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The American Way: What Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men Reveal About America

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The American Way: What Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men Reveal

About America

by

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This dissertation/thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

The American Way: What Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the X-Men Reveal

About America

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Master of Arts

Comic book superheroes have become adopted into American popular culture, and yet few have considered why these characters resonate with Americans. The first comic book superhero premiered in 1938 when Superman appeared on the cover of Action Comics. For almost seventy years his adventures and the adventures of other costumed heroes have been continually published. Batman soon joined Superman as a popular costumed crime-fighter, and the early 1960s saw another generation of superheroes created that would be embraced in American culture. Among this new group of heroes were Spider-Man and the X-Men, who have proved as popular as Superman and Batman. The never-ending narratives of comic book characters provide a unique opportunity to analyze how superheroes have evolved across the decades to remain relevant for new generations of Americans.

Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men are the most popular heroes, not only in comic books, but in other media adaptations. An exploration of why these specific characters have such resonance with Americans will provide insights into American mindsets, ideologies, and philosophies. Furthermore, comic books are uniquely positioned to allow a new historicist reading, as the characters' adventures have been published on a monthly schedule for decades. A consideration of the alterations made in the narratives to reflect the time periods is inherently enlightening.

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Introduction

Dr. Kristin Matthews asked me what the point was of my in-depth consideration of popular comic book figures. I explained that my intent was to explore how the most popular heroes remained relevant through the decades with the alteration of the storylines told with those figures to represent the time period in which the tales were published. Such a study, I argued, would not only provide greater awareness of American icons, but it would ably demonstrate the inherent mirroring between popular culture and society. As a litmus test for my contention she asked what was happening in the current Superman comic books. I responded that the most recent issue featured a debate about whether or not Superman was too powerful, whether or not he was capable of acting unilaterally in what he deemed the best manner, even if others did not share his view of what the "right" thing to do was. We concluded rather quickly that as a representation of America Superman was still echoing society in 2005 and that a larger study could prove fruitful.

My intent in this study is not to defend comic books as literature or discuss the artistic merits of sequential art. Others, most notably Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, have broached that topic and argued the merits of comic books well. Rather I hope to explain why four specific comic book superhero titles have risen to heights of popularity, not just in comic books but in other media, unparalleled by other costumed heroes. While many other genres such as romance, western, and crime are published in comic books, by far genre most associated with comic books, and the most lucrative one for publishers, is superheroes. And within that genre Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the X-Men have become icons in American popular culture.

I hope to explain why these heroes have resonated with Americans, and particularly how they have maintained relevance throughout the decades rather than becoming cultural relics of the 1930s or 1960s as so many other popular creations have. In detailing why these particular heroes have become so popular, my analysis will not dwell so much on their powers or costumes as on what is peculiarly American about each specific character or group. There is a reason characters whose personalities vary as widely as the straight-laced moral beacon Superman, the grim dark knight Batman, the perpetually down-on-his-luck Spider-Man, and the marginalized others in the X-Men all have been adopted into American culture. There are unique aspects for each which link them to varying facets of American ideologies, creeds, and culture.

In developing my analysis I will employ new historicism to examine direct links between the fears, hopes, and concerns of American society and the published adventures of Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the X-Men. New Historicism attempts to situate texts within the existing culture at the time of their creation. Louis Montrose, in the essay "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," explains that new historicism "reorients the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system […] implicit in [this…] is a conviction that formal and historical concerns are not opposed, but rather inseparable" (779). Montrose asserts that the culture of a time period is integral to understanding artistic works, whatever they may be. The historical cultural setting is inherently linked to the products of the culture. And understanding the cultural context not only aids in interpreting the art; the reverse is also true. Stephen Greenblatt states "if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of

literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced" (227). Contextualizing a work within its contemporary culture increases our understanding of both the work and culture.

Comic books are uniquely situated for such an analysis. With the publication of monthly adventures, comic books allow for a new historicist reading which covers decades. Superman has had a continuous narrative since 1938; an analysis of that lengthy narrative reveals both the character's evolution and how Superman has remained a vibrant and relevant feature of American culture for almost seventy years. It also reveals how America has changed in that time period. Comic books are undeniably a commercial facet of popular culture, but that hardly precludes them from having cultural relevancy. In "Why Study Popular Culture," Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure explain:

> We see reflected in pop culture certain standards and commonly held
>
> beliefs about beauty, success, love, or justice. We also see reflected there
>
> important social contradictions and conflicts—the tension between races,
>
> genders, or generations, for example. To find out about ourselves, then,
>
> we can turn to our own popular products and pastimes. (5)

Even though popular culture is often considered escapist fare, we do not escape the prevailing concerns of our day. Popular culture often mirrors the mindset of a culture, and never ignores it.

A Superman story from 1950 will illuminate different insights about America than a story from 1980 or 2005. Individual issues of comic books or adaptations of these

superheroes in other media allow a unique opportunity to see how a single character has been affected by the changing influence of society. John Fiske contends that "Popular culture is the culture of the here and now, not of the always and forever. Popular texts, therefore, are evaluated according to their social values, not their universal or aesthetic ones" (334). This interpretation is useful in examining the changing nature of these superheroes through the years, as the individual stories will have more to do with the societal issues when they were written than the prevalent concerns when the characters were created. Beyond the relevancy to specific times there is also a universal appeal to these characters. They have survived, even thrived, across multiple generations—the American aspects of these characters is what makes them so popular. There is an essential aspect which hooks these creations to the American psyche and makes these characters survive when others, such as the Shadow of the 1930s, become relics.

So this analysis will consider how Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men embody American ideologies and characteristics. It will further explore the manner in which these characters' narratives have been influenced by a changing America. The unique serialized nature of comic book narratives, some of which have been ongoing for nearly seventy years, positions comic books in an ideal situation for a new historicist reading. While individual films, popular songs, or even long-running television shows can all demonstrate the value of analyzing a society through its popular culture, comic books offer a different and largely unexplored avenue of exploration in this field. The comic book medium has been largely ignored as an option for academic study. My thesis will hopefully prove that the medium is a viable option for cultural analysis.

Chapter 1

Superman: The First Superhero

Superman's Appeal

Comic books could not have asked for a better hero to lead the flight into what would become the medium's dominant genre. Superman burst onto the scene as the first comic book superhero in 1938, forever altering not only the fledgling comic book industry, but American culture as well. While thousands of other costumed characters have been introduced in the pages of comic books, the vast majority have gone unnoticed by the general public. Even more tellingly, few have even approached the level of cultural resonance Superman enjoys.

Having single-handedly launched the genre of superhero comic books, Superman was not content to remain merely on the printed page. Superman first appeared on the cover of *Action Comics,* but he has subsequently appeared in myriad other media, including seven cartoon series, a radio serial, two movie serials, a Broadway musical, multiple novels, three live-action television series, and four feature-length films, with a new entry into the film canon scheduled for 2006. Andy Mangels succinctly sums up Superman's multi-media popularity: "Since his creation in 1938, Superman has traveled into the heart of generation upon generation of readers, moviegoers and television fans [. . .] Clark Kent and Superman have been portrayed by more than a dozen actors, and the Man of Steel has appeared in more media interpretations than *any* other superhero" (543). His likeness has been used in advertising and merchandising for products ranging from watches to peanut butter. The ubiquitous S-shield from Superman's uniform can be

found on all styles of clothing and has been adopted by such sports stars as Muhammad Ali and Shaquille O'Neil.

Superman's influence spreads beyond popular culture and commercial products. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner in their book Freakonomics credit the Superman radio show of the 1940s with destroying the mystique and diminishing the influence of the Ku Klux Klan. The radio show aired the secret passwords and hidden organization of the Klan and turned it into a joke and game played by children. Following the radio shows one Klansman is reported to have said in despair "There was my kid and a bunch of others, some with towels tied around their necks like capes and some with pillowcases over their heads. The ones with capes was chasing the ones with pillowcases all over the lot [. . .] They said they were playing a new kind of cops and robbers called Superman against the Klan [. . .] I never felt so ridiculous in all my life!" (64-5).

The sheer pervasiveness of Superman in American culture is evidence of his resonance with the psyche of America. Comic book historian Les Daniels calls Superman "the first fictional character to have been so successfully promoted as a universal icon [. . .] [a] triumphant mixture of marketing and imagination, familiar all around the world, and re-created for generation after generation" (History 11). Perhaps Mickey Mouse could compete with Superman in this category, but clearly both are winners in the battle for universal recognition. Gerard Jones cites Superman as "a national dream self" and a "universal reference point" (Tomorrow 334). Clearly, Superman captures something intrinsically fascinating to Americans.

But what is about Superman has made him such a phenomenon? Literally thousands of other superheroes have been created and few even approach the appeal of

Superman. Certainly Superman was the first comic book hero, but there must be more to his popularity than that. Why Superman? What is it about Superman that makes him so popular, and why has that popularity, which was instantly apparent from his first appearance, endured for sixty-five years? Superman, simply put, embodies America's ideals. As *the* example of American popular culture Superman inherently mirrors America and reveals intriguing insights about America.

Origin

Superman's beginning is oddly humble considering the globally-recognized symbol he has become. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, who first conceived of Superman when they were seventeen years old, could not have imagined the impact Superman was to have. Siegel and Schuster first created a character named Superman in a short story they self-published in the science fiction magazine they created after receiving rejection notices from most existing sci-fi magazines. Though it never reached a large readership, this magazine is notable for containing the story "Reign of the Superman" which told the tale of a mad scientist who attempted to control the world. This "Superman" had little in common with the hero they later created, though the bald villain may have been a predecessor to Superman's arch-nemesis Lex Luthor. After high school, trying to find work at the tail-end of the Great Depression, Siegel and Schuster would fall back on Siegel's writing and Schuster's art skills, talents honed working for the high school paper.

After many attempts, Siegel and Schuster had a concept they thought could sell well, though no publisher seemed to agree with them. Noted comic book historian Jim Steranko records in The Steranko History of Comics that "Siegel and Schuster had, over

the years, sent versions of their character to every comic syndicate editor in the country. The Bell syndicate rejected them with, '*We are in the market only for strips likely to have the most extraordinary appeal, and we do not feel Superman gets into that category*'" (39). What would one day become one of the most recognizable figures in the world could not find a publisher. In frustration Joe Schuster tore up the first Superman art and had to redraw those panels when Siegel convinced him it was worth their time to continue submitting. For six years Siegel and Schuster worked to get Superman published in the comics, and they became so desperate for payment for their efforts that when Harry Donenfeld offered to publish the character in *Action Comics* #1, Siegel and Schuster sold the rights to their creation along with the strip itself. This early lack of business acumen would haunt them for the rest of their lives, but no one could have foreseen the meteoric rise in popularity Superman enjoyed.

