lee and Kirby, "Fantastic Origin" 1974, 45).

This sense of injury and need for vengeance reaches parodic

heights with the Silver-Age origin of Lex Luthor (*Superman* #173, November 1964). As a teenager living in Smallville, Luthor created life in a test tube, but a fire broke out. Superboy extinguished the fire with his superbreath, and chemicals ignited, blowing over Luthor and caused his hair to fall out, so he set himself against Superboy and later Superman, and becomes the greatest supervillain of the DC Universe—all for the loss of his hair.



Superman #173 © 1964 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The Joker offers a theory of supervillain in *The Killing Joke*. As a young man, an unsuccessful comedian named Jack suffers a horrendous tragedy when his wife and baby died in a fire caused by a malfunctioning baby-bottle heater. His subsequent short criminal career as the Red Hood ends after the robbery of the Monarch Playing Card Company when he seeks to escape through the Ace Chemical works where he once worked. He eludes Batman by plunging into a soup of chemical waste and swimming through drainage pipes, from which he emerges with white skin and green hair and takes on the identity of the Joker. As the Joker, he shoots and cripples Barbara Gordon in front of her father, Commissioner James Gordon (and presumably rapes her, though this is not explicitly stated). He then takes Gordon captive and attempts to drive him mad in a horrible parody of a carnival by showing Gordon images of his daughter's violation. He argues that in a psychotic world in which innocents die, when "faced with the inescapable fact that human existence is mad, random and pointless" the only reasonable response is madness (Moore, *Killing Joke* 1988, 34). He wants to demonstrate that one bad day will drive anyone mad, that there is no difference between himself and anyone else, and so he is not inferior or weak for his madness and ultimately not at fault for his actions.

He accuses Batman of having a similar bad day and going mad, but refusing to admit the meaninglessness of existing, and insisting on "pretending that life makes some sense, that there's some point to all this struggling" (39). So for the Joker, the mania that drives the supervillain is a reasonable and understandable reaction to the universe—it is an attempt to impose meaning on the void, a god-like act emerging out of an ego folded in on itself in an attempt to defend its sovereignty against injury.



Batman: The Killing Joke © 1988 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

A few supervillains have a non-personal wound—they feel for a class of beings whom they represent and who have been wounded in some way, or who are mistreated or oppressed (or presented as being mistreated or oppressed). Dracula, Dr. Fu Manchu, and Ra's Al-Ghul share a desire to overturn the status quo and reverse the ruling order—because that status quo negatively affects their kind. Their missions are socially transformative. Dracula comes to London to establish himself in fresh territory. Dr. Van Helsing fears that the Count brings with him generational genocide—the gradual replacement of *Homo sapiens* at the top of the evolutionary ladder. Helsing says that vampires "cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world; for all that die from the preying of the Un-Dead become themselves Un-Dead, and prey on their kind. And so the circle goes on ever widening, like as the ripples from a stone thrown in the water" (Stoker 1993, 178). Humanity will become mere cattle to this circle of undead masters, and the dead will replace the living as the rulers of creation. Dracula's desire to overturn the rule of the living arises from his status as undead—it's in his nature to create other vampires. His wound is literal—the vampire bite that created him.

Likewise the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu, the embodiment of the yellow peril, seeks to overthrow the colonial order and replace it with one in which the colonized are independent or rule in the stead of the Anglo-Saxon race. Fu Manchu stands for the colonized. He feels the indignation that comes from being ruled by foreign powers. Should his plans come to fruition, China will rule the world, his organization the Si-Fan will rule China, and Fu Manchu will rule the Si-Fan. And the world will be turned upside down with Fu Manchu on top.

Batman's enemy Ra's Al-Ghul seeks a more radical revision of the ruling order. Instead of fighting to overthrow Western imperialism he seeks to overthrow human speciesism and bring the world to a perfect environmental balance by reducing humanity a sustainable remnant, which, of course, he will rule. His environmentalist mission was only mentioned in passing at the beginning though. Ra's Al-Ghul explains: "I have been called criminal and genius...and I am neither! I am an artist! I have a vision of an earth as clean and pure as a snow-swept mountain...or the desert outside!" (O'Neil 1972, 18).



Batman #244 © 1972 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Over the decades since his debut in 1971, Al Ghul's artistic vision of a world has evolved into the expression of a wound, the feeling that humankind has become a parasitic pest that needs to be scrubbed off Mother Earth.

Monologue and Soliloquy

The supervillain's wound prompts him to monologue, to sit the hero down—whether to dinner or bound in a death trap—and tell his story.

The villain seeks, as the Joker did, confirmation of the virtuousness and reasonableness of his decisions, of his mania. He wants the approval of the hero, who is by definition superior and not afflicted with the inferiority complex of the villain. The hero is not damaged, not physically, socially, or morally deformed. If the villain can gain the hero's respect and approval—the respect and approval he so missed in his early life—then his life and villainy are justified and he is recuperated back into the community that ostracized and rejected him. Approval by the hero will heal the supervillain's wound. But the hero never gives this approval and that is what keeps the villain coming back to the same hero over and over again, especially if the hero—as in the case of Superman with Lex Luthor and Batman with the Joker—is in some sense responsible for the villain's wound. The hero's refusal often drives the supervillain into a frenzy, leading to a critical error that allows the hero to vanquish his stronger foe, thereby reinforcing the hero's superiority and villain's inferiority and pouring salt into his wound.

In the middle of listening to Dr. Octopus brag about his power, Spider-Man once asked, "Tell me something, Ock…are you trying to defeat me by talking me to death?!" (Lee and Ditko, "The Sinister Six" 1969, 35). The answer—based upon the propensity of villains to talk, talk, talk—appears to be yes. Supervillains are given to two forms of speechifying, the soliloquy and the monologue. The theatrical origin of these terms points to an aspect of supervillainy—the artistic and exhibitionist nature of their crimes. They are not merely involved in crime for its pecuniary reward, they are impressarios, putting on a show of sorts, and the heroes who oppose them are their audience.

The term *monologuing*, coined in *The Incredibles* (2004), refers to supervillains' tendency toward self-absorbed, self-destructive talking; instead of killing the hero, they spout off on their greatness, the hero's feebleness, and the inevitability of their victory. Ozymandias noted the foolishness of monologuing: "I'm not a Republic serial villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my master stroke if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its outcome?" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, 27).

In serials, villains such as Bela Lugosi's Dr. Zorka in *The Phantom Creeps* (1939) and Michael Fox's Dr. Grood in *The Lost Planet* (1953) go on and on about their plans for conquest and domination to stretch the plot to fill twelve episodes. The same is

true in pulps—writers working for a few cents a word had a great incentive to fill pages with villain speechifying. Ideologically driven supervillains such as Doc Savage's opponents John Sunlight (*The Devil Ghengis*, 1938) and Professor Homer Randolph (*He Could Stop the World*, 1937) or the Shadow's arch-enemy Shiwan Khan (*The Golden Master*, 1939) are more given to monologuing than crooks driven by avarice, but any criminal mastermind is likely to launch into a half-page of self-aggrandizement. Monologuing also allows writers to recap the story line and fill the audience in on plot elements they might have missed, so monologuing serves storywriters' purposes well.

Walter Gibson in *The Black Master* provides a marvelous example of the death-trap monologue. The Black Master—who has held New York City in a grip of terror through a campaign of hidden bombs—has The Shadow trapped in an underground crypt in a graveyard. He tells The Shadow that he respects him, that he is the only man in the world like himself, and that he is the only man the Black Master has not killed immediately. He proceeds to tell The Shadow the story of his beloved, who died because of another man's neglect—he served justice to that man in his bombing campaign, destroying all that he had. The Black Master flaunts his power, telling The Shadow that he could lie dead in one-tenth of a second if the Black Master so desired it. He then offers Shadow his life in exchange for companionship—he says he will share his power equally with the crimefighter, who naturally refuses. The Black Master leaves him to think things over in the soundproof vault, but of course The Shadow escapes because he has concealed explosive powder in the lining of his cloak.

But if monologuing were only a tool for the creators, it would not have lasted. Monologuing embodies central aspects of supervillainy. Monologuing is a form of hubris that comes out of the villain's belief in his absolute supremacy and the assurance that his plans are unstoppable. Hugo Drax, villain of *Moonraker,* conducts a classic death-trap monologue with James Bond bound to a chair in the exhaust pit of a rocket launching pad. Drax says, "You don't know how I have longed for an English audience... to tell my story" (Fleming 2003, 204). He then tells Bond the story of his life, finishing with the details of his plan to launch a nuclear missile at London, and closes by asking, "What do you think of my story?" Bond dismisses Drax's life as "sad business," which goads

the madman into beating Bond and forgetting about a lighter left on his desk (213). Bond burns off his ropes, escapes certain death, and stops Drax's plan. Drax should have pocketed his lighter, but his desire to reveal himself to Bond and exert his will over the hero overrides his common sense.

As with Drax, it is common for the villains to tell their story to the hero and for the hero to be the first person ever to hear it. The thing that prompts the villain to tell the hero is the respect he has for the hero, the hero's exceptionality prompts the villain to make an exception and tell his story. In the novel *Dr. No*, the epoynmous villain feels confident that Bond cannot escape his island, over which he rules absolutely, so he relaxes with 007 over a meal, telling the secret agent, "It is a rare pleasure to have an intelligent listener and I shall enjoy telling you the story of one of the most remarkable men in the world," himself, of course (Fleming 2002, 160). No's dinner with Bond is a perfect prototype of the dinner monologue.

Monologuing seems to put the villain in a state of self-absorption. Auric Goldfinger's eyes go blank and focus inward as he rhapsodizes on his love of gold and its power, "the magic of controlling energy, exacting labour, fulfilling one's every wish and whim, and when need be, purchasing bodies, minds, even souls" (184). For these moments Goldfinger enters a world made of his own words—an expression of his desire to stamp his image on history as the greatest criminal artist who ever lived.

Ultimately, though, monologuing is a weakness. It allows a superhero time to recover or escape a death trap or works as an unintentional confession. In Mysterio's debut (*Amazing Spider-Man* #13, 1964), he tells an apparently defeated Spider-Man all about how he faked the web-slinger's powers to commit robberies that would be blamed on Spider-Man. Mysterio does not realize that Spider-Man's helplessness is faked to cover his secret tape-recording of the villain's confession. Mysterio never gets to kill Spidey and the tape is used to convict him and clear Spider-Man's name.

For comic book supervillains, the Golden Age did not offer much space for monologing. The anthology nature of most comics imposed tight storytelling restrictions: typically stories ran six to eleven pages in length with eight panels per page. Thus later loquacious supervillains such as the Ultra-Humanite (*Action Comics* #13, 1939) and Lex Luthor (*Action Comics* #23, 1940) are given

only two panels each to tell Superman of their scientific genius and plans to make themselves the supreme dominators of the world. By the Silver Age, comic books had shrunk from 64 to 24 pages and the original-art boards had similarly shrunk from a 2-to-1 ratio to a 1.5 to 1 ratio, leading artists and writers to compose longer stories with fewer panels per page and slow down the pacing of the stories (Verano 2005, 3-4). Stan Lee and Jack Kirby broke the paradigm of the self-contained story and moved toward serial narratives that continued from issue to issue. Freed from the earlier publishing constraints, Lee's tendency to verbosity came through in longer monologues by villains. In "The Fantastic Origin of the Red Skull" (*Tales of Suspense* #66, 1965), a tale set behind the lines in Nazi German, the Red Skull confronts a bound Captain America and begins to reminisce about his life. "Before I dispose of you, I shall tell you how I first became the Red Skull" (3).



Tales of Suspense #66 © 1965 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The Red Skull discourses for seven pages, at one point slugging Captain America over the head with a pistol into apparent unconsciousness, saying, "And now if I may finish my narrative without any further interruption" (8). The Red Skull wants to control his enemy and have Captain America show him the proper respect by silently listening.

The second form of speechifying, the soliloquy, is performed without an audience or in front of obedient underlings who neither interrupt nor respond to their master's musings. In the soliloquy, the supervillain gives full vent to his ego, proclaiming his greatness and promising vengeance on those who oppose him. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #5, a solitary Dr. Doom declares, "Ordinary men tremble at the mention of my name! The entire civilized world fears the menace

of Doctor Doom!" and he later asserts, "When one is a master of science, as *I* am, there is nothing which cannot be accomplished! Sooner or later, I shall eliminate all those who dare oppose me!" (3, 8).