A planned comic book series called *Action Comics* needed a character befitting that title to launch what was planned to be a serialized comic with different stories in each issue. It is difficult to determine exactly how the decision was made for Superman to appear in that issue, because several people involved in the process have since claimed responsibility for being the one to recognize Superman's potential. However approval occurred, a now-iconic image of Superman lifting a car over his head was used on the cover and sales were far better than expected. Children snapped up the issue to discover who this tights-clad, cape-wearing figure was.

Jerry Siegel's inimitable prose in Superman's first published adventure memorably explains the character's origin:

Just before the doomed planet, Krypton, exploded to fragments, a scientist

placed his infant son within an experimental rocket-ship, launching it

toward Earth; When the vessel reached our planet, the child was found by

an elderly couple, the Kents…The love and guidance of his kindly foster-

parents was to become an important factor in the shaping of the boy's

future. As the lad grew older he learned to his delight that he could hurdle

skyscrapers…leap an eighth of a mile…raise tremendous weights…run

faster than a streamline train…and nothing less than a bursting shell could

penetrate his skin…Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into

channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created SUPERMAN,

champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote

his existence to helping those in need! (9-10)

It was soon apparent that issues of *Action Comics* featuring Superman on the cover sold

far better than those that did not. The
result was that before long Superman had
his own comic book even as his
adventures continued to be told in *Action
Comics*.

Fig. 1 Superman's rocket leaves Krypton.
Action Comics 1, June 1938.

        Regrettably, for much of their lives
Siegel and Shuster did not enjoy many
fruits for their labors. They were paid
slightly above average wage when they worked on the character they created, but in 1948

both were fired. Numerous lawsuits were filed as the pair attempted to regain control of
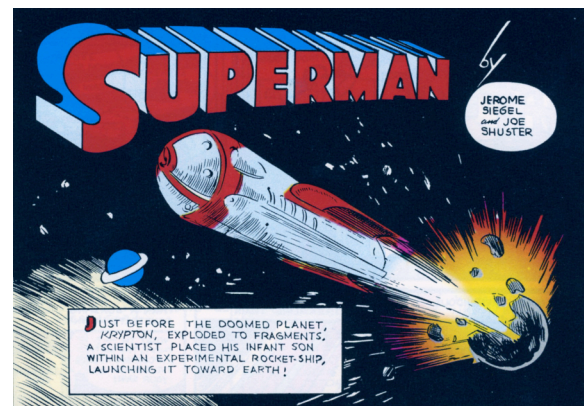
their own creation, but Siegel and Schuster could not mirror the success Superman was enjoying. The legal fact was that they had sold Superman away with the first Superman strip published. Siegel was hired to write Superman stories again in the early 1960s, but he was never credited as the writer. Dennis Dooley records, "After another unsuccessful lawsuit and falling out with DC COMICS in 1963, Siegel went to work as a mailroom clerk at $7,000 a year and Schuster [now legally blind] was taken in by his brother Ben. The two never surrendered the belief that Superman rightfully belonged to them" (34).

Fortunately the creators of Superman would receive some solace before the end of their lives. With the announcement of the multi-million dollar Superman movie being made by Warner Bros. in 1975 Siegel angrily typed a nine-page diatribe describing his and Schuster's treatment at the hands of the publisher that had made millions off of their creation. He sent the article to a thousand newsrooms and waited for a response. It did not come quickly, but it did come, and the story ran in several national papers and broadcasts. While Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster had lost in the court of law, they won in the court of public opinion, and DC Comics agreed to give them an annual stipend of $20,000 to live on and, perhaps most importantly to Siegel and Schuster, credit them in every published adventure (and the soon-to-be-released film) as the creators of Superman.

What Makes Superman American?

It is apparent to any observer of American culture that Superman has come to represent America in an iconic manner. Created by Americans for American consumption, Superman's adventures purposefully resonate with the country's values and ideals. The inevitable cross-pollination between a country and its culture has ensured that

Superman's monthly adventures have remained relevant to the time in which they are published. Various facets of the Superman mythology can be recognized as distinctly American, and it is for those reasons that he has maintained generational popularity.

The fact that Superman embodies the immigrant's tale which all Americans, save Native Americans, have as some aspect of their personal mythologies is certainly one facet of the explanation for his cultural resonance. Because the immigrant is such an integral aspect of America's history it has been mythologized into America's popular culture.

Furthermore, it can be argued that it would have been impossible for a character such as Superman to have been created anywhere but America. While aspects of the hero are reminiscent of ancient mythologies, there are distinctive characteristics that are born out of American traditions of myth-building. Daniel J. Boorstin, a former Librarian of Congress, explains that the creation of American mythologies is unique in world history for various reasons:

> Two crucial distinctions […] mark the American making of a popular legendary hero. First, there was a fantastic chronological abridgement: from elusive oral legend to printed form required here a few years rather than centuries. Legends hastened into print before they could be purified of vulgarities and localisms. Second, the earliest printed versions were in a distinctly American form; they were not in literature but in "subliterature"–writings on popular and vulgar subjects, belly-laugh humor, slapstick and tall tales, adventures for the simple-minded.

Crockett was not written down in any American counterpart of the

Historia Regum Britanniae or in any *Morte d'Arthur…* (328)

American legends and myths were created and printed in a condensed timeline when compared to other world cultures. American myth was not preserved in high art or literature, it began and was printed as low art. Comic books are a continuation of this unique "subliterature" developed in America, and Superman's narrative can be see as an extension of early tall tales.

Sprouting from the same tradition as the frontiersmen and the cowboy, Superman must also navigate the same murky waters as these American mythic figures. A balance is sought between upholding civilization and operating outside of it. Bradford W. Wright, in his extensive analysis of comic books, Comic Book Nation, proposes the following explanation for Superman's genesis as related to American myth:

Siegel and Schuster, however unconsciously, had created a brilliant twentieth-century variation on a classic American hero type. The most pervasive myth in American culture is that of the Western frontier hero, who resolves tensions between the wilderness and civilization while embodying the best virtues of both environments himself. Twentieth century popular culture has adapted the Western and frontier metaphors to meet contemporary tastes and concerns … (10)

However, Superman did not merely continue the same themes previously explored, his narratives expanded and exaggerated them. And Superman would furthermore come to be an emblem of America, a recognized symbol of American ideals. Gary Engle, in his

essay "What Makes Superman so Darned American?" calls Superman *the* great American

hero and goes on to explain:

> Among the Davy Crocketts and Paul Bunyans and Mike Finks and Pecos
>
> Bills and all the rest […] only Superman achieves truly mythic stature,
>
> interweaving a pattern of beliefs, literary conventions and cultural
>
> traditions of the American people more powerfully and more accessibly
>
> than any other cultural symbol of the 20th century, perhaps of any period
>
> of our history. (80)

Superman's mythology regularly explores issues which have challenged America since

its founding. Patrick L. Eagan's essay "A Flag with a Human Face" cites the search for

this balance as the defining question of America's identity, positing that Superman's

struggle mirrors "the fundamental dilemma that confronted the Constitution's framers:

how to establish a government that is sufficiently strong to control evil (Hamilton's

concern), but not so strong that it becomes a greater evil that controls us (Jefferson's

concern)" (90).   As these scholars suggest, Superman can, and should, be read as part of

a long history of American mythology.

Superman both upholds authority, such as when he goes through the governor to

pardon a condemned but innocent prisoner who he could have more easily freed himself,

yet protects the people from the abuses of power. In the same issue Superman frightens a

confession from a criminal to reveal a senator's corruption. Superman's tale has ties

directly related to America's history, but perhaps the most notable tie is his immigrant

origin.

Immigrant's Tale

It is fitting Superman was the first hero to launch a distinctly American genre in superhero comic books because his experience in many ways parallels the American dream. A visitor from a foreign land comes to America, makes more of himself than he could have where he came from, and in the end is adopted as an American. Superman's origin fits all these aspects of the American dream but that should not surprise us, considering his creators were both sons of immigrants.

Superman's parents sent their son from a dying planet to earth so that he might have a chance not at just a better life, but at life itself. As a product of the 1930s Superman draws parallels between his origin and the immigrants who came to the United States from war-torn Europe. The fact that his creators are first-generation Americans, the children of Jewish immigrants, makes this parallel even more compelling. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's parents fled unstable European lands, where it was uncertain that their children would be able to grow up safely, and came to America to protect and provide for their children.

For Jerry Siegel the lure of America figured heavily into his family's past. While Jerry himself was born in America, most with whom he interacted were immigrants who had come to America seeking a better life than they had in Europe. Gerard Jones relates the immigrant history of the Siegel family in <u>Men of Tomorrow</u>:

> Michel Sigel [Jerry's father] arrived in New York around the turn of the twentieth century, adjusted his name to Mitchell Siegel, and found his way to Cleveland. His wife, Sarah, waited for him in Lithuania with their first two children until he'd earned enough money to bring her over [. . .] Soon

he was able not only to bring over Sarah and the children but also to help

other members of his family and Sarah's five younger siblings come over,

too. By the end of emigration from Eastern Europe, a large, interwoven

Siegel-Fine family was scattered through the Jewish communities along

the eastern edge of Cleveland. (23)

Immigration would have been a large aspect of the stories Jerry Siegel heard

growing up as a child. Siegel was immersed in immigrant culture not only in his family,

but in the area of Cleveland he grew up in as well. As Jones further explains, "From the

1890s to the 1920s [Cleveland] grew from a quarter million people to nearly a million [. .

.]It was a mecca for immigrants: 40 percent of its population was foreign-born or of

foreign parentage" (24). Immigration to America would have been a regularly

encountered fact of life in Cleveland for Jerry Siegel, and also his collaborator Joe

Schuster.

Like Siegel, Joe Schuster's family had immigrated to the United States. In Joe's

case the practice of moving had been inscribed into his family for generations. Gerard

Jones explains the Schuster family history: "His family had been moving for generations:

His grandparents had been born in Russia, his father in Holland, Joe himself in Toronto.

When Joe was nine years old, his father pulled up stakes again, seeking work in the

booming Cleveland rag trade" (67). Siegel and Schuster's perception of America was

colored by the immigrant culture in which they were immersed. America was a land of

opportunity; supposedly life would be better simply because they lived in America.

Critical to the American dream is the concept that one will be able to make more

of oneself in America than was possible in one's homeland. Superman fulfills this dream

in spades. Depending on the source legend the direct cause of Superman's powers vary, yet the fact that he is on Earth and not Krypton always plays a role. Siegel and Schuster explained that the gravity on Krypton was so much greater that Superman could leap great distances and had enhanced strength on Earth. In the "Scientific Explanation of Superman's Amazing Strength!" first published in 1939, Siegel writes that "Superman came to Earth from Krypton, whose inhabitants had evolved, after millions of years, to physical perfection! The smaller size of our planet, with its slighter gravity pull, assists Superman's tremendous muscles in the performance of miraculous feats of strength" (11). Originally Superman could not fly, only leap great distances. The fact that Superman grew up as a child on earth so that his muscles might have acclimated to Earth's gravity field is never addressed, which is perhaps why other explanations have been offered in later re-envisionings of his origin.

In the fifties a young fan's letter brought to the attention of Mort Weisinger, the editor of Superman comics at the time, that the old explanation of Superman's powers, Earth's lesser gravitational pull, did not explain Superman's X-ray vision, his heat vision, or even the power of flight which had been added to his roster of abilities. Weisinger came up with a new explanation, that Earth's yellow sun somehow endowed Kryptonians with special powers because Krypton had orbited a red sun. How exactly this process worked has never been addressed in detail, but this new explanation of his powers has allowed for frequent trips to planets orbiting red suns so that readers can see a powerless Superman use his brain instead of his brawn to get out of sticky situations (Jones, Heroes 17).

In all these explanations of Superman's powers it is the fact that he is in America, and not Krypton, that allows him to excel beyond what he would have been capable of in his "home country." Being in America allows Superman opportunities to excel which he never would have had on Krypton. The American Dream has been mythologized directly into Superman.

Superman is very literally an alien and yet he has come to represent America both in comic books and, in many ways, the real world as well. Superman's costume, while not exactly red, white, and blue, is red and blue enough to smack of American patriotism. It's clear to all readers what country Superman is from: the United States of America. Superman was raised with small-town, mid-western virtues by a farming couple in Kansas, and represents America in every conceivable way. Superman's ideals, his efforts to protect the people's rights without enforcing his will, his vision of a moral universe where free will and democracy reign are all American ideals.

Many have noted the similarity between Superman's origins and the immigrant's tales of America. For example, Gary Engle notes:

> It is impossible to imagine Superman being as popular as he is and
> speaking as deeply to the American character were he not an immigrant
> and an orphan. Immigration, of course, is the overwhelming fact of
> American history [. . .] No nation on Earth has so deeply embedded in its
> social consciousness the imagery of passage from one social identity to
> another: the Mayflower of the New England separatists, the slave ships
> from Africa and the subsequent underground railroads towards freedom in

the North, the sailing ships and steamers running shuttles across two

oceans in the 19th century, the freedom airlifts in the 20th. (80)

Such pervasive images of transportation from one locale to another made a Kryptonian

ship sending Superman to America easily adopted into American mythology. Michael

Chabon, the author of the novel The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, which

explores the early comic book industry and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, says:

> Superman comes from this other place to America, he can never go back,
>
> there, it's been destroyed very much as the Europe that the European Jews
>
> left behind was eventually destroyed, he is adopted by this ultimate
>
> American couple, he leaves behind the vaguely Hebraic sounding Kal El
>
> and becomes Clark Kent the ultimate American. Even if you don't look at
>
> him as an allegory of the immigrant he *is* an immigrant, he did come to
>
> America, and he did make good" (*Superheroes Unmasked*).

Superman celebrates an idealized immigrant experience, beginning with the

immigrant's journey and ending with adoption into American culture, even as he

maintains obvious ties to his ethnic heritage. Superman's ethnicity is literally worn on

his sleeve, as he dons tights and spandex that bear symbolic colors and images of his

home world. Engle's exploration of Superman's correlation with the immigrant tale

further posits that "Superman's powers [. . .] are the comic book equivalents of ethnic

characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in

which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture"

(81).

While most immigrants failed to experience the incredible success and acceptance Superman obtained, his story is a romanticized narrative, a wish-fulfillment fantasy on many levels. Just as his abilities are exaggerated, so too his success and adoption into America are beyond what was experienced by most immigrants.

Secret Identity

Having Superman choose to disguise himself as Clark Kent seems to be a bit extreme. Why would the most powerful individual on the entire planet disguise himself not just as a normal man, but as an unabashed geek? Various reasons are possible; it can be seen, as it often has, as an odd mix of self-flagellation and adolescent fantasy-fulfillment by Superman's creators, or as a clever narrative device, or as a product of the unique time in which he was created. The separation of Clark Kent and Superman has become more blurred as the mythology has been handed down through the decades, but originally there could not have been two more polar opposites than this pair of personalities in one body. Clark Kent and Superman, as created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, were inverted in powers, attitudes, and personality. Two aspects of the secret identity warrant exploration. First, why is the secret identity employed at all? Why would the creators of Superman force the world's strongest being to masquerade as a mild mannered geek? And second, why has the relationship between Clark and Superman which was once so clearly delineated has become so blurred in the current rendering of Superman?

The dual nature of Superman/Clark Kent is a core aspect of the Superman mythology; something about the concept of the secret identity captures the imagination of the audience. There are obvious narrative reasons writers have employed the secret

identity in Superman stories. The fact that Superman has a day job provides storytelling

possibilities that certainly could not be explored were Superman to be Superman all the

time. Clark Kent's job as a reporter provided a handy way for Superman to be aware of

natural disasters and dangers facing Metropolis. Also, literally decades of stories were

milked out of the inherent conflict of the bizarre Clark Kent/Lois Lane/Superman love

triangle. But is there something at the core of the secret identity concept that captures the

imagination of the reader?

Perhaps it is that Clark Kent provides an area of the story the reader can relate to.

Few readers could relate to the concept of bulletproof skin or the ability to lift a car over

one's head. But in the market to which comic books were aimed, adolescent American

boys, feeling awkward or unappreciated was almost universally understood. Jules

Feiffer, in one of the first academic considerations of comic books, The Great Comic

Book Heroes, provides an in-depth exploration of the Clark Kent/Superman relationship:

> The particular brilliance of Superman lay not in the fact that he was the
>
> first of the superheroes, but in the concept of the alter ego […] Remember,
>
> Kent was not Superman's true identity as Bruce Wayne was Batman's
>
> […] And for what purpose? Did Superman become Clark Kent in order to
>
> lead a normal life, have friends, be known as a nice guy, meet girls?
>
> Hardly […] The truth may be that Kent existed not for the purposes of the
>
> story but for the reader. (11-13)

Clark Kent provided a link for the reader into the fantastical world of Superman.

Steranko concurs with Fieffer's assertion that Clark Kent exists for the reader, "Clark

Kent existed so that we might lock into that part of him in our fantasies, hoping somehow

that a superman lived inside us until the right moment came for him to emerge" (History of Comic, 40).

Steranko's analysis sheds light on another likely reason for the presence of Clark Kent in Superman comics. The secret identity is, in its essence, adolescent wish fulfillment. This should hardly be surprising— Superman was created by two shy adolescent boys. Danny Fingeroth posits that the secret identity is a simple case of adolescent fantasy made fiction. In Superman on the Couch Fingeroth explores why incarnations of heroes for mass consumption such as film and television still maintain the secret identity aspect of the characters even as the comic books, in an effort to promote pseudo-realism, have, in the decades since superheroes first appearances, lessened the importance of the secret identity. Fingeroth boils the appeal of the dual identity to the adolescent wish that "IF ONLY THEY (*whoever your "they" may be)* KNEW THE TRUTH *(whatever that truth may be)* ABOUT ME *(whoever you believe yourself to be),* THEY'D BE SORRY FOR THE WAY THEY TREAT ME. That's a powerful fantasy and a powerful human need. It's what makes people read and watch fiction" (60).

For the creators of Superman there certainly was an element of Fingeroth's "if only they knew the truth about me" syndrome. It is often recognized that Siegel and Schuster had far more in common with Clark Kent than with Superman. Steranko notes that Siegel and Schuster were "described as 'two small, shy, nervous, myopic lads,' [they] made the Man of Steel everything they weren't […] They were, in their own way, striking back at a world of bullies that had threatened, bruised and beaten them" (History, 39).   Clark Kent was an exaggerated version of themselves and Superman was everything they weren't. Les Daniels's Superman: The Compete History argues that

Siegel and Schuster "patterned [Clark Kent] after themselves, almost masochistically, making him timid, myopic, working class, and socially maladroit [. . .] Siegel and Schuster stripped him of any vestige of the exotic" (19). Dennis Dooley's essay "The Man of Tomorrow and the Boys of Yesterday" sheds further light on this relationship between Clark Kent and his creators, describing Jerry Siegel as "a paradox. Outwardly shy, thin, unathletic, bumping about behind glasses that slipped down his nose, he lived almost totally within a boyish imagination teeming with spectacular adventures and tales of outrageous daring" (23). In Superman Siegel created a narrative outlet in which the shy boy could coexist with an adventurous world.

Included in the discussion of Clark Kent and Superman's relationship must be the odd attraction/repulsion associated with Lois Lane. While Clark Kent pined for Lois and made pathetic attempts to woo her, Lois displayed open disdain for Clark and wished for Superman. Superman was aloof towards Lois and appeared oblivious to her romantic designs. The fact that Superman and Clark Kent were, in fact, the same person makes their interactions with Lois peculiar.

An explanation for these odd character interactions should, again, begin with a consideration of Superman's creators. Les Daniels affirms some direct links between Jerry Siegel's adolescent issues with girls and the Clark/Superman/Lois relationship, "Siegel had his share of adolescent crushes, including one on a student named Lois Amster [. . .] Siegel could alleviate whatever unhappiness he felt by envisioning the ultimate version of an almost universal fantasy: of containing hidden qualities that would someday command everyone's admiration" (History, 19). Siegel also admitted in an interview that "the inspiration for Superman's dual identity grew out of his own

frustration as a high school kid who wasn't 'glamorous' and felt uneasy around girls"

(Daniels, <u>DC</u> 24).

Beyond personality projection of Superman's creators there are other possible

explanations for the opposing natures of Clark Kent and Superman. A new historicist

reading of Superman allows for direct parallels to be drawn between the time period of its

creation and the narrative implications of Superman's tale. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster

had been developing Superman during the mid-1930s. During this time America was as

split as Superman's personalities. The Great Depression had a disastrous affect on the

population of America throughout the 1930s altering the identity of many Americans,

who went from at worst a sustainable income and at best upward mobility to

unemployment. America, which had invited the world's tired, poor huddled masses to

come to its shore, found itself the home of its own poor masses. The Great Depression

shattered America's confidence, enfeebling and emasculating working-class males—the

general population was rendered powerless. In 1932 to combat the Great Depression,

President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised a New Deal for the American people. The

government promised to fix all of America's problems. In effect, the government

pledged to become a powerful protector of the people and solve their troubles.