The other topic of the soliloquy is the villain's relationship to the hero. In Doctor Octopus' second appearance (*Amazing Spider-Man* #11), Ock complains that he has been committing all sorts of crimes, but he cannot get Spider-Man's attention. He is essentially wondering why their relationship is not foremost in Spider-Man's life and resolves, like a football widow, to do more to interest his man.

The monologue and soliloquy have great value in conveying the character of a supervillain and are presented straight-fowardly and without irony. The treatment of Doctor Octopus demonstrates the value of the two techniques as he has always been concerned with speech and dictating to those he considers his inferiors. In his first appearance after the accident that has grafted his metal arms to his body, Octavius holds the director of the Atomic Research Center and two maids captive while he performs an experiment. The director says Octopus has no right to hold them captive, and Octopus replies, "Right?! You dare to speak to me of right?" and when Spider-Man bursts in and wisecracks, Octopus indignantly answers, "You dare speak flippantly to me? You fool! When I'm finished with you, you'll sing a different tune!" and after defeating the wall-crawler spouts, "You dared to mock me before! Why aren't you mocking me now? Where are your brave words and taunts now, Spider-Man?" (Lee and Ditko, "Doctor Octopus" 1963, 7). Octopus is very concerned with who has the authority and ability to speak.

In *Doctor Octopus: Year One* (2005), Zeb Wells and Kaare Andrews retell Octopus' origin and first encounter with Spider-Man. Octopus is shown to have an unhealthy, almost sexual, relationship with atomic power. He breaks in to the Ravenswood nuclear reactor, shuts down the safety locks, and speaks to the reactor:

> Yessss. Unfurl before me. I heard your cries. It will take only a moment, and you will be free. I have felt both parental love and hate. And to be truthful, the one shaped me just as much as the other. In the great design, the destroyer leaves as great a mark as the builder. It is the

> highest purpose, to influence another's life. In this godless world it is the only proof that we exist. Together, we will touch millions. And the seed of those millions will spread…and we will be felt for generations. But first I will see your face. The face of my god. And I will grant you freedom. (np)

In this soliloquy Octopus reveals the origin of his stunted psyche—his parents' mistreatment of him, as well as his twisted view of how to achieve greatness. This speech lets the reader into the supervillain's mind and exposes his motivation. Contemporary writers like Wells go far beyond the formulaic motivations of hurt pride and injured ego that drove Stan Lee's Silver Age villains, but they use the soliloquy in the same way that Lee did, to help the reader see behind the villain's mask and make even a supervillain into a human being.

Octopus' monologue in the same story lets him put forward his vision of the world and proclaim his superiority to it. He has apparently defeated Spider-Man and is holding the web-slinger in two of his metal arms, helpless.

> You're just like the sheep, Spider-Man, you do not understand. Everything is technology. Our language, our words… all intellect-driven inventions, making order out of chaos. But the most telling of these technologies is morality, Spider-Man. A device constructed to spur our race to greater things…the compass by which all actions and advances are judged. Surely, in the age of the atom, we are due for an innovation. Your body gives way, just as your pedestrian values will yield to a greater truth. And your human sentimentalism will be crushed in the wheels of progress. (np)

And while Octopus is monologuing, Spider-Man is able to pull the two metal arms that hold his hands close enough together to connect them with a package of chemicals and short circuit them through a feedback loop, rendering Octopus helpless. Had Octavius merely killed Spider-Man instead of holding him aloft and yammering on about his philosophy of life, Spider-Man could

not have beaten him. But Octopus' ego—and villains are all ego—demanded an audience, demanded that Spider-Man acknowledge his superiority and greatness, and this, not Spider-Man's power, brought the supervillain low, as pride always does.

Power

Supervillains are superior to and more powerful than the ordinary authorities. They have cunning, genius, resources, or extra-ordinary abilities that render the ordinary agents of the social order helpless to stop them, or at least that puts the authorities at a distinct disadvantage. Their superiority has several sources. Typically they have access to super-science or science-fictional technology—technology that is far superior and greatly advanced over the technology available to the rest of society, and they typically either are geniuses and create this technology themselves or they employ geniuses—willingly or not—to invent for them. This technology can also be represented as mystical or magical power, in which case the villain is or is allied with a sorcerer. The second source of their power is great wealth, wealth that can be used to recruit and equip a private army or a squad of highly trained and effective specialists in crime; or their wealth represents the resources of a foreign power or state—the armed forces, government bureaucracy, agricultural resources, industrial power, and national resource wealth of a kingdom, nation, or empire. The third source of their power is charisma—they are able to draw mass numbers of ordinary people into their schemes or extract extra-ordinary loyalty from those who serve them. The last source of strength is extra-ordinary physical, mental, or mystical abilities, superpowers that make them more than human—super strength, invulnerability, telepathy, superspeed—any of the powers that a superhero might possess.

Power is central to definition of supervillain—if a malign individual has only the strength, wit, and other resources available to normal human beings, they are mere villains. If the resources and abilities of the police are sufficient to counter a villain's schemes, he is just a bad guy. But if a villain transcends those abilities and holds mastery of so many resources that even major world governments are working against the odds when they try to stop him, then he is a supervillain, particularly if these resources are matched to a vision that goes beyond mere avarice—if they have an ego-soaked or ego-

driven mania or vision, some great project to accomplish, especially if this project is socially transformative but will have to be forced upon an unwilling populace and especially if it involves mass murder or massive numbers of deaths, or if the project can be viewed—in a sick and twisted way—as art. Therefore, mission and power are the two important defining elements of supervillainy.

Identity

In the reverse of the superhero, identity is the weakest element of the definition of the supervillain and is not necessary but typical. It is a necessary aspect of inverted-superhero supervillains since they wear costumes and have codenames. Unlike superheroes, they often do not maintain secret identities, though they obviously have ordinary identities. They often give up their normal lives, deciding to live purely within the super world. They have abandoned the things that tie them to mundane existence and cut themselves off from normal life. Just as the secret identity helps the superhero retain ties to the larger society he protects, so does the villain's abandonment of the ordinary identity magnify his selfishness and disconnect from the larger society he attacks.

Quite often a villain's name raises him above the ordinary criminal. Joe Chill killed Bruce Wayne's parents, but he is just a criminal and his name does nothing more than identify him for booking purposes. But the name Ming the Merciless, Emperor of Mongo, is a different story. It conveys his character—he is merciless—and gives a sense of his power—he is emperor of Mongo. Quite often the villain's birth name supplies some sense of grandiosity—one wonders if it is the villain's attempt to live up to his name that drives him to become a supervillain.

The Bond villain Mr. Big gets his name from his initials—Buonaparte Ignace Galla—but it reflects his physical nature—he is "six and a half foot tall and weight twenty stone, and little of it was fat" (Fleming, *Live* 2003, 60). His name also reflects his position in the black underworld—"probably the most powerful negro criminal in the world" (16)—head of the Black Window Voodoo cult, believed to be Baron Samedi, a Soviet agent, and a member of SMERSH.

Goldfinger is another man whose birth name perhaps suggested his criminal career. His surname comes from his family's long association with the gold trade—his father and grandfather had

refined gold for Fabergé. He is the man who fingers gold, and by associating himself so fully with something so valuable and desirable and powerful—gold possesses "magic of controlling energy, exacting labor, fulfilling one's every wish and whim, and when need be, purchasing bodies, minds, even souls"—he acquires an aura of that power (Fleming, *Goldfinger* 2002, 185).

Supervillains also give themselves grandiose names to assert their superiority. Dr. No coined his name—"I changed my name to Julius No—the Julius after my father and the No for my rejection of him and of all authority.... I called myself 'doctor' because doctors receive confidences and they can ask questions without arousing suspicion"—while looking for a place to make his headquarters (Fleming, *Dr. No* 2002, 166). His name is a rejection of all authority above him and an assertion of his superiority and his knowledge and competance, but it is false—it has no outside authorization, it is solipsistic, another aspect of the ego being at the center of the supervillain.

Captain Cold's name similarly emerged from his desire to assert authority, but also to draw the Flash's attention. In a recent version of his origin, Lenny Snart claims, "I was more than happy to trade in my real name for something a bit…dramatic, I guess. Something I thought would grab the Flash's attention. I always loved the cold. Added the 'captain' part to give me the illusion of authority" (original ellipses, Johns 2003, 131). His identity is thus based upon a relationship he wished to establish with the Flash. This desire is often at the root of the hero/villain dance.

Hero/Villain Relationships

Supervillains relate to their heroes in a number of ways, through self-worth, as archenemies, as dopplegangers, in Oedipal parings, as displacement of the hero's personality, and in rogue's galleries.

Self-Worth

Supervillains get their sense of self-worth from the quality of the hero they oppose. In *Detective Comics* #475 (Feb 1978), the Joker surprises Rupert Thorne in the men's room:

> Heed my words, fat man: I know you
> bid for the Batman's identity, alongside

> the Penguin and myself! I suspect you're behind Prof. Strange's disappearance! But obviously, you didn't learn the Batman's identity, and that's why you yet live! I don't want that secret penetrated—ever—since it would take away my fun—the thrill of the joust with my perfect opponent. The Joker must have the Batman! Nay, the Joker deserves the Batman! What fun would there be in humbling mere policemen? I am the greatest criminal ever known! Ha Ha Ha Ha! And for anyone else to destroy the Batman would be unworthy of me! (Englehart, "Laughing" 1978, 12).

The Joker rates himself by rating his opponent—he is a great criminal because he has a great hero to oppose him. Their relationship is what makes his criminal life worthwhile.

Arch-Enemy

In the archenemy relationship, the villain is the hero's greatest opponent, typically the one he has faced most often. The archenemy relationship always comments on the nature of the hero. The defect that makes the villain villainous is exactly what the hero resists. The Red Skull stands for Nazi ideology and anti-democratic values, which the Aryan-looking *übermensch* Steve Rogers rejects. The Joker represents a self-centered response to tragedy that Batman, who has suffered a similar tragedy and loss, must resist. On the television show *Smallville*, Lex Luthor stands for the moral shortcuts that Clark Kent must resist to avoid becoming the tyrant as his father Jor-El seemingly wants. Perhaps the most telling arch-enemy relationship is that of Professor X and Magneto. Once they were friends who shared a vision—or at least a fear—of what mutants could become in the world and of how humanity would respond. Xavier chose the path of peaceful integration, Magneto the path of violent opposition to the threat humanity posed mutanity. In a very real sense, they have identical goals—the safety of mutantkind—but Xavier chooses the arduous, slower, path of cooperation, whereas Magneto's plans would result in *Homo superior* ruling the earth and replacing *Homo sapiens* with Magneto ruling over the mutants. Xavier is selfless and

therefore a hero; Magneto is selfish, and therefore a villain.

Doppelganger

The doppelganger is a villain with the same powers as the hero and most often a very similar visual look. The purest example is Professor Zoom, whose costume inverts the costume of the Flash.



The Flash #225 © 1974 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Captain Marvel's red costume is inverted in Black Adam's black costume; as is Spider-Man's in Venom's. In some cases the inversion is taken to a higher level, as with the armored opponents Iron Man, a capitalist in his Tony Stark identity, and the Crimson Dynamo, a communist agent. These villains offer the toughest challenge to the hero because they have the same powers but are not bound by the heroic code.

A rare variant of this relationship exists, the opposite doppleganger. The opposite doppleganger reverses the powers and appearance of the hero. Man-Bat, who originally appeared as a monster supervillain, inverts Batman's name, and appears more as a bat than a man. The Hulk villain the Leader is small with a large cranium—he is all brain, whereas the Hulk is all body. The Silver-Age Flash's first villain, Turtleman, has the opposite sobriquet to the Flash; he is the slowest man alive.

Oedipal

An Oedipal villain has a Freudian relationship with the hero; he represents the hero's relationship to his parents. The clearest example of this relationship is Superman, who primarily battles versions of his father.[36] According to Michael Fleisher:

> The horrendous cataclysm that destroyed Krypton occurred at a time when the infant Superman was grappling with the agonizing complexity of his affectional and erotic feelings toward Lara, his mother. In Oedipal terms, the infant Superman wished his father dead so that he could possess his mother. And then, all at once, the first part of the forbidden fantasy came true: the entire planet exploded and his father died. (*Superman* 1978, 396).