It is not accidental that Siegel and Schuster created a hero who embodied both

roles America was experiencing in the 1930s. Clark Kent was unconfident, incapable of

standing up for himself. On the other hand Superman was an all-powerful protector of

not only himself but of the people. Particularly in the early issues he battled the problems

that 1930s Americans encountered. He did not fight space aliens or super-villains in

powered suits; Superman fought crooked politicians, dirty union leaders and abusive

husbands. The roles of Superman and Clark Kent paralleled to the time period in which they were created.

Having explored what may have been the impetus for the dual identity in this American myth a consideration of why that split identity has morphed throughout the years will also prove valuable. To fully appreciate the change, one must first consider the original interpretation of the situation and compare it to the manner it is handled in current interpretations.

Originally Clark Kent and Superman were a case of split personalities sharing a single body. Whereas Clark Kent openly pined for Lois Lane, Superman would hardly deign to have a conversation with her, interacting with her only when she was (admittedly quite frequently) imperiled. Consider some examples from the first issue of Superman published in the summer of 1939. Clark Kent stutters and stammers while asking Lois Lane out on a date, "W-what do you say to a –er—date tonight Lois?" and later whiningly asks Lois "Why is it you always avoid me at the office?" Lois's response, "Please Clark! I've been writing 'sob stories' all day long. Don't ask me to write another," demonstrates her character was originally snobbish (Siegel Archives 19). Lois, a few panels later, provides an accurate summation of Clark's personality as demonstrated in these early issues when she yells, "I avoid you … because you're a spineless, unbearable COWARD!" (Siegel 20). In contrast to Clark's whiny character we have Superman, who in the same issue also interacts with Lois Lane, with a decidedly different tone. Whereas Clark fawns over Lois, Superman gruffly tells her to "Save the questions!" when she attempts to engage him in conversation, and his parting words to her betray none of Clark's feelings as he responds to Lois's query of "When shall I see

you again?" with a rude "Who knows? Perhaps tomorrow—perhaps NEVER!" (Siegel 36).

Superman was not only brusquer in his relationship with Lois Lane in his early tales, but he was harsher with criminals. Similar to Clark Kent's more submissive nature as compared to his later incarnations, Superman was more aggressive. Superman resorted to threats and was excessively violent.   Several times in the first issue of Superman the hero threatens helpless criminals with physical violence unless they confess, hardly the generous-hearted actions expected from the moral beacon of the superhero community which Superman has become. After disarming a murder suspect of her gun, Superman threatens, "You little vixen! Are you ready to sign a confession? Or shall I give you a taste of how that gun felt when I applied pressure?" (Siegel 14). Also in this issue Superman takes a corrupt political lobbyist on a wild ride, threatening to electrocute him with power lines and pretending they are falling to their death when he leaps from the capitol building in order to scare a confession from him.   Superman threatens a munitions seller who is helping to instigate a war by bending a metal bar in front of him and saying, "You see how effortlessly I crush this bar of iron in my hand? That bar could just as easily be your neck!" (Siegel 28). Today's consumers of the Superman mythology are not familiar with such wildly different personalities as were present in these stories.

The modern blurring of Clark Kent and Superman's distinctive identities is easily understood if one considers them in light of Hegel's dialectic. If, as Hegel expressed, a thesis and its antithesis are destined to become a synthesis of one another it is only natural that Superman and Clark Kent would synthesize from their dichotomy into a

character with a balanced nature rather than a schizoid one. Modern readers and viewers are more familiar with interpretations of the character that make Kent less sniveling and Superman more personable. Currently there is more of Superman in Clark and more of Clark in Superman than Siegel originally included in the characters. As Hegel asserted, two opposing forces in constant interaction with one another would eventually create an amalgam. For Superman and Clark Kent it took decades for this change to take place, but the process is quite plain. The slow march towards synthesis began with softening the wild differences between Clark Kent and Superman. As other writers took over the writing duties from Jerry Siegel the distinction in personalities was lessened. Superman became less aloof, losing the bullying tendencies which marked his early career. His nature and personality became much closer to the "big blue boy scout" with which most are familiar today. The beginnings of these changes can be seen clearly in the 1950 story "Three Supermen from Krypton" written by William Woolfolk. In this story Superman encounters the three Kryptonians who have caused earthquakes and flee from his presence, yet his first words upon catching up with them are "My name is Superman–and

Fig. 2 Superman uses threats to extort a confession. *Superman* 1, 1939.

Fig. 3 Superman attempts a peaceful resolution. *Superman* 65.

I assure you I mean no harm! I just want to find out more about you" (17). This

conciliatory tone is a far cry from Superman's earlier threat "That bar could just as easily

be your neck!" (Siegel, Archives 28).

Much as the original personalities are indicative of the time period they were

created in, the causes of this transition can be traced to the cultural changes in America at

this time. America's role in the world, and Americans' perceptions of themselves, altered

greatly between the late 1930s and the 1950s; Superman, acting as a symbol of America,

would change as well. Mark Waid explains:

> … in the years following World War II–Superman's natural patriotism
>
> practically forced him to transform his approach to problem-solving. As a
>
> nation, we had just validated the concept of the American way not only by
>
> leading–and helping to win–the greatest battle mankind had ever
>
> witnessed, but also consequently establishing ourselves as the world's
>
> policeman. As a people, we were justifiably proud of ourselves and
>
> believed more than ever in the ideals of order and virtue. In reflection,
>
> Superman gradually curbed his rebel ways and became more of a super-
>
> lawman–a global boyscout if you will. (5-6)

Clark Kent too moved away from the extremes he was originally written in. He

gradually lost his stutter and slowly became more assertive. The fainting spells

remained, however, because they provided an easy excuse for Clark to miss out on the

action whenever Superman was needed. Dennis O'Neil, a writer for Superman comics,

recognized this shift and explains that by the mid-1980s "Clark Kent was no longer a

bumbling loser; he became a Pulitzer Prize winner who moonlighted as a successful

novelist" (58). It is likely that the writers subsequent to Siegel softened these extremes

because they did not have the personal ties to the character that Siegel did, and moving

the two personalities closer together made sense—they were, after all, the same person.

It is likely that Siegel exaggerated what he felt was his geeky nature in writing Clark

Kent, and provided that nature's opposite in writing Superman as aloof and dominating.

Jim Steranko identifies Lois Lane's "disdain for Clark and his for her when he is

Superman" as an early story element that was possibly too exaggerated due to the fact

Siegel and Schuster were still feeling out what elements worked and which did not in this

new genre:

> The early Superman saga can be viewed as a series of experiments made
>
> by young pioneers struggling to determine the dimensions of an emerging
>
> art form called the comics. Typically, they stumble and fall; yet, in
>
> retrospect, their failures are as interesting as their successes. In reading
>
> their efforts, we must remember they were establishing the guidelines of a
>
> vision, trailblazing in a new publishing medium where rules were tenuous,
>
> often non-existent. (272)

It is understandable that these young creators would explore story elements which seem

out of place to modern sensibilities, not only because they wrote in a different time but

because beyond exploring the boundaries of the medium, they were themselves

establishing them. The discoveries of what worked and did not were made in published

comics, not by looking at historical precedent.

The watershed event that marked the synthesis of the personalities most distinctly

was when Clark Kent revealed his secret identity to Lois Lane, for narratively she was the

only reason his secret identity ever existed. The writers obviously recognized the

valuable narrative possibilities inherent to the bizarre love triangle Siegel established

between Superman, Clark Kent, and Lois Lane, for they milked it for every logical

permutation and also its illogical possibilities for over fifty years before finally allowing

Lois to know Clark's secret identity. This change forever altered the relationship

between Kent and Superman, and while the secret identity is still maintained, their

personalities were more similar than different from that point on.

Within the comic books this change can be seen as a gradual evolution through

the decades, but within other mediums, the change is seen more in the variations of each

new incarnation rather than a process occurring within the series themselves. For the

sake of this discussion we will begin our consideration of Superman's media adaptations

with the 1978 film *Superman*. In this film the vision of Clark we are given by actor

Christopher Reeve is quite similar to the stuttering, geeky version that first appeared in

Action Comics. The two most recent television programs to explore the Superman

mythology, 1993's *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* and 2001's

Smallville, have both changed the character of Clark Kent from a bumbling buffoon into

a more self-assured and socially capable human being. The distinction of personalities

between Superman and Clark has been progressively lessened in each adaptation. Les

Daniels, considering the evolution of Clark Kent and Lois Lane's relationship in *Lois and

Clark*, explains:

> The mass audience was not expecting the changes that the comics had
>
> introduced years earlier. Gone was the old wimpy Clark Kent, who chose
>
> to hide all his best qualities, and gone was the old lovelorn Lois Lane,
>
> obsessed with an alien and conniving to outsmart him. Instead the series

presented two smart, sexy people who weren't interested in secrets and

were obviously going to jump each other just as soon as they got through

with the fun of fencing […] Jerry Siegel's idea that unprepossessing

people could have hidden depths was pretty much abandoned, but in an

age of instant gratification nobody seemed to miss it. (172-3)

While in this adaptation the personality of Clark Kent and Superman is no longer

as distinctive a split as it once was, their appearances are still in the traditional mode.

Clark Kent still wears his large glasses, and Superman is still clad in muscle-revealing

tights and a cape.

In *Smallville* the road to synthesis is essentially completed. While the concept of

the secret identity is still employed, Clark Kent bears absolutely none of the trappings of

a geek—gone are the large glasses, the stuttering and the fainting spells. And when he

performs heroic deeds there are no tights and cape. Superman does not even exist as an

identity, nobody has even considered the name "Superman." In this, the most recent

incarnation of Superman outside of comic books, Clark Kent and Superman are

inseparably one. Super feats are performed, but secretly by Clark Kent, and not by a man

dressed in tights. There is no separation, there is no dichotomy, the two dialectically

opposed personalities have synthesized into one being.

However, it must be noted that Superman and Clark Kent seem to resist true

synthesis. Anytime the characters approach a fusion of being, the narrative resets to more

or less the original scenario. In the comic books this happened in the 1985 after the

storyline *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* which reset the general continuity of the DC universe,

and ended with Clark and Superman reassuming their original pole positions. It seems to

be happening again in this year's *Infinite Crisis*, another revamping of the DC Universe,

one purpose of which, DC Executive editor Dan Didio has explained, is to make secret

identities matter again. In the end the final step of Hegel's dialectic is not met, rather

than true synthesis there is a reversion to thesis/antithesis. Similarly, in the media

adaptations the process of synthesis near its conclusion in *Smallville,* but from the

appearances of the trailers for *Superman Returns* we will be seeing another reversion to

geeky Clark Kent and stoic Superman. Why does the character resist what seems to be

his natural progression?

Umberto Eco may have provided the answer in his 1972 essay "The Myth of

Superman." Eco contends that:

> The mythological character of [Superman] finds himself in this singular
>
> situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective
>
> aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an
>
> emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable […]
>
> but since he is marketed in the sphere of a "romantic" production for a
>
> public that consumes "romances," he must be subjected to a development
>
> which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters. (149)

Thus Superman must be both a static American mythology and a dynamic character in a

narrative. A problematic scenario at best. Eco further explains that to navigate this

difficult scenario the writers of Superman, most likely unconsciously, have created a

pseudo-linear world for him to live in, a world in which an actual flow of time is difficult

to nail down. Eco contends that comics books do not operate in a linear state such as we

perceive the world, with open causal chains wherein A leads to B which leads to C and so

on, but rather comic books exist in a world with closed causal chains where A leads to B which leads to C which leads back to A. Thus, in comic books an illusion of progression is provided that is necessary for the conventions of romantic narrative, but no actual progression occurs, allowing Superman to remain a static myth.

The application of Eco's assertion to Hegel's dialectic explains why Superman and Clark Kent never quite synthesize; they only come close and then are reset to more or less their original positions. In this way the characters can always be changing but forever stay the same. Superman and Clark Kent are both narrative and myth, and because of this they appear to evolve but never really do so. In this distorted version of Hegel's dialectic, what comes out of the interaction of thesis/antithesis is not a true synthesis, but an almost-synthesis which alarms Superman's editors so much that they find a storyline to send the characters backwards up the road of synthesis.

Context of the Times

Superman is clearly a product of his times; this is as true now as it was when he was created. The monthly nature of the serialized comic book allows us to examine the close relationship between the pressures of certain time periods on the content of the stories being told. Superman stories have been published without a break since 1938, and Superman has always been up to the task of carrying monthly titles. This serial continuity allows correlations to be easily drawn between real world events and concerns and what types of stories are being told about Superman.

Superman's very nature is a product of the time in which he was created. The New Deal was a period of idealism and hope in the government's ability to solve the people's problems. What type of hero is created in this period? Not some angst-ridden

teenager with quirky powers. This period of idealism demands an all-powerful hero, and it got one.

Superman's early adventures are not marked with battles with super-villains like Doomsday or Bizarro, but rather fighting the social ills of the times. In the first issue of Superman from 1939 he deters a lynch mob, violently stops a wife-beater, halts a kidnapping, forces a crooked politician to confess, and intervenes in a war that was only being fought to "promote the sale of munitions!" (Siegel Archives 39).

During World War II Superman and his other costumed counterparts were often shown fighting with the Allies. In an early effort in this propagandistic vein of storytelling Siegel and Schuster wrote a story entitled "What if Superman Ended the War?" Remarkably, it takes Superman only two pages to end the war, as he simply takes terrific leaps (he could not yet fly) into Germany and Russia and carries Hitler and Stalin to a meeting of the League of Nations in Switzerland. There they are found guilty of "modern history's worst crime—Unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries" (13). Superman's efforts on behalf of the war effort were not always as laudable as taking enemy leaders to trial. The cover of *Action Comics* #58 proudly proclaims in bold letters "Superman says: YOU CAN SLAP A JAP WITH WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!" accompanied by an offensive caricature of a Japanese solider being slapped in the face.

As other writers took over the writing of Superman new elements were added to his mythology. Many of these seem directly tied to the time periods in which they were introduced. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs recognize this in their history of comic books The Comic Book Heroes. Jones and Jacobs explain that Mort Weisinger was brought in

to be editor of the Superman "family" of comics for DC (at this time the Superman family of comics included the monthly titles *Action Comics, Adventure Comics, Superman, Superboy, Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen,* and *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*) and he felt that "something had to be done with DC's premier hero, and the times said that science fiction should be part of it" (14-5). Note the clear statement that the time period directed the route Superman should travel. Jones and Jacobs continue to explain that "in the shadow of Sputnik" space-themed stories seemed to be important, and so Weisinger "pitted Superman against an alien villain named Brainiac." (15) The first of myriad extraterrestrial villains Superman faced was introduced during the space race between America and the Soviet Union. As America's fears were drawn to the skies in concern of what Soviet satellites might be able to do from above the Earth, Superman begins to battle enemies from space.

Entering the 1960s Superman stories became more ambiguous, much as the citizens' feelings towards the country and its international policies. Some stories show unabashed support for America and its leaders, and others imply that perhaps some battles are not worth fighting, much as many viewed the war in Vietnam. Just as America's role and identity at this period were questioned and often ambiguous, it is difficult to simplify Superman's narrative into a single ideology. Several stories considered classics from the 1960s feature Superman (or Superboy, as the case may be) learning that he cannot win every battle, a situation which many Americans found themselves contemplating as the Cold War wore on and America entered Vietnam. However, the attitudes and outlooks implied in these stories are not uniform, but the attitudes of Americans' were far from even approaching a cohesive whole in this decade.

In "The Impossible Mission" written by Jerry Siegel and published in 1960 Superboy faces his inability to solve every crisis. Superboy attempts to go back in time to thwart the assassination of President Lincoln, but finds he is unable to alter the past. The somewhat nihilistic moral Superboy takes from the story is shared in the last panel when Superboy laments in front of the Lincoln Memorial "I tried awfully hard! But I learned … no mere mortal, not even a Superboy, can change fate" (149). In another tale, "The Last Days of Superman" written by Edmond Hamilton, Superman has a far more optimistic outlook when facing an impossible foe, a "virus x" which is killing him. Superman does all the good he can in his final days, offering positive words to all around and even carving in the moon "Do good to others and every man can be a Superman" (109).

During the Cold War American fears were played out in comic books, as Superman faced heightened threats from newly created super-villains who could be read as Communist "others." Patrick L. Eagan notes that Superman's stories in this era generally deal with Superman fighting a super-villain of the month who is almost always his equal power-wise. As the two begin to battle it appears that neither will be able to overpower the other, and "we know that the fate of humanity/democracy rides on the broad shoulders of the Man of Steel […] In the end it is usually Superman's ingenuity, that good old Yankee can-do attitude, that wins the day" (94).

The current stories being published about Superman have continued this long history of mirroring actual societal concerns. Mark Verheiden, the writer for Superman, has been exploring in the *Superman* comic book whether or not Superman is too powerful. Superman's peers in the superhero community and the citizens whom he

protects are concerned whether or not Superman has too much power in and of himself,

and his ability to act unilaterally is of equal concern. In the August 2005 issue of

Superman, with a story ominously entitled "Power," the opening pages contain a news

report with the cautionary dialogue:

> Natural disasters have been a part of our world since the beginning of
>
> time. But it's only recently that man's tried to pretend some dominance
>
> over the Earth. It doesn't take much to remind us just how ridiculous this
>
> conceit can be. Still, when the worst happens, we console ourselves by
>
> looking at nature as a force without conscience or deliberation. Fire, wind
>
> and water have no pity. No mercy. They simply 'are.' Leaving an
>
> unanswered question. How would we feel if the same unchangeable
>
> forces were unleashed in a directed, sentient manner? Amazingly, the
>
> potential for such devastation walks among us even now … and his name
>
> is Superman. (1-2)

This story makes use of the association Superman has developed with America itself, and

uses Superman as a narrative example of many of the issues currently being debated in

America and in the world. Is America powerful enough to act without consulting other

nations? What are the consequences if it does? There are no easy answers to these

questions, and Verheiden does not offer any in the story. Superman, in the story, uses his

heat vision at its strongest level because he sees it as necessary to defeat a villain, but in

doing so he frightens the public spectators because of how much power he possesses.

The crowd reacts with fear to a display of Superman's power. *Superman* 218, August 2005.

As shown, Superman stories have a long history of being influenced by the times in which the stories are written. There is no reason to assume that this is going to change, as the fingerprints of the time period are all over Superman's first stories from the late 1930s and can still be easily seen today, if one is willing to look for them.

Superman acts as both a reflection and a warning to his readers. Because Superman is the embodiment of American ideals his writers have had the opportunity to explore those ideals in fictional action, often upholding them and also often questioning them. Patrick L. Eagan summed up this aspect of Superman's nature when he wrote "Superman is a constant reminder [. . .] of the delicate balance between control and

freedom of a democratic nation must work to maintain and of some of the strengths and dangers inherent in the American character" (95).

As a symbol of America Superman will always resonate, inspire, mirror, and warn Americans. Continuously producing new stories and adjusting his mythology for new times have guaranteed Superman relevancy for new generations. Superman is not stuck in the 1940s dealing with the issues of that day, rather he continues to reflect current culture and society. Superman was created imitating the America his creators saw, and he continues to represent an ever-changing America. While key aspects of Superman will always remain, the writers and editors have not been afraid to maintain his relevancy. Because of this Superman's popularity can be understood, he was, is, and will be an iconic example of America's ideals.

Chapter 2

Batman: The Self-Made Superman

Batman's Popularity

Bruce Wayne. Batman. One name immediately connotes the other, and both have become unforgettable icons of American popular culture. Batman ranks among most popular members in the pantheon of American comic book superheroes. Even those who have never read a comic book are still familiar with his origin story, his costume, his secret identity, even his sidekick and enemies. The general recognition of these aspects of Batman's mythology is easily explained: Batman has pervaded aspects of culture far beyond the comic books that spawned him.

Almost immediately after Batman's first published adventure he was already being adapted to other mediums. Though Superman preceded Batman to the comic book page by almost a year, Batman was the first comic book character to be adapted for the silver screen. In 1943, only four years after Batman's first appearance in comic books, the character was adapted into a film serial. Both Batman and Robin made intermittent appearances in the *Superman* radio show in 1945, maintaining a presence in media outside comic books. In 1948 another serial, *Batman and Robin,* was produced. This would be Batman's last appearance in film for twenty years. Both of the serials featured high levels of camp, a feature common to most serials of the time, which were universally plagued by low production values. The camp factor would become associated with the Batman character even more thoroughly in the public's mind with the 1960s television series (Mangels 61-2).