Compounding this Oedipal tension is the fact that Lara specifically rejected Kal in favor of Jor-El.



Superman #53 © 1948 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

In Oedipal terms, she could have rejected Jor-El by suggesting that he save himself while she and Kal remained on Krypton. This rejection is made explicit in the first initial comic book version of the origin (*Superman* #53, 1948). The rocket is large enough to carry one adult along with the child. Jor-El suggests that Lara take their baby to earth, but she rejects this idea, telling Jor-El that her place is by his side. Instead of a long life on Earth as Supermom to her son, Lara chose death as an ordinary woman with her husband. Thus she rejects both Kal and the Superman he would become, banishing him to a life isolated from his past and leaving him to discover his Kryptonian heritage slowly and on his own.

Fleisher further proposes that the personality of Clark Kent emerged from this cataclysm. Having seen what his fantasies could produce, Kal-El created Clark Kent as a way of denying his awesome power, "of protecting the universe from his awesomely destructive

fantasies of death and cataclysm" (*Superman* 1978, 396). Clark Kent, therefore, is the outward expression of Superman's inner self. Superman sees himself as weak and inadequate because of survivor guilt. He feels anger at having been abandoned by Kryptonians. At the moment of his planet's death, he was not super, he was impotent; a spineless Clark Kent fleeing the destruction of his home and people instead of a powerful, potent Superman coming to their rescue.

Deep feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing by perceived rejection by his parents find their outward expression in the personality of Clark Kent who "reinforces and confirms his own lowly estimation of himself by arousing the loathing and contempt of others through his cringing, unmanly behavior. On the other hand, Superman's mortal anger at his parents for having 'rejected' him finds socially acceptable expression in the personality of Superman, who has sublimated his enormous aggressive impulses to the task of battling evildoers and apprehending criminals" (396).

Superman desires to be loved as Clark Kent, which makes sense if Clark is the true persona and Superman the masquerade. "When Clark Kent is viewed as Superman's inner self, however, it becomes immediately apparent why Superman is so anxious to win acceptance in this identity." (396). The Clark persona is the only place Kal-El can express vulnerability. The Superman persona is the embodiment of "strength, control, omnipotence, and perfection while Clark Kent personifies weakness, cowardice, helplessness, and inadequacy" (396).

The infant Kal-El likely "unconsciously despised the Kents for being ordinary and elderly, for compromising his exalted Kryptonian heritage, and for not loving him as much as, in his child's imagination, his real parents would have loved him had they only lived. Superman's unconscious hatred of the Kents finds expression in the personality of Clark Kent, which is in many ways a distorted caricature of Jonathan Kent. Superman, after all, is the great man that he might have been had he grown to maturity on Krypton. Clark Kent is the bumbling son of a small-time farmer whose greatest achievement in life was operating a general store" (396).

This explanation fits nicely with the pre-Crisis Superman and is more archetypal. John Byrne's revamp of Superman included bringing the two identities closer together in personality and making Krypton less welcoming and accepting of Kal-El. It is easier for the

post-Crisis Superman to reject Jor-El and Krypton because of the sterility and emotional distance of the culture.

Fleisher missed several additional aspects of the Oedipal nature of the Kal-El/Jor-El relationship. Lester Roebuck in "The Good, the Bad, and the Oedipal" proposes that Superman's foes, particularly Lex Luthor, represent twisted father figures, and Superman's struggles against them are therefore Oedipal. Kal and Jor-El and his father look identical.[37] Lois looks just like Lara. Lara Lor-Van, Kal-El's mother's maiden name, reproduces the "LL" motif of Superman's primary romantic involvements (Lois Lane, Lana Lang, Lori Lemaris, and Lyla Ler-Rol). So does her married name, Lara Jor-El (i.e. Lara El). Kal-El, in his life as Clark Kent, therefore attempts to reproduce the relationship of his parents in his own life by finding the woman most like his mother.

Superman's chief supervillain, Lex Luthor, stands out as a twisted version of Jor-El. Luthor is a leading scientist on Earth, but unlike Jor-El he has turned his gifts to selfish pursuits. An even greater Oedipal aspect of their relationship was the attempt by Lex Luthor to replace Jor-El (*Superman* #170, July 1964). He once went back in time in order to romance Lara and become Superman's father, reasoning that a son could not oppose his father, even his father's schemes to rule the world. Therefore Lex Luthor gains a double Oedipal resonance: he is a father figure who wishes Superman dead and tried to take his mother away from him in order to negate his heroic persona.

Superman's other villains are generally representations of his father in the role of leading scientist. Brainiac is an especially interesting inversion of Jor-El. Jor-El sought in a variety of ways to save his home planet. He discovered the Phantom Zone, into which Krypton could have projected its population. But the only Kryptonians who survived in the Phantom Zone were its criminals. So Jor-El's genius only managed to save the worst of Krypton. Brainiac seeks to repopulate his home planet, which has been decimated by a plague, by shrinking cities from various planets and putting them in jars with the idea of returning them to their original size on his home world (*Action* #242, July 1958). Before the destruction of Krypton, Brainiac shrinks and steals its capital, Kandor, thereby preserving the best of the planet's heritage. Where Jor-El tried to preserve the planet but only managed to save its worst element, Brainiac saved its best element through theft.

Displacement

Supervillains can represent a displaced aspect of the hero that the hero struggles with. This relationship is best represented by Batman. Like Superman's villains, Batman's opponents emerge out of Bruce Wayne's relationship with his father. Batman's relationship with his father is much less ambivalent than Superman's, but his internal struggles are much more intense. In discussing Batman, Richard Reynolds asserts, "The great Batman villains all mirror some key point in Batman's character, a point of reference which gives their villainy special purchase within the metatext of the Batman myth" (*Superheroes* 1994, 68). Most of Batman's villains adopt costumed identities in attempts to make sense of the world, just as Bruce Wayne took on the Batman identity to make sense of the world in which his parents were killed. For Bruce Wayne, a part of himself died when his father died. Unlike Kal-El, Bruce knew his parents; he was about ten years old when they were killed. Further his childhood is typically depicted as happy and his relationship with his parents as warm and loving. Unlike Kal-El, Bruce Wayne's connection with his family and heritage was not broken at the moment of his parents' deaths. He did not need to rediscover that heritage; through his accumulated wealth and his servant Alfred, Thomas Wayne provided for his son after his own death.[38]

Bruce and Thomas Wayne resemble each other greatly and when Bruce Wayne took on the identity of Batman he was taking on a mantle his father had previously worn (*Detective Comics* #235, September 1956). Dr. Wayne and his wife Martha attend a costume party with the theme of flying creatures. Wayne wins first prize for his bat-man costume, when crooks burst in needing a doctor. They take Wayne to the injured bank robber Lew Moxon, who needs a bullet removed from his shoulder. In typical Batman fashion, Wayne defeats the crooks. Moxon swears revenge and after being released from prison arranges the murder of Thomas Wayne. Years later Bruce Wayne finds his father's bat-man costume, a can of film shot at the costume party, and a diary explaining it all. He hunts down Moxon and confronts him in his father's costume. Seeing the costume brings back Moxon's amnesia-wiped memory and he flees into traffic to be run over by a truck. Thus Batman solves the murder that started his

transformation from ordinary boy into superhero. This story adds an element to the origin by asserting that Bruce Wayne's subconscious memory of his father's costume was prompted by the bat that flew in his window. Though this adventure is a retcon, it fits with the overall story of Bruce's relationship with his father. Just as he carries on the Wayne name and the good works of Thomas Wayne, so does Bruce carry on the bat identity of his father—he takes up the bat mantle that was partially responsible for his father's death. Thomas Wayne's bat-man costume led to his death, which caused Bruce Wayne to seek vengeance against the criminal underworld that had shattered his childhood, and thus Bruce took on the image of the bat, closing the circle by becoming his father in a psychological sense.



Detective Comics #235 © 1956 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

In contrast to Kal-El, Bruce Wayne had outgrown the Oedipal stage when his parents were murdered. Their deaths ended Bruce's childhood. His obsession with revenge took over and he essentially became an adult, in charge of the Wayne family fortune. What should have been his happy late childhood and adolescence was changed into his adulthood because of the actions of Joe Chill and Lew Moxon. Thomas Wayne represents Bruce's secure, stable world and happy childhood; therefore, he represents the portion of himself that Bruce Wayne lost and also the portion that he has to suppress. Bruce has to suppress the pleasure-indulging and selfish portion of his personality in order to fulfill the duty of being Batman. Batman's villains represent that pleasure-principle and selfish personality—his id—gone out of control. They represent what Batman would like to allow himself to do or become and he is relentless in pursuing them because he is relentless in pursuing the restraint of that aspect of his personality. Bruce Wayne's feelings of worthlessness and self-

loathing arise from survivor's guilt—he stood by while his parents were murdered. He takes out this anger at himself upon criminals, but since he can never capture the one person he really holds responsible for their deaths (himself), his battle can never end.

This characterization of Bruce Wayne's relationship with his alter ego explains why comics creators have come to see Batman as a kind of beast that Bruce Wayne has to control. The best developed presentation of this view comes in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* in which Batman has been retired for ten years, a time during which Bruce Wayne has spent trying to keep the bat down through alcohol and growing a mustache, which would show under his mask and perhaps give his identity away.



Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1 © 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

But he ultimately cannot, as is demonstrated when Wayne comes upstairs from the Batcave and Alfred asks him what happened to his mustache. He shaved it off without being aware he was doing so, removing one mask so that he could resume the wearing of another.

Batman's first supervillain, the Monk, is a twisted version of himself. The Monk's "brain is the product of years of intense study and seclusion" (Finger 1939, 1). The Monk operates at night and can turn himself into a wolf, just as Bruce Wayne operates at night and effectively turns himself into a bat. Many of Batman's other villains suffered one bad day, as Bruce Wayne did, but their grief and anger turned inward and twisted them so that they take out their pain and hurt on society. Interestingly, like Batman their wounds often come from criminals, but instead of turning their hatred toward crime as Bruce Wayne did, they join with criminals in despoiling society.

Alan Moore and Brian Bolland address this aspect of the Joker's

criminal identity in *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). The Joker attacks and maims (and perhaps rapes) Barbara (Batgirl) Gordon in front of her father, Police Commissioner Gordon. He kidnaps Gordon in order to drive him mad by running him through a crazy carnival ride featuring pictures he has taken of the attack on Gordon's daughter. The Joker wants to demonstrate that "All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy" (35). The Joker wants to validate his own insanity. Besides telling the story of Gordon's rescue by Batman, *The Killing Joke* recounts the most detailed origin of the Joker to date. The Joker was once a struggling, unemployed stand-up comic named Jack with a pregnant wife. To get money, he agreed to guide criminals through the chemical plant, where he once worked as a chemist, in order to rob the playing card factory next door. On the day of the robbery, his wife dies when a baby bottle heater she is testing shorts out and electrocutes her. The robbery also goes badly and Jack dives into chemical waste pool to escape. The chemicals permanently disfigure him, leaving him with the white skin and green hair that prompted his Joker identity. The events of this day drove him over the edge, and he argues that anyone would have been driven crazy by such a day.

Batman faced a similar day when his parents were killed. *The Killing Joke* argues that villainy and heroism proceed out of the same confrontation with absurdity. The apparent meaninglessness of the world is summed up in the killing of loved ones. Batman was able to deal with these events better than the Joker was, but both have their origins in a single bad day and the way they dealt with its consequences. Interestingly, when Batman goes to visit the Joker at Arkham Asylum in order to talk over their conflict in an attempt to avert it ending in the murder of one by another, he passes Two-Face, his split face divided by the barred window of his door. Gordon, Batman, Two-Face, and the Joker represent a continuum of response to law and crime.



Batman: The Killing Joke © 1988 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Gordon has a single face and represents law and sanity, the proper construction of authority and an unproblematic relationship with reality. Gordon's world makes sense and is codified in the law. When Batman arrives at the amusement park and frees Gordon, the commissioner admonishes the crime fighter, "I want him brought in...and I want him brought in by the book!...By the book, you hear? We have to show him! We have to show him that our way works!" (40).



Batman: The Killing Joke © 1988 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Batman has two faces—Bruce Wayne and the Batman, representing his encounter with the meaninglessness of the universe via the senseless death of a good man and woman who should not have been killed in a just universe. As Batman, his face is split between his mask (above) and face (below), thus representing his dual nature and his incomplete transition into the world of insanity. He holds half of himself back, going much farther than Gordon but not fully committing to a solipsistic view of the world. He brings the Joker in; he does not kill him.



Batman: The Killing Joke © 1988 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Two-Face also has two faces, but his split vertically, the opposite of Batman's. Two-Face's faces are also permanent. He cannot slip out of his superidentity as Batman can. Two-Face suffered a bad day like Batman and the Joker. He was once Harvey "Apollo" Dent, dashing and handsome crusading district attorney who worked alongside Batman before Gordon became commissioner. At his murder trial, enraged gangster "Boss" Maroni hurled acid at the D.A. in order to disfigure him, but Batman deflected it and the acid only scarred the left side of Dent's face and his left hand. The only plastic surgeon who could heal him is trapped in a Nazi concentration camp. Dent's disfigurement drives his fiancée away and despondent, he seizes on Boss Maroni's two-headed silver dollar, a crucial piece of evidence from Maroni's trial, scars one head and flips the coin to determine if he should wait for Dr. Ekhart to be free or if he should take his outcast status literally and turn to crime. The scarred side turns up and he turns into a supervillain. Like Batman, Two-Face only borders on insanity. He uses his coin to make sense of the world, flipping it to determine the nature of the crimes he commits and to make all his decisions. If the unscarred side turns up, he commits a daytime robbery and turns the loot over to charity. If the scarred side, the crime is at night for his own gain. Also like Batman, Two-Face's creates his own relationship to the law, a very individualized one, but one with some controls.



Batman: The Killing Joke © 1988 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The Joker has one face, a permanent joker-face, and seemingly has no control or outside consideration over his actions. His is an individualistic anarchy without loyalty or consideration for others. He wants only what he wants, regardless of the consequences. This solipsistic approach to the universe is perhaps best illustrated with the story "The Laughing Fish" by Steve Englehart and Marshal Rogers (*Detective Comics* #475). The Joker dumps his joker-toxin in the ocean, giving every fish a joker-face. He then attempts to copyright his likeness so that he will get a percentage of every fish sold in the country. He wants to permanently stamp his unique face on nature, to transform the world in his image. The Joker-toxin he uses also illustrates the Joker's way of dealing with the insanity he feels operates in the world. Joker-toxin kills and turns its victim into a hideous duplicate of the Joker, laughing until dead and then stuck in a rigor-mortis smile duplicating the Joker's own look. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker gasses the studio audience of the David Endocrine show with his toxin, killing them all and transforming them into laughing duplicates of himself. He seeks to make the world comprehensible by transforming it into a twisted parody of himself.

Rogues Gallery

A rogues gallery is a band of villains who repeatedly face off against one hero. Typically they oppose him individually, but they often team up in various combinations. The rogues gallery reflects the hero in some way. The Flash's rogues gallery is collection of single-powered supervillains—each villain has a central motif: cold (Captain Cold),

heat (Heat Wave), mirrors (Mirror Master), the weather (Weather Wizard), etc. The Flash also has a single superpower—speed—but he is well known for using that speed to produce a whole range of superpowered effects, such as invisibility, intangibility, time travel, whirlwinds, appearing to be in more than one place, and so on. So the Flash represents many powers in one power, whereas the rogue's gallery represents the combination of single powers.



The Flash #254 © 1977 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Proactive and Reactive

In a narrative sense, villains are proactive and heroes are reactive. The villain's machinations drive the plot. The hero reacts to the villain's threat, which justifies the hero's violence. But on a generic level, the villain is reactive; that is, supervillains are created in reaction to the hero's ability to defeat ordinary criminals in order to create narrative tension. This idea of villain inflation is raised in *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). At the end of *Batman Begins,* Batman meets Lieutenant James Gordon atop police headquarters. Gordon expresses the concern that Batman's existence, though useful in the fight against Ra's Al-Ghul and the Scarecrow, pushes criminals to heighten their attacks. Batman asserts, "We can bring Gotham back." Gordon rejoins, "What about escalation? We start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor-piercing rounds. And you're wearing a mask and jumping off rooftops. Now take this guy, armed robbery, double homicide. Got a taste for the theatrical like you, leaves a calling card," and he hands Batman a evidence-bagged joker playing card. Implied here is the idea that the next escalation

will be from ordinary gangsters and mob leaders to masked, theatrical supercriminals who will take crime to horrific new heights. Because the implied but unnamed Joker seems to be responding to the debut of Batman, it seems that Gordon may be correct.

In *Dark Knight*, Dr. Bartholmew Wolper, the psycholgist who has been treating Harvey Dent, proposes a theory for this escalation while arguing that Two-Face is not to blame for his crimes, "Batman's psychotic sublimative/psycho-erotic behavior pattern is like a net. Weak-egoed neurotics like Harvey are drawn into corresponding intersticing patters. You might say Batman commits the crimes using his so-called villains as narcissistic proxies" (47). Wolper goes on to describe the public psyche as a vast membrane. When Batman acts, he strikes that membrane through the media that report on his vigilantism. The membrane springs back through the creation of "ideological dopplegangers" like Two-Face, who are "bent to the matrix of Batman's pathological self-delusion. Batman is, in this context, ...a social disease" (66). Miller presents Wolper as a figure of scorn and ridicule, a pointy-headed liberal elitist who cannot see outside his ivory tower to the effects criminals have on society and to the common-sense fact that criminals are responsible for their own crimes.

At the same time, Miller undercuts this ridicule by showing that criminals react to Batman instead of Batman solely reacting to criminals. In *Dark Knight*, the Joker has been comatose ever since Batman retired. In Arkham Asylum he sits in front of a television, on which Lana Lang and a liberal pundit debate the value and effect of Batman's vigilantism. The Joker slowly emerges from his catatonia.



Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #2 © 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The Joker's return to consciousness is a perfect demonstration of the validity of Wolper's analysis of Batman's effect on the public psyche. The Joker is a weak-egoed ideological doppleganger who bends to the matrix of Batman's pathological self-delusion that costumed vigilantism is an effective response to crime.

Narratively, though, the superhero is reactive, and this reactivity is grounded in the superhero code. The superhero code is an aspect of the mission. The superhero's goal is the greater good of humanity and his society, which he pursues through his own interpretation of right and law, and his application of might to support that interpretation. Superheroes are willing and able to violate the civil and legal rights of others because of their code. This willingness and ability derive from a central tenet of the superhero code: the possession of superpowers or extraordinary abilities is enough to qualify one to make and act upon an individualized interpretation of justice. Simply stated the mask (symbol of the superhero's authority) confers the right usually only accorded, and only partially at that, to the badge (symbol of the policeman's authority). All superheroes assume that their powers give them the right to take justice into their own hands and act outside the law, a right even policemen do not have. Stan Lee's axiom, "with great power comes great responsibility," justifies this central tenet of the superhero code. But this responsibility operates within the context of endemic criminality. Criminals commit crimes that cannot be stopped by the ordinary authorities, superpowers enable the superhero to oppose the threat that overwhelms the forces of society and so it is the responsibility of the hero to react to that threat and use his great powers to fight crime.

The exception to the code is killing. Although both Superman and Batman killed during their first year, and the Spectre went on a nasty spree of deadly punishment in the Bronze Age, killing is generally regarded as a line that superheroes will not cross because it makes them too much like the criminals they fight. Killing also takes the hero from being reactive—responding to crime and working to support the criminal justice system by turning criminals over to the authorities for trial and punishment—to proactive, taking the powers of the jury and judge into their own hands.



Adventure Comics #432 © 1974 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

When the superhero attempts to be proactive, he essentially becomes a villain, as with Ozymandias in *Watchmen*. Ozymandias sees that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are headed to nuclear confrontation and so fakes an alien incursion to give the superpowers a common enemy to join forces against. His plan works, and it seems that a nuclear catastrophe is averted, but at the cost of millions of deaths as the fake alien sends out a telepathic burst that kills most New Yorkers and drives the rest mad. Ozymandias started as a superhero but ended as the greatest mass murderer in history in a proactive attempt to save the world.

In limited series, such as *Watchmen*, proactive superheroing complicates the moral action, in ongoing series it provides conflict and drama, but it does not seem to last. In his early days, Superman is quite proactive, but is treated narratively as a hero. He is at his most proactive in *Action Comics* #12 when he declares war on reckless drivers. Superman takes on every element of society, from the crooked cop grafting a bribe out of a stopped speeder to drunk and reckless drivers, to an auto dealer who sells junkers, to the mayor who does not adequately enforce speed and other safety laws. Superman completely destroys the factory of the Bates Motor Company for building shoddy cars, resulting in the loss of jobs for factory workers in the midst of the Depression. Bates has done nothing illegal, but the immorality of his actions deserves punishment in Superman's view. And not only political officials and capitalists are at risk from Superman's wrath. A well-dressed, respectable-appearing gentleman calls the police to say that someone has thrown his car up on top of his garage; he seems well-off enough to maintain his car in proper working condition, and no indication is given as to why

Superman moved his car. Superman wrecks the impounded cars of traffic violators. He straightens out a dangerous curve by tearing through a hill, possibly taking—in the Constitutional sense—private land without compensation. Furthermore, when Superman takes to the radio waves to issue his declaration of war on reckless drivers, he breaks into radio station WVUX through a window and then a door on his way to the microphone, and finally destroys a brick wall during his exit. Later the same day just after a tuckpointer has repaired the hole, Superman bursts through the same wall into the radio station again and holds the newscaster over his head while repeating his earlier warning. In wrecking the walls of this radio station, he destroys the private property of citizens who commit no crimes merely to convenience himself—he clearly could have entered and exited the studio in a less destructive way. Superman's desire for social change and social justice leads him to punish the guilty as well as destroy property of the completely innocent. In his view, every single person in Metropolis is responsible for the traffic fatality rate. Superman was shortly thereafter denuded of his public-spirited vigilantism.

The problem for the creator is that the proactive superhero runs into the trap of most SF supermen: he risks becoming a ruler, savior, or destroyer, essentially a villain in the first and last roles. Philip Wylie's characters Hugo Danner from *Gladiator* and William Carpenter from *Murderer Invisible* confront this very issue and choose opposite paths. Danner sees that the only way he can effectively affect society is to become a tyrant and use physical force to better the human condition, but no matter how well he rules people will hate him. Carpenter is comfortable being hated and attempt to enact this sort of tyranny, but the authorities are more capable than he suspects and they hunt him down and execute him.

The issue of proactivity is at the heart of the television program *Smallville*. Clark Kent learns over and over again that moral shortcuts do not work. He sees Jonathan and Martha Kent cut a deal with Lionel Luthor to officially adopt Clark, but at the price of bringing LuthorCorp to Smallville. Clark uses his abilities to become a football hero, but learns through the example of another empowered player who murders to hide his kryptonite-fueled advantage that winning football games by unfairly using superpowers is morally corrosive. Lex Luthor, in contrast, consistently takes moral shortcuts—whether

in a naval weapons system that kills fish or in paying off women he dumps with diamond earrings sent by courier—and throughout the series slides down the slippery slope to supervillainy. Every time a character tells a lie, cuts a corner, or acts in a morally suspect way, it comes back to haunt them. These lessons teach Clark self-restraint, and only this self-restraint could keep a hero reactive, could keep a hero from becoming a tyrant.

In the comics proactivity seems to be a narrative dead end in the superhero genre. Alan Moore's Miracleman decides that he cannot leave humanity's path to itself, so he takes over governance of the planet, along with Miraclewoman and the rest of the Miracle Family. The series shifts from being a superhero genre comic book to a meditation on the discontents of utopia, which Neil Gaiman takes in interesting directions. But the series pulls away from superheroes, because in a utopia the superheroes rule instead of fighting crime and hence are not really superheroes at all.

Other proactive-superhero books break down or fall apart for a variety of reasons, whether because a main character—like Iron Man in *Force Works*—turns out to be under the control of a supervillain, or because a key creator leaves the series—like Warren Ellis and *The Authority*, or just because the series loses its narrative force—as with *Extreme Justice* and *X-Force*.

This brief overview of proactive superhero series seems to suggest that the superhero has to be reactive to operate effectively within the genre, at least in terms of open-ended serial narratives. Individual graphic novels or movies can discuss the proactive superhero profitably, but proactivity as a central focus seems to cause a shift in narrative strategy away from the superhero formula and towards a use of the superhero as metaphor, along the lines of literary fiction. Conversely, the supervillain must remain proactive to create the menace the superhero reacts to.