The comic book adventures of Batman and Robin had taken on their own campy flavor in the 1950s and 60s because of government hearings that investigated links between comic books and juvenile delinquency. In an effort to avoid further associations between comic book adventures and real life crime the Batman comic book series editors and story-tellers took the characters into less realistic territory. Stories from the 1950s included "The Rainbow Batman," in which Batman wore different colored costumes every night and "Batman Meets the Bat-Mite" in which an elf-sized character runs around dressed as Batman. This goofy style of storytelling was translated into the 1966 television series *Batman*. Starring Adam West and Burt Ward as an even campier Batman and Robin, the series was an immediate success for ABC.

Batman reveled in the hammy acting of its stars, West and Ward, to create a stylized atmosphere for the show. The series, which attracted notable stars such as Cesar Romero and Burgess Meredith to play villains, even garnered award nominations. The show was popular enough that a feature film was produced between the first and second seasons. This goofy interpretation of Batman, with its famous "POW" and "WHAM" graphics which would appear anytime a punch was thrown, would be the version the American public would be most familiar with for decades. It has remained popular in syndication to this day, and in many ways is responsible for the juvenile atmosphere many people associate with comic book narratives. This insistently inane interpretation of one of the most notoriously complex superheroes would be perpetuated by many cartoon series too, series which would be made after the live action television series finished production after the 1968 season. Batman has been constantly available to

television viewers in some form or other since the 1960s, ensuring continued familiarity to new generations of Americans.

In 1968 *The Batman/Superman Hour* premiered on CBS. The Batman segment of this animated show was soon spun off into *The Adventures of Batman and Robin*. Batman and his sidekick Robin were regularly on the air in animated form through the 1960s and 70s. They appeared in two movies with Scooby Doo, as well as *Challenge of the Super Friends*, *The Super Friends Hour*, *The Super Powers Team: Galactic Guardians*, *The New Adventures of Batman, The Batman/Tarzan Adventure Hour,* and *Batman and the Super 7*. In 1979 two live-action adventures were filmed, with Adam West returning to the role of Batman in *Legends of the Super-Heroes*. All of these television series maintained the simplified and campy tone used in the 1960s series starring Adam West. While the comic books had shifted into a grimmer characterization of Batman, the general public would not become familiar with this interpretation until Tim Burton's 1989 film Batman (Mangels 64-5).

This big screen adaptation of Batman proved to be a blockbuster and was the highest grossing film of the year. Tim Burton directed the sequel, 1992's Batman Returns, which was even grittier. The film was successful financially, but many complained about how dark the franchise was becoming. Joel Schumacher was hired to direct a new sequel with a lighter tone and he delivered Batman Forever, with a decidedly campier touch, in 1995. The film was more successful than the studio had anticipated and the production of a fourth film in the series was rushed so that the film could be released in 1997. The result, Batman and Robin, was a painfully campy disaster that was

lambasted by critics and fans alike. It was bad enough to force one of the most

financially successful series in film history into hiatus for almost a decade.

Fans of a more serious Batman had other adaptations they could look to besides

Schumacher's films. In 1990 Batman: The Animated Series premiered on Fox

Television. The series was praised by critics and won numerous awards. A notable

aspect of the series was the visual style, one which producers Bruce Timm and Eric

Radomski called "Dark Deco" which utilized "Art Deco architecture and character

designs on darkened or black backgrounds, with heavy airbrushed effects" (Mangels, 66).

The same team which produced this animated series also made several direct-to-video

animated films, and one theatrical animated film, Batman: Mask of the Phantasm. In

2001 a new television series, Batman Beyond, began to air on the WB network featuring

the adventures of a young man taking on the mantle of the Batman of the future, trained

by an older Bruce Wayne. The Batman, yet another animated series featuring the caped

crusader, began to air in 2004 and continues in production.

The Batman film franchise was revived in 2005 with the release of Batman

Begins, directed by Christopher Nolan. The film focused on the earliest training of Bruce

Wayne in his preparation to become Batman. By resetting the film franchise to the

earliest days of Batman, the film distanced itself from the Joel Schumacher films which

had decimated the franchise in the late 90s. The film, praised almost universally by

critics for its psychology and serious tone, became one of the highest grossing films of

the year.

With so many adaptations and variations of Batman introduced to American

culture it is no wonder that the character is one of the most recognizable and well known

in the world. Generations of Americans have been inundated with images of Batman on whole ranges of products. Similarly they have been introduced and reintroduced to the character and back story of Batman. But the products and media adaptations of Batman would not have existed had an audience not been there to consume it. Why has there always been an audience for Batman? Why was the character created in the first place? Why has he always been so popular despite such wildly different interpretations of the character?

The Second Superhero

Superman and Batman have saved the other's life multiple times in their comic book adventures. But Batman doesn't only owe Superman for saving his life, Batman owes his very existence to Superman. Batman simply would not have been created had Superman not been a success as a comic book character. In fact, it is likely that every superhero from Batman to Spider-Man to Spawn only exists because Superman proved popular enough to sustain a genre. Batman was created specifically to piggyback off the success that Superman comic books were having.

Vin Sullivan, the editor of DC Comics in 1938, was looking for another character, similar to Superman, to feature in the already existing title *Detective Comics*. There is a difficult-to-verify legend regarding Batman's creation that Sullivan told artist Bob Kane about the need *Detective Comics* had for a prominent new feature. Gerard Jones sums up the rest of Batman's real world origin: "Sullivan told [Kane] about the *Superman* newspaper strip and said Siegel and Schuster could be making thousands of dollars a month soon. It was Friday. Kane said he'd be back with a new hero on Monday" (149).

According to the legend, Kane was back on Monday with the character sketches for Batman.

It is difficult to say exactly what role Bill Finger, the writer of the first Batman stories, had in the creation of the character. Conflicting reports exist as to how crucial his role was, ranging from Finger having zero input on the character's design all the way to Finger stopping Kane from going to his editor with a brightly-garbed character called Bird-Man and working with him until they had designed the look and personality of Batman. It seems very likely that Kane did consult with Finger during that weekend and received his input before returning to Sullivan. Though credit for the creation of Batman has traditionally, and legally, been attributed solely to Bob Kane, most comic book historians feel that Bill Finger has been slighted in this regard, that his role was more significant than generally recognized.

Why Batman?

While Superman's popularity is directly responsible for editor Vin Sullivan's seeking another costumed hero, there are other inspirations which were drawn into the character of Batman. In <u>The Complete History of Batman</u> Les Daniels provides perhaps the most thorough examination of the process of creating this American icon. Daniels explains that Kane began by drawing the outline of a character similar to Superman, including tights and trunks, and then laid a piece of tracing paper on the drawing to experiment with different looks. Then multiple inspirations began to affect Kane's process of creation:

> He tried a pair of bird wings, perhaps inspired by an alien race in one of his favorite strips, Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*. Then Kane had a

brainstorm. From his boyhood reading he recalled the ornithopter, a

flying machine designed by Leonardo Da Vinci. This device was

essentially a glider, with wings built like those of a bat […] By the process

of association he was also reminded of one of his favorite films, *The Bat*

Whispers (1930) […] A third source of inspiration for Kane came from a

movie he'd seen as a boy: *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) […] the story, about

a wealthy fop who transformed himself at night into a masked crusader for

justice in Old California, stuck with young Kane. Even such details as the

hero entering his hideout through an old grandfather clock were carried

over from the film. (18-21)

While Daniels cites Da Vinci's blueprint, pulp hero Buck Rogers, silent film villain The

Bat, and multi-format adventurer Zorro as inspirations for Kane's visual design of

Batman, Finger cites an even wider array of sources as inspiring the character's

personality and the style of stories he would write starring Batman. Finger's influences

included the Phantom, a costumed hero appearing in newspapers comic strips,

D'Artagnan from *The Three Musketeers*, Sherlock Holmes, and perhaps most

significantly, the pulp and radio-serial hero the Shadow. Out of this eclectic grouping of

muses came one of the most recognizable and resonant figures in American popular

culture history. Though the inspirations for Batman can be traced, the character is more

than an amalgamation of existing elements, he has evolved into a complex, unique

individual.

Perhaps the most credit for inspiring Batman must be given to the premier

superhero, Superman. It is intriguing to consider the similarities and differences between

these two figures who were created within a year of one another. Many of the similarities between the two can be seen as stereotypical of the genre of comic book superheroes as a whole. Superman and Batman are the archetypes from which the stereotypes arose. Both Batman and Superman are orphans, have secret identities, and wear capes and costumes. These three aspects, particularly the costume and secret identity, can be found in almost all the superheroes who have followed.   And there certainly are a disproportionately large number of orphan superheroes, even some such as Spider-Man who take the orphan aspect to the next level. Spider-Man is orphaned not once, but twice. These have become such fundamental archetypes that other creations must either embrace or react against them, but inevitably they need to be addressed.

But Batman is far from a carbon copy of Superman. Their differences are fascinating, and help explain why there is room for more than one costumed character who can maintain phenomenal interest from readers. While Superman may be the first comic book hero, Batman is generally considered the more interesting. Batman has had better success maintaining himself in other media than has Superman, and Batman's sales have generally been better than Superman's in comic books themselves. Though Superman was the first comic book hero, and all others in some way owe their existence to him, other superheroes do not necessarily follow in the exact same pattern.

Consider, for example, their power levels. Superman has phenomenal strength and is indestructible, and that isn't all—he has X-ray vision, heat vision, arctic breath, can fly, and even boasts other ridiculous powers such as super-ventriloquism. Batman, conversely, is entirely human. Yes he has gadgets to help him, but he is only as strong as a human, and his greatest weapon is his mind. Whereas Superman, especially in his early

adventures, could use his strength and other abilities to get confessions and solve

mysteries, Batman is touted as being "the world's greatest detective." Batman is a clever

mortal, Superman a super-human. Jim Steranko identifies several other key differences

in The Steranko History of Comics:

> Superman was a multi-colored one-man circus doing continuous
>
> performances at popular prices for the public. Batman was a dark,
>
> shadowy loner working outside the law, outside the public eye, ruthlessly
>
> stalking his prey through rain slick allies […] Thematically the strips were
>
> in opposition. Superman had sworn 'to devote his existence to helping
>
> those in need.' Batman's approach balanced the scales, 'I swear by the
>
> spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life
>
> warring on all criminals.' Whereas Superman's motivation was one of
>
> altruistic benevolence, Batman's was based on misanthropic vengeance.
>
> (43-4)

This difference in why they do what they do, vigilantism versus community concern,

vengeance versus moral duty, is perhaps the greatest between the two characters.

In the inevitable comparisons which arise concerning superheroes, Batman is

consistently declared the more interesting character when compared to Superman. Some

cite Superman's invulnerability as making him boring. They conclude that unless there is

kryptonite in the room it is a foregone conclusion who will win (a problem the writers of

Smallville circumvented by having the arrival of Superman's rocket ship accompanied by

a meteor shower from Krypton, so that there is always kryptonite handy). With Batman,

it is more interestingly not a foregone conclusion that he will win the fight.