Conclusion

Supervillains are not unique to the superhero genre but have roots that go back through the adventure narratives of the last two centuries into epics, legends, and mythology. Though the superhero genre is a twentieth-century invention, the superhero likewise has roots in such ancient materials. What does the superhero draw from myth, legend, and epic?

Dunn.

Olga Mesmer has been long forgotten and was probably forgotten by the November 1938 issue of *Spicy Mystery*. Unlikely to have influenced either Siegel or Shuster, Olga Mesmer merely demonstrates the same point that the other comics precursors to Superman demonstrate, that, like the pulps before them, comic books and comic strips contained all the elements of the superhero—the powers, the mission, the identity—but it took Siegel and Shuster to put them all together into Superman. The best popular culture, whether Homer's epics, Shakespeare's plays, or the televised adventures of Xena or Buffy the Vampire Slayer, combine preexisting elements in new and exciting ways. They follow the dictates for success in formula, balancing convention and invention to create successful, popular, and archetypal stories and characters.

Conclusion

Comics are the natural home for the superhero genre because of they way they can seamlessly combine intense action, ordinary daily life, and fantastic images. The superhero genre and comics have been linked—oftentimes conflated—since the inception of the genre. But when did the genre begin? What is the definitive starting point, the character or text that was imitated repeatedly and which serves as a clear demarcation between the genre and its precursors? Who is the first superhero?

Chapter 8
The First Superhero

Superman

Superman was the first character to fully embody the definition of the superhero and to prompt the imitation and repetition necessary for the emergence of a genre. *Action Comics* #1 contains the majority of the conventions of the superhero genre. In fact, the issue's one-page origin of Superman presents the primary triad—mission, powers, identity—as well as several others.



Action Comics #1 © 1938 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Mission is present in panels six and seven, "Early Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind", and "Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!". Powers are evident in panels three through six in which the baby Clark lifts an armchair above his head and it is explained that the adult Clark can "leap 1/8th of a mile; hurdle a twenty story building...raise tremendous weights.....run faster than an express train....and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!" (original ellipses). Identity comes with the name "Superman" and the now famous costume (panel seven). Other conventions present are origin (panels 1-5), the urban setting (panel seven), and analogical science (panels 8-9).[89] The rest of the Superman story in *Action Comics* #1 includes nearly every other major convention of

the superhero genre with the exception of the supervillain. None of the other candidates for the title of the first superhero debuted with so much generic density, particularly a density of conventions that were imitated and repeated and have become endemic to the superhero genre. And it must be remembered that hero-types do not exist independently of genres. There were no epic heroes before epic poems and no Western heroes—except real-life celebrated frontiersmen—before the Western.

Contenders for the Title

Spring-Heeled Jack

The earliest candidate—he long predates Superman's creation—for the first superhero is also the best. Bill Blackbeard, who has a penchant for these sorts of statements, proposed that Spring-Heeled Jack "was in plain fact the first costumed superhero in literature or art" ("Springheeled Jack" 2002). Jack's mission is as clear as any superhero's. He is an all-around do-gooder. He stops urban street crime, forces duelists to reconcile, foils nobles' schemes to defraud their wealthy fellows, rescues maidens from aristocratic despoilers, "and he frees poor-but-righteous young men and women from torture chambers, black masses, and Sweeny Todd-style pie and meat shops" (Nevins, "Spring-Heeled Jack" 2002).



Jack has passable powers: he is a strong and skilled fighter, and his boots contain steel springs that propel him dozens of feet into the air where he can glide—almost fly—on his bat wings. He has both a secret identity and a codename; he is a nobleman whose relatives defrauded him of his fortune and he takes on the Spring-Heeled Jack

guise to protect his true identity while he saves those who are victims like himself. His name expresses his identity—he is a spring-heeled jackanapes, bounding around like a demon, terrorizing wrongdoers. His costume is a "skin-tight glossy crimson suit, with bat-style wings, lion's mane, devil's horns, talon hands, cloven hoofs, and a sulphurous-breathing mouth" (qtd. in Nevins, "Spring-Heeled Jack" 2002). This costume iconically expresses his identity as a demonic figure and, like Batman's, strikes terror in the hearts of criminals. Spring-Heeled Jack neatly meets the criteria of mission, powers, and identity that define the superhero. He even basically meets the generic distinction test as his adventures contain most of the conventions of the superhero genre, and he even "spouted insulting wisecracks as he did in the villains a la the comic book superheroes to follow" (Blackbeard, "Springheeled Jack" 2002). So he very likely can be considered the first hero character to fulfill the core definitional elements of the superhero.

But he did not inspire the imitation and repetition necessary to initiate a genre, so he is not the founding figure of the superhero genre. Perhaps his adventures were too inventional, and the heroes who came later in adventure literature of all kinds were needed to build up a base of conventions that could create a field of reference from which the superhero could emerge. Instead, his adventures stand as an intriguing anomaly among penny dreadfuls and other cheap nineteenth-century literature. Perhaps the ephemeral nature of his home medium and the fact that his adventures were not reprinted in American editions kept him off the radar of the creators of the superhero genre. It is clear, though, that had others followed Jack's leaps and bounds, the superhero genre would probably have started in 1867 with his debut in the dreadfuls.

Hugo Hercules

In a phone call to me Bill Blackbeard once referred, seemingly in all seriousness, to Hugo Hercules as the first superhero, as Clark Kent without a costume. Hugo Hercules clearly has the great strength necessary to operate at the superhero level—he can carry a fire engine. But, though he seems generally prosocial, Hugo Hercules has no mission. While he does sometimes use his strength to save himself from danger, or to perform a good deed for another, he is just

as likely to create as much trouble as he resolves. He tends to use his strength for self-serving reasons and or just to show off, whether winning a bowling trophy by hurling the ball so hard that the pins pulverize into dust, helping a woman retrieve her handkerchief by lifting an elephant, lifting a car so a beau standing inside it can kiss his girlfriend who waits at the window above, or ripping the portico off the front of a house to cover the passage of a pretty girl who lacks an umbrella into her cab.



Therefore, he is not selfless in American monomythic tradition, and heroes have to be selfless to be cultural role models. He does not fulfill the identity convention, lacking a codename and costume—he wears ordinary two-piece suits. Further, the other conventions that mark the genre are missing from his brief stories—he does not fight crime or villains; his city features no helpful authority figures; he has no supporting cast, sidekick, pal, or girlfriend who gets kidnapped; and the origin of his powers is left unexplained. Finally, he was lost to history until Bill Blackbeard exhumed him from his printed grave for *The Comic Strip Century*; he was forgotten because other cartoonists did not imitate him as a character nor did they repeat his types of stories. He does not fit the genre definition of the superhero and he did not found the genre.

Popeye

Popeye is an important prefigure in the development of the superhero genre during the Antediluvian Age as an influence on Siegel and Shuster and as the character who "opened the lid that let loose pandemonium" according to Nell Doherty in 1945**.** Once again, it is Bill Blackbeard who puts forward a candidate for the premiere

superhero by referring to Popeye as "The First (Arf, Arf) Superhero of Them All," the title of his contribution to *All in Color for a Dime* (1970, 93). Blackbeard clarifies this identification by calling Popeye "more of an anti-superhero than anything else" due to E.C. Segar's focus on the comic humanity of the strip's characters, particularly that of Popeye sloppy humanity—e.g. his being "smelly, capable of disastrous mistakes, able to slug a woman, pursue likely-looking chicks with lusty interest, swear a blue streak when 'irrikated,' [and] able to be cheerfully cynical about almost everything" (113).



Popeye © King Features Syndicate

Popeye lacks mission; he uses his strength to earn a living as a prizefighter or to search for treasure. Once he even uses it to become the dictator of Spinanachova, the utopian, fascist country he founds. And Popeye lacks the conventional aspects of the superhero identity—he has no codename, nor even a last name, and while he often dresses as a sailor, he in fact is a sailor and so these are his ordinary work clothes. Most importantly, he cannot be considered the progenitor of any genre, as Segar's comic strip falls far outside the bounds of genre and must be considered an individual work of creative and artistic genius.

Hugo Danner

In a paper given at the Comics Arts Conference, held during the 2000 San Diego Comic-Con International, independent scholar Brian Camp defines Hugo Danner, hero of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, as a superhero based on three factors: "One is that he has abilities far beyond those of mortal men, the second is that he feels that he should use these powers to help mankind. The

third is the entire novel is about his attempts to do so" (2). Danner's superstrength, superspeed, and invulnerability certainly qualify him as a superhero. But superpowers alone should not be used as the sole criterion for calling a character a superhero, because doing so privileges one convention over all the others. Camp proposes that Danner's desire to aid mankind qualifies him as a superhero; clearly this desire is related to the mission convention. But Danner's mission, such as it is, is a failed mission. Camp acknowledges that Danner is frustrated in this desire, but Hugo Danner's desire is much more ambivalent in the novel than Camp would make it appear. During most of the novel he does not feel driven to aid others. Instead he uses his powers to earn a living at a number of jobs and also in the trenches of WWI. This use of his powers does not materially advance the Allies' war effort against the Central Powers. In fact, it is a selfish employment—he joins the war not to fight for democracy but because the chaos and lawlessness of the front line gives him reign to fully exercise his powers without check. In essence, he fights in the war because it gives him a license to commit mass slaughter, unhindered by any authority. When he does decide to end the war by going directly to Berlin and attacking the Kaiser and the German High Command, he is too late; the war is over, and his strength is irrelevant to the Allied victory.

His brief efforts to do good with his abilities are carried out in secret. He attempts to influence national politics by terrorizing a corrupt steel lobbyist who promotes pork-barrel military manufacturing and aggressive military policies, but to no ultimate effect as the munitions bill the lobbyist backs passes after Danner frightens the lobbyist to force him to leave Washington. Danner does free a man from a vault, thereby saving his life; but the president of the bank accuses him of planning to use his powers to rob the bank, and this treatment sours him on the idea of aiding humanity, so he returns to using his powers to make a living. He briefly considers a career as a super detective, a super criminal, or a tyrant, but rejects all in frustration. Danner has no codename and no public identity; he is never referred to as the Gladiator in the novel and he wears no costume. The absence of mission and identity make the generic distinction between Hugo Danner and Superman fairly clear. *Gladiator* fits snugly within the genre of science fiction and the formula of the science-fiction superman; thus it is not the first

superhero story and Danner not the first superhero.[90]

Camp makes one possibly persuasive argument in his identification of Hugo Danner as the first superhero. He argues that because Siegel and Shuster imitated Danner in creating Superman, and others imitated Superman, therefore "the result of *Gladiator* was the creation of thousands of characters like its protagonist" (2). But this result is quite indirect. The characters, plot, setting, and themes of *Gladiator* were not imitated and repeated in the Golden Age, but the characters, plot, setting, and themes of the Superman stories in *Action Comics* were. Therefore, *Gladiator* did not start the superhero genre, *Action Comics* did, or as Jerry Siegel remembers kids calling it, "that magazine with Superman in it" (qtd. in Daniels, *Superman* 1998, 35).

The Phantom

The Phantom offers the greatest challenge since Spring-Heeled Jack to Superman's title as the initiating figure of the superhero genre. The daily Phantom strip began on February 17, 1936, and a Sunday strip was added in May 1939. The Phantom comes very close to being a superhero, but remains a mystery man. The Phantom's mission originates in the 1525 oath of Sir Christopher Standish, a British merchant whose father is killed by the Singh pirate brotherhood in the Bay of Bengal. Cast up on a remote shore, Standish is brought back to health by a tribe of Bandar pigmys, who find the corpse of a pirate wearing the clothes of Standish's father. Standish swears an oath on that skull, "I swear against the Singh, against all piracy, greed, and cruelty! I swear that as long as my descendants walk the earth, the eldest male of the family shall carry out my work" (Falk np). The Phantom of 1936 is one of these descendants. This mission is as clear cut as that of Doc Savage, the Shadow, Superman, or Batman.

The next test is powers. Though he does not possess true superpowers, the Phantom is tough, strong, highly athletic, and clearly operates at the physical level of Batman. Therefore, he can be considered to have the necessary skills and strength to qualify as a superhero.

The Phantom also has the combination of name linked to biography and costume expressive of that identity that is found in

superheroes. The Phantom name originates in his being the "Ghost Who Walks," the immortal avenger fulfilling the ancient tradition of the Standish family. In explaining himself to his love interest, Diana Palmer, the Phantom relates, "Sir Christopher said his descendants would return generation after generation, like phantoms" (Falk np). The Phantom costume is a hooded bodysuit with a domino mask, complemented by a skull belt and a skull ring. The skull emblems bring the Phantom very close to meeting the definition of the superhero, because the skulls can be seen as fulfilling the iconic element of the superhero. While a skull does not quite announce his identity the way a spider does for Spider-Man or a bat does for Batman—he is after all the *Phantom*, not the *Skull*—it does emblematize the original Phantom's oath on the Singh pirate's skull and every succeeding Phantom's repetition of that oath on the same skull. As the first true costumed adventurer in comics, with adventures sometimes set in contemporary America, the Phantom laid important groundwork for the superhero because his adventures contain nearly all the elements of the superhero genre.



Phantom © King Features Syndicate

But he is not quite the superhero that his correspondence with the mission, powers, and identity elements of the definition suggests. His mission fits the convention well, but as demonstrated earlier in the definition chapter in the discussion of the missions of Doc Savage and Superman, there is no meaningful difference between the pulp mystery man's mission and the superhero's. The Phantom's adventures usually take place in exotic locations and fit in more closely with the globetrotting adventure strips and pulps of the 1930s than they do with the urban crime fighting of superheroes. So the Phantom's mission does not mark the emergence of a new genre. His physical abilities, while qualifying him as a superhero, are no

greater than Doc Savage's and do not signal a break with the pulp tradition the way Superman's powers do. He has both the codename and costume elements of the identity convention, and perhaps his codename and costume fit more closely with the identity convention of the superhero genre than they do with the identity convention of the mystery-man genre. But some pulp mystery men, like the Black Bat, and many of Johnston McCulley's characters such as Zorro, the Crimson Clown, the Black Star, the Man in Purple, and the Thunderbolt wear costumes as close to superhero costumes as the Phantom does, so his costume does not differentiate him from the mystery-man genre as Superman's costume does.[91]

The Phantom's skull belt is not quite the iconic chevron it might seem. In many—perhaps most—images of the Phantom, the skull cannot be seen. It does not serve to announce the character to a reader. While his costume is very close to one a superhero might wear—a hooded gray (later purple) body suit with domino mask, trunks, a skull icon on the belt, and boots—it does not represent the sort of break with the past that Superman's costume does. The importance of Superman's costume, and therefore the unimportance of the Phantom's, can be seen in any example of a generic superhero as used in advertising or editorial cartoons. Occasionally, superheroity is asserted with only a cape, but typically the character is dressed in a full bodysuit with a cape and chevron; sometimes a mask is included, but not usually. This costume draws on Superman's costume, not the Phantom's.

Additionally, the Phantom primarily fights pirates—including air pirates—and gangsters. He does not fight inverted-superhero supervillains. They are unique to the superhero genre and stand as perhaps the strongest convention in regards to generic distinction. Villains with codenames who wear robes and masks inspired by the Ku Klux Klan appeared in pulps several years before *Action Comics* #1, but *superpowered* villains with costumes and codenames did not. Consequently, fighting inverted-superhero supervillains—a generic distinction—while meeting the mission-powers-identity definition should provide a good test for identification as a superhero. Although it took time for Superman and Batman comics to evolve inverted-superhero supervillains, they did so relatively quickly—both were facing them by 1940; however, the Phantom definitely did not face such enemies before the appearance of these supervillains in

Superman and Batman stories, and almost certainly has not faced them since, so the Phantom can clearly be defined as a mystery man and not the progenitor of the superhero.[92]

As discussed in chapter three under generic distinction, a superhero need not strictly meet all elements of the mission, powers, and identity conventions of the definition to count as a superhero. But this standard should be stricter for the first superhero. The start of a genre can be seen as a narrow gate that must be passed through before reaching the broader fields of evolution and expansion later on. And this is where the fourth element of the definition, generic distinction, comes in. If he were created today, the Phantom would likely be considered a superhero, but he was not at the time of his debut.[93] The Phantom did not break significantly enough from conventions of the mystery man to found a new genre. Conversely, as discussed above, Superman provided a number of breaks with the past. He initiated a huge increase in the sales of comic books. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence identify the full sexual renunciation of Superman, along with the inflation to truly superhuman powers, as marking the fulfillment of the American monomythic hero.[94] The Phantom cannot be considered as fully sexually segmented because of the nature of his origin. Kit Walker, the Phantom introduced in 1936, has to live long enough to marry a woman and father a son to carry on his mission. The introduction of Diana Palmer, the Phantom's revelation to her of his secret identity and history, and his announcement of his intention to marry her (October 9, 1936) indicate that he has not renounced sexuality as fully as Superman. Superman provides a break with the past that the Phantom simply does not.

The popular-culture principle of imitation and repetition can also be used to argue against the Phantom being seen as the genesis point of the superhero genre. The Phantom does not appear to have been very influential on the creation of other superheroes. Siegel and Shuster had already made the rounds of the syndicates with Superman before the Phantom first appeared. Had the Phantom's success in the newspapers been seen as worthy of imitation, surely some newspaper editor would have taken a chance on Superman. But no outpouring of similar characters—costumed mystery men—either in comic books or strips, followed his appearance, even after his comic book debut in *Ace Comics* #11 (February 1938), which

predates Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938). Perhaps most telling, neither Siegel nor Shuster mentions the Phantom in any of their interviews regarding the creation of or attempts to sell Superman.[95]

Furthermore Lee Falk and King Features Syndicate did not file a lawsuit against DC Comics for Superman as DC did against Fox for Wonder Man.[96] That lawsuit establishes Superman and Wonder Man as generically similar to each other but generically distinct from earlier heroes. DC felt threatened by the mere appearance of Wonder Man and legally demonstrated that the character imitated their lead superhero, but no pulp publisher felt similarly threatened that Superman was close enough to their heroic mystery men to signify copyright infringement. This lack of lawsuits against Superman suggest that he was not seen as an imitator of costumed pulp heroes or even of the costume-wearing mystery man the Phantom, and thus suggests that Superman represented a new and different type of hero.

The Superhero Genre

As argued in chapter two, the superhero genre is a genre unto itself. The hero figures put forward as rivals for Superman as the first superhero all fit into other genres, primarily the SF superman and the pulp hero genre. Superman, though, marks a break from these genres in a number of ways.

One of the important shifts that divide the superhero genre from the pulp genre is the treatment of criminals. Like all genre products, the pulps responded to the tensions and anxieties of their times (Cawelti, *Adventure* 1976, 33). The greatest tension and anxiety of the 1930s was produced by the Great Depression, and the pulps responded to that overwhelming event. Gary Hoppenstand writes:

> The Depression, its causes and effects, were not clearly understood by Americans who lived through it. Rather than seeing the Depression as a social problem, it was viewed as a personal problem. The Depression was not perceived as the result of a failed capitalistic system but as individual failure [...]. The American Depression was a moral depression.

> The primary cause of the fall was the consumerist excess of the 1920s, and the price of failure for many Americans was economic insecurity, and, more importantly, moral insecurity. The Depression was a "real life" enactment of the Apocalypse. ("Pulp" 1982, 144, 146)

Pulp novelists responded to this view of the world by producing fictional apocalypses that threatened to overturn the existing order just as the Great Depression had done.

Because pulp fictional apocalypses arise out of the plans of supervillains, instead of the inherent contradictions of capitalism, they can be detected and defeated, mythically and allegorically suggesting "that with the proper heroic dimensions, the real-life Apocalypse of the Depression, too, could be licked" (147). The apocalypses depicted in the pulps came not out of the excesses of the capitalist system, as the Depression did, but from the machinations of criminals and supervillains, the metaphorical Indians of the urban frontier. These villains "represented the bottom rung of the social ladder [...] foreigners, the ethnics, and the hardened unemployed," directed by upper-class criminal masterminds and supervillains, "symbolic socialists and communists who literally adopted the 'share the wealth' worldview of their Marxist predecessors" (144). The cure, therefore, for the apocalypse represented by the supervillain's plans was not social but personal.

This conspiracy of upper-class masterminds and lower-class hoodlums against middle-class victims provides a symbolic way of understanding the Depression as the result of market manipulation and criminal conspiracy. The middle class is threatened, not by the underclass alone but by the underclass working at the direction of the upper class, the conspirator classes.

The conspiracy of the upper and lower classes against the middle class is complemented by a criminal class. This depiction of a criminal class continues the shift from a vanishing geographic and racial frontier to a permanent class frontier that would be complete in superhero comics. In the comics, criminals come nearly exclusively from the criminal class, dividing the legitimate and criminal worlds sharply. In the 1930s, pulp fiction was moving in that direction, but maintained a vision of the conspirator classes against the middle class that made the world seem more precarious and threatening for

the continued security and safety of bourgeois normalcy.

Throughout the tales of Doc Savage and the Shadow, the criminal class maintains some permeability as people can pass in and out of it. That permeability would be mostly removed in the comics of Superman and Batman. Removing that permeability reestablishes the line that separates the civilized world from the savage one, omnipresent in Westerns, and reproduces the idea of an alternative culture. Like the alternative culture of the Indians that seduced white men like captains Simon Girty and James McPhee into becoming "white Indians" and which tempted Daniel Boone and Natty Bumppo, the alternative culture of the criminal class tempts young people and other weak-minded citizens into a life of crime, and this alternative culture must be fought as the savagery of the Indian was fought.

Batman directly addresses this aspect of crime in a letter to his readers (*Batman #3*). He says that every individual has to guard against slipping into crime by believing that criminals prosper and get away with their crimes unpunished. Eventually, Batman claims, all criminals get what is coming to them and unless each individual governs themself properly, they will end up wasting their life in prison or dying in a hail of bullets from the "ready guns of the law-enforcement agents who[se] duty it is to guard those of us who are honest from those of us who are not" (Kane, *Dark Knight* Archives vol 1 1992, 169). Although the division between the honest and the dishonest seems clear at the end of the sentence, it is not so clear since a failure to govern one's life can result in prison or an early death. The message emerging from these texts is that crime is a slippery slope that one can easily travel down just by letting one's guard down or having the least cooperative contact with criminals. Crime is presented as a lifestyle that is ultimately chosen, no matter the root causes of that choosing.

Once criminality is chosen, a person joins the criminal class, which offers an eternal class frontier on which heroes can fight. Doc Savage and the Shadow share much in common with Superman and Batman in terms of the eternal frontier, but the opponents on their class frontier come from both the conspirator classes. While Doc Savage cooperates fully with the authorities and has official sanction for his actions, the Shadow never attains more than informal recognition and approval, and officially he is never acknowledged.

Superman and Batman both gain official recognition and act in concert with the authorities, and in both series the class "other" is distanced from mainstream society and its alternative social vision is firmly rejected. Superhero comics thus break ideologically with the pulps that preceded them by presenting a world firmly divided between straight and criminal society. This break began in Superman's stories, but intensified as imitators sprung up and the comics publishers, particularly DC Comics, wanted to appeal to children and their parents by presenting moral heroes operating in a moral universe instead of the sometimes murky world of the pulps.

A second break with the past comes with Superman as the culmination of the American monomyth at the end of the "axial decade" (Jewett and Lawrence 1977, 185). The axial decade begins in 1929 with the sound version of *The Virginian* and the immediate rush of heroes such as the comic-strip Tarzan, Buck Rogers, the Shadow, Doc Savage, *Gladiator*, the Phantom, and ending in 1938 with the publication of *Action Comics* and the debut of Superman. In this decade the "unknown redeemer on a horse becomes 'The Masked Rider of the Plains'; his sexual segmentation is complete; he assumes the uniform and powers of angelic avengers; and thus he grows from mere heroism to superheroism" (185). The decisive factor in this growth is serialization, which permits sexual renunciation to become permanent. No longer can tales end with the hero riding off into the sunset with his bride, as in the end of *The Virginian*, because that would end the hero's story and require another selfless redeemer to arise. Serialization, according to Jewett and Lawrence, "offset this problem by allowing a presentation of heroic action more spectacular than any made credible before" (186). They cite the Lone Ranger as the archetype for the new, permanently segmented monomythic hero, with the superhuman speed of Silver and his superhuman silver-bullet accuracy, "which seeks to relieve the vigilante from guilt in the exercise of vengeance" ensuring that "minimum injury is inflicted" and the hero need not kill.