However, I contend that this difference in the motivations of the heroes is the reason Batman is infinitely more interesting. Steranko contends that Superman was "more impressive, certainly more original, but Batman was more fascinating. You either liked one or the other depending on your psychological development" (44). While I disagree that it is an all-or-nothing scenario in which only one character can be appreciated, there is admittedly something more simplistic in Superman's nature. With Superman you are essentially watching an indestructible boy scout at work, with Batman you are watching a scarred individual trying to prevent a trauma that happened in his childhood.

Ironically, this tragedy that has so defined Batman's persona was added almost as an afterthought to his mythology. Batman's first appearance did not include an origin. It simply had a grown man running around in a bat-suit trying to solve mysteries, prevent crime, and punish criminals, often in a brutal manner. Batman's first stories feature a vindictive vigilante who carried a gun and used it to kill criminals. This early aspect of Batman's character is more easily understood if it is put into conversation with other popular narratives of the period. The tone of Batman's stories from this period very much mirrors that of pulp fiction and the developing film noir. The nature of these narratives suggested America was passing through a crisis of faith in established systems. America was still struggling with the results of the Great Depression, and the government programs which were instituted to fix the problem had yet to provide the promised economic turnaround. Faith in the establishment was not running high, and this was evidenced in the popular culture of the time.

Both the pulp fiction of the 1930s and film noir, which was gestating in the 1930s and broke into full bloom in 1941's The Maltese Falcon, popularized characters who operated outside of the established systems in order seek justice. Consider the pulp hero the Shadow with his tagline, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." Implicit in this, and explicit in his stories, is the understanding that there are some crimes without enough evidence to convict anyone, that there are guilty people who can slip through the justice system. However the Shadow can find them and distribute his own brand of justice, which usually involved his .45 automatic.

The hard-boiled detectives stereotypical of film noir operate in a similarly gray area between established authority and the criminal element. These detectives find themselves on the run from police as often as the criminals as they employ techniques of questionable legality in order to discover the truth. Truth is of such utmost importance to these "heroes" that often they circumvent legal procedure to find it. Doing the "right" thing is generally more important to these characters than doing the lawful thing. Richard Reynolds explains in Superheroes: A Modern Mythology that "Superheroes are by and large not upholders of the letter of the law; they are not law enforcement agents employed by the state. The set of values they traditionally defend is summed up in the Superman tag of Truth, Justice and the American Way" (74). Pulp characters such as the Shadow and the Spider, as well as the hard-boiled detectives featured in film noir, sought their own justice when the system failed. Batman similarly fulfilled this role. In 1941's *Detective Comics* issue 40 Batman explains, "If you can't beat them 'inside' the law, you must beat them 'outside' it…and that's where I come in."

While there was undoubtedly an explosion of this morally-right-lawfully-questionable narrative in the 1930s and 40s it should be noted that America has a long tradition of popular characters in this vein. The frontiersmen, beginning in narrative form with Natty Bumpo and then carried over into the mythologizing of real life figures such as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone all have rugged, do-it-yourself-so-long-as-it-is-the-right-thing attitude which permeates their stories. Even when Davy Crockett was a member of congress his stories cast him as an outsider proclaiming reason to a blind and/or corrupt body.

The popularity of characters who are willing to break with establishment in order to do what is right is quite probably due to the fact that the entire country was founded on those principles. Consider the logic provided in the Declaration of Independence on the relationship between what is established and what is just:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the people to alter or abolish it.

Essentially the Declaration of Independence asserts that when the system is failing it is the duty of just men to do the right thing, whether or not such actions are upheld by the law. America has adopted this ideology into its popular narratives, and mythologized it into its culture.

Batman's Evolution

Much like Superman, Batman's character, personality and narrative style have evolved since the character's first introduction. The longer a character has existed in continual publication the greater the difference that will be notable over the course of his existence, but another reason that Superman and Batman saw such alteration early on is because the rules and conventions of the superhero genre were still being established when they were created. Conversely, Spider-Man, whose first adventure was published in 1964, long after the generic conventions were established, has had almost no noticeable alteration to his personality in his four decades of existence. But Batman has seen evolution and various interpretations of his character long since the conventions became more established throughout the 1940s, and these changes are indicative of the changing culture in America. Dennis O'Neil, a longtime writer and editor of Batman's comic books, explains the importance of Batman forever remaining a character in transition:

> Batman has been continually evolving since his first creators, Bob Kane and Bill Finger, graced *Detective Comics* with "The Case of the Criminal Syndicate" in May 1939. That may be why he remains as popular now as he was in that long-ago day, before television, before computers, before video games and movies-on-tape […] and a hundred other miracles—a thousand!—we take for granted. The world has changed, perhaps more in the last 50 years than in the previous 500, and Batman has changed with it. If he hadn't he'd be a relic, remembered by nostalgia freaks and pop-culture experts, and not a vigorous viable ongoing work of fiction. (6)

The variations that have occurred in Batman's character reveal insights not only into the creative process of creating a decades-long comic book narrative, but also into the culture which consumes these products.

Just as Superman was initially ruder and brusquer than he is now presented, Batman originally crossed lines that now seem completely out of character. Batman experienced some rapid changes after his first stories. Originally a grim avenger within a few issues Batman would become much less dark, losing his gun and adopting a "no kill" policy. Yet many essential aspects of his character and his fictional world were established from the very beginning and have remained more or less unaltered through the decades. Comic book writer and historian Bill Schelly explains how

> In Batman's debut story, the key elements of his mythos were established: his eerie costume, his nighttime milieu in the streets and rooftops of Gotham City, his secret identity as bored socialite Bruce Wayne, and his relationship with Commissioner Gordon. Amalgamating various elements from characters in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, young Bob Kane and Bill Finger took the concept of the crime fighter who used terror to cow his underworld enemies and dressed it up especially for comic books (4).

Though the night theme and dark costume would remain, editors requested that the tone be lightened and aimed more at an adolescent audience. The editors, thinking that young readers would be able to identify with a kid sidekick, added Robin to the cast. Possibly the only thing about Robin that young readers could identify with is that he was young, as it is unlikely that any of those readers lived as wards of billionaire socialites or spent

nights dressed in garishly bright costumes fighting crime, but that was the logic of Robin's introduction into the Batman family.

This is the first of many tonal shifts Batman would undergo in the long history of the character. Throughout the decades different writers and editors have made significant alterations to the attitude of Batman's character, shifts which endure for a few years or perhaps a decade before another change is wrought. While the basic look of Batman remains the same, these shifts are significant enough that they constitute different Batmans who have existed in the comic books and other media. Dennis O'Neil sees the grim and the kinder, gentler Batman as two separate characters who appeared in the beginning of Batman's history. In his examination of the different Batmans O'Neil identifies five different versions of the character, and his analysis provides a useful frame through which the character can be considered throughout this discussion. Some of the distinctions are so minor it is questionable whether O'Neil's five different Batmans are all necessary, and I contend that an important shift in the 1980s constitutes another Batman, though O'Neill cites the 1970s iteration of the character as the last significant shift.

For O'Neil the first Batman was "a wealthy, gentleman vigilante who fought crime for reasons that weren't always clear" (6). In fact, there was no motivation or origin story provided when Batman first appeared; it seemed that Bruce Wayne simply had free time on his hands and decided to fight crime to pass the time. The second Batman that Dennis O'Neil identifies comes about less than a year after the character's introduction and has much in common with this first version. O'Neil explains "The second Batman was a *paternal* costumed gentleman crimefighter [...] Although he

remained the dedicated scourge of villainy, Batman mellowed just a bit and could be glimpsed behaving like the daddy any adventurous kid would love to have" (7).

Robin is actually a troubling figure for many writers, as he seems to represent everything that Batman would resist. Batman's sole purpose is to protect innocents, and yet here he invites a child (Robin was supposed to be eleven years old) dressed in bright colors to attack criminals with various sundry weapons. Alex Ross, the premier comic book painter working today, discussed his issues with the character of Robin in Mythology, and concluded that "As a character, he just doesn't make sense. He's the compromise Batman would never have logically made. Who would put a child at risk like that, in that garish outfit? But you can't fight history […] There's no point in trying to make his costume look tough, or menacing, or even practical. With Robin, you don't have a choice, it's those gaudy colors or nothing." Frank Miller, in promoting his recent project entitled *All Star Batman and Robin* referred to Robin as "the Boy Target" because of his costume. Nevertheless, even though the character seems to go against Batman's character Robin has become integrated into the Batman mythology. Even if the character was introduced because of editorial mandates and not the natural evolution of a narrative the dynamic duo of Batman and Robin are permanently fixed in pop culture lore.

O'Neil adds but one word in his definitions to distinguish these two Batmans, "paternal," but that is indicative of a very large alteration. An important change between Batman's first characterization and the Batman who is accompanied by Robin is that Batman now becomes a mentor. Batman was originally a loner, and this loner Batman is one that is still seen as essential to the character as evidence by both of Burton's films as well as Nolan's attempts to return Batman to his core in *Batman Begins,* all of which

feature Batman as a solo figure. Robin is but the first of what would eventually become a Bat-family. Batman's family of fellow crimefighters who are specifically associated with Batman and Gotham City includes Robin (all four), Batgirl (all three), Nightwing, Azrael, Batwoman, the Huntress, Oracle, Catwoman (in some stories) and Sasha Bordeaux. For a hero who is often featured as bitter and lonely he has certainly mentored a large number of individuals, and this can be traced directly back to this early paternal incarnation of Batman.

Batman in Happy Days

The 1950s saw a sudden shift in tone for the caped crusader, one that had more to do with Dr. Fredric Wertham and the U.S. government than anything else. Dr. Wertham was a successful and respected psychiatrist whose intentions to help the youth of America were impeccable. But his conclusions concerning comic books and their role in the postwar rise of juvenile delinquency were questionable at best. In Comic Book Nation Bradford C. Wright provides a substantial analysis of Wertham's methodology and the studies which led to his conclusion, allowing some of the flaws in Wertham's logic to become clear:

> Wertham's experience treating African American and juvenile patients led him to develop theories about how sociocultural factors acted on personality development. Unlike most of his Freudian-trained colleagues, Wertham emphasized exterior social conditions to explain the psychological disorders affecting the human psyche […] This led him to investigate [juvenile delinquents'] cultural backgrounds, their patterns of play, and their choice of reading material. Consistently, he found that the

common cultural influence shared by virtually all juvenile cases before

him was comic books. (93)

Comic books were damned by their own popularity and a flawed deduction by Wertham.