But Superman represents a final transformation of the redeemer paradigm that emerged since *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Virginian* (1902), which show that "democratic institutions are incapable of lifting the siege" of evil against the American Eden and that only selfless redeemers can save society. Jewett and Lawrence see "final, monomythic extension of powers into the superheroic" as

occurring with Superman. Superman's superpowers enable him to engage in vigilante violence without repercussion, without incurring blame: "The actual effects of boundless power are denied, since Superman never kills anyone" (190). His powers go beyond the Lone Ranger's, beyond the Shadow's; with Superman the "transcending of human capabilities has reached its apex" and when combined with the secret identity of Clark Kent, the "redemptive god with superhuman strength is disguised as Everyman, and thus the bounds of democratic ordinariness are broken. For the first time in modern, secularized America, superhuman powers became widely distributed in fantasy" (191).

The second aspect of this transformation by Superman is permanent sexual segmentation. Since "sex cannot be integrated with the personality of one engaged in a redemptive mission, it must be segmented, placed in a separate compartment sealed off from the world of work, public affairs, and one's deepest personal commitments" (58). Though the Lone Ranger is as sexually segmented as Superman, he does not possess truly superhuman powers, as Superman does; but Superman achieves a permanent romantic triangle with Lois Lane and his Clark Kent identity, and so fulfills the movement axial decade and fully embodies the American monomyth. According to this analysis, Superman differed significantly in degree from heroes who preceded him; thus, Superman marked a break with the heroes of the past and he, and not those earlier heroes, launched the superhero genre.[97]

Etymology of Superhero

In "The Roots of the Superman!" Will Murray asserts that Superman is not the first superhero. His primary argument in this article is that the word *super-hero* was in use before Superman saw publication. He is, of course, correct. Mike Benton traces the word back to 1917 when it was used to describe "a public figure of great accomplishments" (*Golden* 1992, 5). Although Murray quotes Lowell Thomas using *superhero* in a January 1941 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* on comic books, he focuses his discussion on the appearance of the word in the pulps, specifically in relation to Doc Savage and the Shadow. He does not claim either as the first superhero. But his article implies that because the word was used frequently in reference to other

characters that Superman is not the first superhero, especially in the context of the earlier Olga Mesmer article.

Doc Savage was referred to as a superman often, although as shown previously, the pulp ubermensch goes back to Tarzan and *superman* has usages distinct from the superhero genre. Murray acknowledges the root of *superman* in Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Murray points out that Doc Savage is also referred to as a *super-hero*, but never in the novels themselves, only in advertising material such as in-house ads appearing in Street and Smith's pulps. In the August 1935 *Bill Barnes*, he is called "Doc Savage. Amazing Adventurer. Super-Hero" and in the December 15, 1935 *Shadow* an ad reads, "Full length novels of the exploits of those two great super-heroes of modern fiction—Doc Savage and the Shadow" (qtd. in Murray, "Roots" 1998, 20).

Murray finds that Walter Gibson, the primary author of the Shadow's adventures, used the adjective "super" frequently in such constructions as "supercrime," "supercrooks," "supercriminals," "superfoes," "superspies," "superminds," and "superhands of crime" and in references to the Shadow as a "supersleuth" or "superbeing" (21). According to Murray, Gibson may even have coined "supervillain" (21).[98] Gibson had obviously become fond of the adjective. But clearly Gibson did not have a new type of hero or villain in mind in these uses, but sought an adjective to elevate his hero and the criminals who opposed him.

Gibson was not the only author throwing the term *super* around. Murray quotes at length a July 31, 1937 letter from Charles Spain Verral, author of *Bill Barnes*, to Street and Smith executive Henry Ralston. When Ralston hired Verral to write Bill Barnes' adventures in 1933, he warned the writer that: "We ought not to forget that the more we can develop the idea that Bill Barnes can do anything in the air, that he is really a super-man, a bird without wings, the more attractive the magazine will be to its readers" (21). When Street and Smith editors decided to pare Barnes down to more ordinary levels, Verral objected:

> These stories are based on a superhero. Bill's history and background is an extravagant one. He is the greatest ace in the world. That has been drummed into the readers since the start. I was instructed to do this. Bill has made colossal fights and done great things. He has a super airport. He has a super flying force. He has superplanes. His Lancer is faster than anything that has been invented or will be for some time.
>
> Now with all this in mind, all this super-hero stuff—do you think it's humanly possible to get utterly mature stories? A superhero, surrounded by the finest equipment any man has ever had, cannot deal with mediocre villains [....] I have tried to bring him down to earth and plant his feet on the ground and make a normal guy out of him. But even so, with the background [he has] Bill can never be changed. His very existence is based upon tremendous skill, and wealth, and exaggeration [....] Its roots are too firmly planted in the super fiction field. (21)

As with Gibson's use of the word, *super* here is used to modify a variety of things. It points, as Verral mentions in the last line, to the exaggerated nature of pulp fiction, or the "super fiction field" as he puts it to contrast *Air Trials* with *Cosmopolitan*. He is not suggesting that a "super plane," a "super airport," or a "super flying force" are new kinds of planes, airports, or flying forces, but that they are exaggerated versions of the planes, airports, and flying forces that already exist. The same can be said of his use of "superhero." Bill Barnes is clearly a pilot, an existing and well-established hero-type. Verral does not mean to create a generic distinction between Barnes and other pilot heroes or other pulp heroes, but uses it to indicate an exaggeration of an existing hero-type, in this case the pilot.

Murray closes the article by tracing the roots of Superman back through Philip Wylie's *Gladiator*, John Carter, and Hugo Hercules. He also cites a 1929 story by Jack Williamson and Miles J. Breur called "The Girl from Mars," which features an infant girl sent from the red planet who gains superpowers on earth. He concludes that Superman's roots are many. He does not finalize his point about the appearance of the word "superhero," instead pointing out what he mistakenly refers to as the "one clue that has gone unnoticed all these years," but has in fact often been commented upon by comics historians, that initially Superman wore "high-strapped leather sandals" instead of boots (68). To Murray these are obviously "*gladiator* sandals," the implication being that Wylie's novel is the

Batson speaks the magic word, "Shazam," and is transformed into the adult Captain Marvel. He immediately accepts the wizard Shazam's charge to "defend the poor and helpless, right wrongs, and crush evil everywhere," by replying with a respectful, "Yes, sire!" (Beck 1976, 223).



Whiz Comics #2 © 1940 Fawcett Publications

Power of Shazam © 1994 DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

In the Renaissance Age *Power of Shazam* (1994), Jerry Ordway re-imagines this scene. Billy Batson takes the same magical subway train to the same wizard, who plays scenes from Billy's life on the Historama just as his Golden Age version had done. But when Billy speaks the magic word, he does not humbly accept his new body and mission. He angrily demands, "What have you done to me? You've made me old!" (38). Shazam begins instructing Captain Marvel in his mission using the exact words from the earlier version, but Marvel grabs the wizard by the neck and shouts, "No--No! I didn't agree to--to this!" The wizard calms Captain Marvel down, but never instructs him in his mission. This version of the Captain's origin calls attention to how disruptive and potentially disturbing the transformation from ordinary person to superhero would be. Billy Batson does not humbly accept his role as superhero as he had done in the Golden Age and as the Fantastic Four had done in the Silver Age. Billy Batson's non-formulaic reaction to his transformation here draws attention to the conventional nature of the origin in a refreshing and exciting way. It makes the character's later decision to use his gift to aid others a human decision instead of a cardboard, formulaic reaction.

Costume: In the earlier ages, costumes are accepted as part of superheroing. Typically the hero gains his powers and appears

shortly thereafter in his costume, with no indication of how he chose the elements that went into it or the meaning the various colors and symbols might have. But in the Renaissance Age, the construction of the costume is foregrounded. Jack Knight rejects the traditional red and green costume his father wore and his brother died in. Instead, Jack assembles his costume from his collection of pop culture artifacts, a direct reflection of his work-life as the proprietor of a nostalgia shop.



Starman: Sins of the Father © 1996 DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

This costume has a number of overlapping resonances for Jack. First it is designed to state his Starman identity through the star on back of costume and the Cracker Jack sheriff's badge. Second it is practical—the leather coat is warm and the goggles protect his eyes while flying. Third it is personal—it moves away from the red Starman outfit his brother was killed in and puts his own stamp on the identity. Fourth, it enables him to connect with his father, who will like the touch of the Cracker Jack prize sheriff's star. And finally, it works metaphorically to express his relationship to Opal City—just as a sheriff is a "star man," so is he a kind of sheriff who looks over the city—to the O'Dare family, whose members have been on the police force of Opal City since its founding, and to Brian Savage, Opal's sheriff and protector from the 1880s. All these relationships emerge over Robinson's seventy-issue story of Jack Knight's sojourn as Starman, and his costume resonates with all of these meanings, making it a rich statement of Jack Knight's identity as Starman.

Conclusion

Many comics creators besides Kurt Busiek are aware of the shift toward a new age and are attempting to further the move in that direction. Alex Ross and Mark Waid in *Kingdom Come* do narratively what I attempt to do here analytically: to describe the shift that appears to be taking place in superhero comics, although Ross and Waid's work is an explicit argument in favor of that shift.[117] The confrontation between Superman and the out-of-control superbeings, which they depict, is an illustration of the conflict between the two competing ages of superhero comics, Iron and Renaissance. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, the key Golden Age superheroes, lead the fight against the Iron Age anti-heroes and win. Thus, symbolically, the idealism and hopefulness of the Golden Age has returned in the Renaissance Age to defeat the darkness and cynicism of the Iron Age.

At this writing it is entirely unclear if the genre cycle will make another round or if it will somehow come to a halt with the reconstructive stage. None of the movie genres that went through the first genre cycle—the Western, the romantic comedy, the gangster film, the musical—have evolved past the reconstructive stage. Perhaps in the reconstructive stage, all the past stages become available for story telling, and the audience and producers therefore can play at will with the genre's past. This play has been in effect with Big Bang Comics, which produces comics in the styles of the past ages of the superhero genre. Perhaps with time a new classic stage will emerge in superhero comics or one of the movie genres and a new round of evolution will proceed, although given the saturation of the audience that the conventions of the genres have already attained after the first turn of the genre cycle it seems unlikely that new levels of complexity and self-reflexivity will be demanded by consumer or reached by producers. Only time will tell what path genre evolution will take.[118]

Generic evolution is not a closed system, though it can be useful to examine it as if it were. Creators respond to events in the world and draw upon their own lives for material. Genre offerings often comment upon social realities—as "Vietnam Westerns" did in the 1960s and 1970s—in metaphorical terms. The superhero can be a pliable metaphor, but for what?

Chapter 10
The Superhero as Metaphor

The metaphor the superhero most often embodies outside the superhero genre is the idea of effortless efficacy, the power to right wrongs without danger to oneself. An example of this signification can be seen in the television commercials of Auto Glass Plus, a St. Louis windshield repair company, and their superhero spokescharacter, Glassman. In one of their television commercials, a woman is stranded in her driveway by a broken windshield. Glassman, in red tights and a blue cape, swoops down from the sky, miraculously fixes the windshield, and flies off with the woman's thanks. The superhero here is a selfless Samaritan imbued with simplistic, straightforward goodness and overwhelming efficacy. Glassman graphically embodies the glass company's ability to resolve any windshield problems a person might have without complication, without the seemingly endless hassles of dealing with the insurance bureaucracy that can be so frustrating.

The superhero has a unique signifying function. It can be used to express ideas that other genres cannot portray as well. Superheroes embody a vision of the use of power unique to America. Superheroes enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others, and they possess overwhelming power, especially in relation to ordinary crooks. They can project power without danger to themselves, and they can effortlessly solve problems that the ordinary authorities cannot handle. This vision of power fits quite well with the position America finds itself in after the Cold War. America is the only superpower in the world, something like Superman in the days before other superheroes and supervillains.

An example of this signification can be found in an editorial cartoon by David Horsey. The relationship between the United States and Europe is metaphorically expressed in the relationship of the Almighty Dollar's self-assurance and the secondary nature of his sidekick Euro Boy. No other genre would be as useful in indicating the editorial viewpoint of the relationship between the U.S. and Europe. Western sidekicks would either be too general—

two cowboys with one's superiority indicated perhaps by size or age—or too specific—Leatherstocking and Chingachgook or the Lone Ranger and Tonto. The same is true of science fiction, the gangster genre, and the detective genre. None of these other genres would convey the difference in power and arrogance that the two figures represent, nor would they have been able to so neatly sum up the seeming power of the U.S. in relationship to the rest of the world.



"The Almighty Dollar" © 1999 David Horsey.

Previously, metaphors drawn from the Western fit the American mentality. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin argues that the metaphor of the Western underlay American military adventures for a century leading up to the Vietnam War. He discusses the way that the Indian wars of the post-Civil War period, the U.S. involvement in the Spanish-American War, and the expedition to China to quell the Boxer Rebellion were wrapped in rhetoric that concealed the "essentially economic basis of the conflict" behind a righteous vengeance at being attacked without provocation and which "emphasized the need to rescue white captives" from the brutal savages who held them (1973, 562). The Vietnam War, Slotkin argues, fits this pattern. President Johnson "invoked the characteristic imagery of the captivity myth, in which the family—symbolic embodiment of the social order—is assaulted by dark and savage forces from beyond the borders, aided by local renegades" in his description of peaceful South Vietnamese farming families being attacked by invading North Vietnamese communist forces who were aided by the Viet Cong (562). Slotkin further develops this idea in *The Fatal Environment* where he details the use of metaphors drawn from the Western that were used to explain the war

in Vietnam. Slotkin quotes Senator Russell Long's use of a frontier analogy to rebuke critics of the war, "If the men who came in on the Mayflower were frightened to helplessness the first time they had to fight Indians, they would have gone back to England ... But they fought the Indians and won, meanwhile losing some fine Americans, until this nation became great" (ellipsis in Slotkin, *Fatal* 1985, 17). The American presence in Vietnam was an extension of the frontier struggle that defined the nation from its earliest days.

These uses of Western metaphors can be summed up in the Truman Doctrine of containment, the idea that a frontier has to be defended against an alien culture bent upon the apocalyptic destruction of America.[119] That the Western so neatly fits the Cold War can be seen in the common interpretation of *High Noon* (1952) as a Cold War Western with Sheriff Will Kane representing America, Frank Miller and his gang in the position of the Communists, and the townspeople standing in for the rest of the world. But now the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force has replaced the Truman Doctrine, and it seems more based on the superhero metaphor.[120] In the Gulf War, Kosovo, and Afghanistan the United States acted more in the line of a superhero than a Western sheriff. Saddam Hussein, Slobodon Milosovic, and Osama Bin Laden are portrayed in the media as power-mad, meglomaniacal supervillains who threaten the world and whom no one but America can stop. The American military's invulnerability and quick victories fit in well with the superhero genre, as do the recurring fights with Hussein, Bin Laden, and their proxies. Admittedly, it is unlikely that Powell or either President Bush consciously drew on superhero comics when thinking about world events, but it is similarly unlikely that Truman had the Western in mind when he propounded his doctrine of containment, although in retrospect the connection is fairly obvious.

Perhaps the superhero metaphor to describe US foreign policy has not caught on in the way that the Western did during the Cold War because the superhero genre reaches beyond America's shores—superhero stories are produced in other countries, besides which the distinction between superheroes and heroes who are super is little noted. Perhaps more important, though, is the fixed relationship between America and the Western. The Western is always grounded in the American West—even spaghetti Westerns filmed in Spain with multinational casts were set on the American frontier. As long as the

Presidency is held by literal ranch owners, like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, it is unlikely that the superhero metaphor will edge out the Western metaphor, but perhaps the superhero metaphor will emerge as the superhero genre continues to dominate the Western at the box office.

Conclusion

The superhero figure and genre can clearly be used to embody metaphoric meaning. But metaphor is slippery and any metaphor can be read from varying ideological viewpoints. How has the superhero been read?

Chapter 11
The Ideology of the Superhero

Like all myth-narratives, the superhero genre has been used for a variety of ideological purposes. Bradford Wright's history of the comic book contains a history of the superhero and traces some of the meanings the figure has held for its producers and consumers. At first, creators like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and Will Eisner presented "superheroes for the common man" who underscored New Deal assumptions (2001, 22). These heroes took on corrupt and abusive local governments, political machines, and greedy corporations and privileged the public welfare over the self-interest of the powerful (22-23). The superhero served as a medium to call for interventionist government on the side of the common citizen. Before WWII, creators like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby used patriotic heroes like Captain America to call for American intervention in the war, which mirrored the earlier call for an activist government in regulating domestic affairs. Wright states, "The 'common man' of the Depression era was now America itself, a repository of virtue and morality charged with extending justice and freedom to the oppressed in Europe and Asia" (35). Superheroes opposed the "militarism, oppression, and intolerance perpetuated by the Axis powers" and promoted an image of a unified American society (42).

At the same time, comics struck a chord with their young readers. Children must have found it refreshing to "discover a source of entertainment that spoke directly to them as independent consumer" in "a national culture forged by adults for adults" (28-29). After the war, superheroes embodied hope for international cooperation to prevent atomic war (Captain Marvel) and led the anticommunist crusade (Captain America) (69, 123). In the 1950s and early 1960s, superheroes served "to reinforce a blandly optimistic consensus view of America premised on the virtues of anticommunism, corporatism, consumption, domesticity, and middle-class social aspirations" (184). They affirmed the individual's obligation to society and reconciled the competing imperatives of individualism and communal responsibility (203, 205). Later in the 1960s they would serve as a

metaphor for bigotry (the X-Men), question authority (Green Lantern and Green Arrow), and express the disillusionment of the young in the Watergate era (Captain America). Out of Wright's study comes a vision of the superhero reflecting the times as perceived by the writers and artists working within the commercial constraints and direction of the editors and the publishers.

Other scholars see a somewhat sinister face behind the superhero's mask. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence view the superhero as the culmination of the American monomyth, the redemptive heroes of which predispose audiences to look for anti-democratic solutions. American monomythic tales have a tranquilizing effect, repeatedly validating the notion of a spectator democracy and instilling a fantasy of Edenic resolution enacted by superhero redeemers whom the population passively observes saving them from outside evil (1977, 178, 213). Thomas Andrae's conclusions about the superhero fit in with this vision. He sees the superhero as a symbol of the "erosion of individual autonomy under monopoly capitalism" ("Menace" 1980, 102). Superman stories "promote an acceptance of powerlessness in one's daily life for the sake of an ersatz existence beyond it" in consumer culture (100). Andrae sees superheroes as reproducing "the consumerist ideology of late capitalism, that labor is inherently unsatisfying and only an instrumental means to the freedom obtainable in leisure time" (103). The lack of temporal progression in Superman stories—he never ages and the stories take place in a timeless present—undermines the individual's capacity to become a self-constituted subject—the ability to emancipate oneself from the inhibitions and distortions of the past and to create a future which authentically expresses the individual's needs and desires. It promotes a psychologically regressive state in which the reader is reduced to a condition of impotence and passivity, becoming a perfect pawn for the bureaucratic chessboard. (109).

In both these views the ideological import of the superhero is to inflict a sense of powerlessness and resignation on readers. This resignation is expressed in an acceptance of things as they are, which is, according to Roland Barthes, the conservative function of myth (1988, 143). Richard Reynolds sums up this conservative vision of the world:

> A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action—and defended over and over again almost without respite against an endless battery of menaces determined to remake the world [...]. The normal is valuable and is constantly under attack, which means that almost by definition the superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo. (1994, 77)

Superheroes reinforce the idea that things are the way they should be and thereby reify current power relationships.

But superheroes may not be perceived in this way by the readers of their stories. Will Brooker presents a concept called a "brand" that is useful for looking at the ways space might be left for interpretations outside the implications of the ideological readings of Jewett, Lawrence, Andrae, and Reynolds. In his study of Batman, Brooker makes the argument that the "meanings can be seen as existing in a democratic system of persuasion and co-existence" (2001, 35). But not all meanings carry equal cultural power as "corporate voices are able to shout far louder, drowning the opinions of individuals" and so the "freedom to construct meanings specific to one's interpretive community should not necessarily be seen as having any power in itself to transform society" (28, 29). These meanings, though, are built around a core "brand," which Brooker defines as the forms and conventions that govern a cultural entity and all the primary aspects of the entity's "mythos" (35). Once established—and readers play a role establishing this brand through their purchasing decisions and communication with the producers—the brand remains remarkably stable (35). Batman's brand can be summarized thus:

> Batman is Bruce Wayne, a millionaire who dresses in a bat-costume and fights crime. He has no special powers but is very fit and strong, and very intelligent. He lives in Gotham City. He fights villains like the Joker. He fights crime because his parents were killed when he was a child. He is often helped by his sidekick Robin. (section headings, 42-56)

This core brand took about two years to be established. Establishing this brand was a process of negotiation among writers, artists,

editors, the publisher, and the readers (59). By the time of WWII, this brand was set and Batman (the communal creation of all the forces involved) resisted being pulled into wartime adventures, unlike the many superheroes created in the midst of the build-up to and fighting of the war (79-81). This brand has held true across time and medium, whether authored by the liberal writer Denny O'Neil or the conservative artist Frank Miller, or presented in the serious comics version of Neal Adams or the silly television version of William Dozier.

The same is true, I would argue, for the superhero brand as a whole. Superheroes were created out of a vision of aiding the weak against the strong—whether domestically as in Superman's fight against corrupt businessmen and ineffective government officials, or internationally as in Captain America's fight against militarism and fascism. Ironically, they were ideologically turned—Andrae, Jewett, Lawrence, and Reynolds argue—into a medium for disempowering ordinary people. The core brand of the superhero has remained constant, though. From the one-page origin in *Action Comics* #1—in which Superman is declared to be the "champion of the oppressed" and a "physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need"—to the present, the superhero brand has been concerned with power and justice—physical, economic, ideological—both within the narratives themselves and in scholarly analyses of them. As such, superheroes can be read as liberating or oppressing.

And superheroes are read as liberating.[121] Commercial artist Arlen Schumer, author of *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (2003), told me several years ago that comics writer Alan Moore said that he learned his morals from Superman. Superman presents right and wrong very clearly and distinctly. He uses his powers to help others and to stand up against powerful, selfish forces. Schumer felt that he too had imbibed this view of the world and that it had served him well throughout his life. I had the same experience and agree with Moore and Schumer. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's original vision of a heroic superman has held true throughout the character's evolution.

Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian W. *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*. New York: Doubleday, 1973.

Andrae, Thomas. "From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature." *Discourse* 2 (1980): 84-111.

---. "Of Supermen and Kids With Dreams: A Rare Interview with the Creators of Superman: Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster." *Nemo: The Classic Comics Library*. August 1983: 7-19.

Anglo, Michael. *Penny Dreadfuls and Other Victorian Horrors*. London: Jupiter Books, 1977.

Apollonios, Rhodius. *The Voyage of Argo: The Argonautica*. Intro. and trans. E.V. Rieu. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin, 1971.

Autoglass Plus commercial. KSDK, St. Louis, MO. 19 Oct. 2000.

Axmaker, Sean. "Christopher Nolan's Realistic Superhero." 20 Oct. 2005. Green Cine. <www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=247>.

Barr, Mike W. "The Madames & the Girls: The DC Writers Purge of 1968." *Comic Book Artist*. Summer 1999: 12-17.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday Press, 1988.

Batman. Dir. Tim Burton. Perf. Jack Nicholson, Michael Keaton. Warner Brothers, 1989.

Batman Begins. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Gary Oldman. United States: Warner Brothers, 2005.

Beck, C.C. "Captain Marvel." *Secret Origins of Super DC Heroes*. New York: Warner Books, 1976. 219-231.

Beerbohm, Robert. "Siegel & Shuster Presents...The Superman!" *Comic Book Marketplace*. June 1996: 47-50.

Benton, Mike. *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing, 1989.

---. *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age: The Illustrated History*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1992.

Beowulf. Burton Raffel intro and trans. New York: Signet, 1963.

Beresford, J.D. *The Wonder*. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1999. Rpt. of *The Hampdenshire Wonder*. 1911.

Bird, Robert Montgomery. *Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky*. 1835. New York: American Book Company, 1939.