The early 1950s were one of comic books' most popular periods. It is estimated that

ninety percent of adolescents read them (Wright 96). Had Wertham performed a study of

youth who had never been in any sort of trouble he may have also found that comic

books were the "common cultural influence" shared by well-adjusted adolescents. Stan

Lee, the creator of Spider-Man, complains of Wertham's conclusions, "he said things

like, 'Ninety percent of all the kids in reform school read comics!' Of course, ninety

percent of them also drank milk, but that didn't matter to him" (Legends). As Lee points

out, there were myriad common denominators which were shared by these youths, but

Wertham latched onto comic books and made a crusade of his cause.

Mostly as a result of Dr. Wertham's published findings and his vocal public

campaign against comic books, the U.S. Senate's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile

Delinquency convened on April 21, 1954, with the special purpose of considering comic

books and their influence on youth. Many comic book publishers were present, as was

Dr. Wertham. The conclusion drawn by the subcommittee included a heavy-handed

threat of government censorship if comic books did not begin policing themselves. The

record of the hearings include committee chairman Senator Hendrickson's statement at

the conclusion that, "A competent job of self-policing within the industry will achieve

much," with the implication that others would begin censoring them if they did not do a

"competent job" (U.S. Senate, 310).

The comic book publishers together formed the Comics Code Authority which would provide a seal of approval that could be published on the covers of all comic books which met their standard. The code, though self-inflicted to avoid outside censorship, sorely restrained the stories which could told. It included such inhibitions as "In every instance good shall triumph over evil," "Scenes dealing with […] walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited," and "Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority" (Nyberg, 166-7).

Batman comics, which had been specifically targeted by Wertham, experienced a drastic tonal shift in order to avoid the slightest possibility of offending anyone. Dr. Wertham had accused Batman and Robin of inspiring homosexual activity in youth. With his usual tortured logic he drew his conclusion because, as he explains in his book Seduction of the Innocent, "We have inquired about Batman from overt homosexuals treated at the Readjustment Center […] A number of them knew these stories very well and spoke of them as their favorite reading" (191-3). That was the extent of Wertham's research into the links between Batman and homosexuality, but it was enough for him to draw his conclusions. In order to combat this particular accusation, of inspiring homosexuality in youth, the character of Batwoman was introduced in 1961. Batwoman was not a creature of the feminist movement. In her debut issue, *Detective Comics* 233, she fights crime using not a utility belt, but a utility purse. Her array of crime-fighting devices included a powder puff loaded with sneezing powder, charm bracelets which are really handcuffs, her compact mirror which is used to blind criminals, a perfume bottle loaded with "Tear Gas No. 5," a "BIG […] superstrong" hairnet used to trap crooks, and

the strap of her utility purse which is weighted to become a bola (Hamilton, 70-81).

Batwoman has since been written out of Batman's "official continuity," but her

appearance in the 1960s can be seen as a direct result of Wertham's attacks on Batman

and Robin.

Further results from the strict censorship of the Comics Code Authority included

Batman losing much of the noirish elements which had set him apart from other comic

books. His stories became downright goofy. The effects were so dire that many saw the

code as tolling death for the creativity of the comics industry. Comic book artist and

Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist Jules Fieffer bemoans the results of Dr. Wertham's

attacks and the senate hearings in 1965, a little more than a decade after the code was

established:

> In the years since Dr. Wertham and his supporters launched their attacks,
>
> comic books have toned down considerably, almost antiseptically.
>
> Publishers in fear of their lives wrote a code, set up a review board, and
>
> volunteered themselves into censorship rather than have it imposed from
>
> the outside. Dr. Wertham scorns self-regulation as misleading. Old-time
>
> fans scorn it as having brought on the death of comic books as they once
>
> knew and loved them. (71)

Michael Uslan, the first professor to teach a class on comic books at an accredited

university, spoke in a 2005 interview of the comic code and its effects with a different

perspective but the same conclusion: "As a result [of the creation of the Comics Code

Authority] a lot of the writers and artists of the era, and those that followed, claim they

felt very restricted in terms of what they could do. And a lot of people see the fifties as

kind of a bland era for comic books, kind of like the Eisenhower era of comic books"
(Legends). Comic books, in an effort not to offend anyone anywhere, adopted an ultra-
conservative"safe" mode of story-telling in which no danger zones were explored. These
safe stories resulted in less realism and more fantasy being introduced, as anything which
reminded readers of real problem could be considered as exacerbating those problems.
Comic books became even more escapist because reality was editorially removed from
them.

Batman comics from this era demonstrate a downward spiral of quality as the
tight controls on what could and could not be shown in comic books led creators on wider
and more exotic paths in search for original stories. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs trace
this trajectory in their history of the silver age of comics, Comic Book Heroes:

> In the jittery wake of the Comics Code, the Bat-tales were dulled down a
> bit as DC editors feared showing people getting shot or punching each
> other. In 1957, science fiction came to Gotham City […Batman faced] a
> thug armed with an "energy radiator" from the planet Skar (*Detective* 250,
> Dec 1957), then the winged bat-people from another dimension (*Batman*
> 116, June 1958), next Garr of Planetoid X (*Batman* 117, Aug. 1958).
> Within three years Batman found himself embroiled with so many aliens
> and weird creatures that on one cover he was driven to remark, "Great
> Scott! Another bizarre character with a fantastic weapon (*Detective* 287,
> Jan. 1961). (27)

Just as the science fiction films had replaced film noir at the Cineplex, foreign planets
replaced Gotham City and aliens replaced thugs in Batman's adventures of the 1950s.

However, it should be noted that even though Batman comics published in the late 1950s and early 1960s show a seemingly out-of-character zaniness for the generally brooding character, the stories themselves still provide insight into what was happening in America at the time. The science fiction elements followed the trends of American concerns as the space race with Russia heated up.

This period saw the emergence of a new Batman, the goofy Batman. The reasons for this new characterization were in many ways external and driven by censorship, but nonetheless a new Batman was presented in the comic books. Dennis O'Neil calls this version of Batman "Batman-lite" which follows the "costumed gentleman crimefighter" of 1939, and the "paternal gentleman crimefighter" of the 1940s:

> The third Batman (and Robin) developed in the '50s, battling not grim urban felons, but rather more jaunty evildoers whose doings weren't all that evil, really. These adventures were often flamboyant fantasies tinged with science fiction; I consider them Batman-lite and although they seem simplistic to modern tastes, they were appropriate for a cheery, generally optimistic America. (7-8)

Even under strict editorial control there were still parallels between Batman's stories and American culture. In fact, the very strict control is, in itself, indicative of the time period. Senator McCarthy served from 1947 to 1957, and the repressive era of McCarthyism which he ushered in caused many to fear government intervention. Attempts to play it safe and not rock the boat were hardly the exclusive domain of comic books.

And these lighter stories may have served a different role for that time period. In the introduction to the collection <u>Batman in the Fifties,</u> Michael Uslan attempts an explanation of "the wild, wacky, weird, wonderful world of Batman in the 1950s," a Batman far removed from what came before: "This was a Batman who was a product of a vastly different time, a different generation, a different America. As "Give 'em Hell" Harry Truman gave way to the bland years of "I Like Ike" Eisenhower […] the atom bomb and the hydrogen bomb had become realities…This was a time for escapist fare" (5). It is true that in this period, more than ever before, comic books became a world wherein children could escape reality. In some form or other comic books always functioned as escapist fare, but that aspect became magnified in the 1950s. Whereas comic books before and after this period would attempt to infuse the world the characters' inhabited with some elements of realism, motivation, psychology, and social relevancy, the comic books of the 1950s and early 60s rarely concerned themselves with these issues. Comic books allowed a retreat from the world by taking the readers to far distant locales. But even in becoming more escapist comic book nevertheless remained reflective.

Just as Superman stories became focused on outer space and threats from above during the early space age, this is the only era in which Batman regularly traveled in a space ship and encountered space creatures. In the introduction to "The Interplanetary Batman," published in 1959's *Batman* 128, the narration explains "This is the story of an almost impossible situation–the story of how Batman and Robin join forces with a criminal to crash out of prison! But the criminal is a space pirate—and the prison in another solar system" (182). Note that the impossible aspect is not that Batman and

Robin encounter aliens or travel to other planets, for those had become commonplace

aspects of stories told in the 1950s. The impossible aspect is that Batman would join

forces with a criminal—in fact he does not join forces with the criminal, but is tricking

him into revealing where he has hidden his stolen loot. Just as many television shows,

radio shows, films, and children's toys became focused on space, Batman and Robin

similarly found their narratives caught up in the space race.

For most of the 1960s Batman followed a vein similar to that which readers saw

in the 1950s. Dennis O'Neil identifies a shift into yet another style of Batman in the

sixties, though this shift is a minimal one and not the massive tonal shift seen previously.

It is more akin to the costumed gentleman crimefighter becoming a paternal costumed

gentleman crimefighter than the sudden shift to Batman-lite in the 1950s. Dennis O'Neil

explains that in the 1960s:

> [There] came Batman the Comedian. For a time in the '60s, the nation
>
> was enthralled by the "camp" craze. Its most visible manifestation was
>
> the live-action Batman television show, which, by putting heroes in
>
> inappropriate contexts and emphasizing their sillier aspects, lampooned
>
> them. The show was an enormous hit for two of its three seasons on ABC,
>
> and for a while the comics half-heartedly tried to emulate it. Then, in
>
> 1968, within months, camp became as obsolete as button hooks; the TV
>
> show was cancelled and the comics were, temporarily, without focus. (8)

I feel it is a stretch to call this a completely different "Batman" than what came before.

The tone of the live-action TV show was born out of the craziness of the 1950s comic

books, and while it is true that the comic books became campier as the 1960s wore on,

they were already on that path before the television show was produced. There is something of a chicken-and-egg argument here, and the only sure thing is that both the television show and the published comic books became progressively campier until the audiences tired of it. When Batman had lost resonance with his targeted consumers, a new Batman was needed.

Batman: The Dark Knight

This shift was provided when a new editor, Julius Schwartz, was given charge of the Batman comic books in the late 1960s. Dennis O'Neil, who worked under Schwartz, explains the changes which were made:

> Julie [Schwartz] no longer remembers if he was told to change Batman's direction or just decided it needed to be done. Whatever the reason, he encouraged two of the newer kids hanging around the office–who, I may as well admit quickly, were Neal Adams and me–to try something different. For openers, I eliminated any hint of camp from the scripts, and Neal drew a Batman who exuded power and determination. We were both trying for what lit critics call "magic realism," defined […] as "a style…of literature in which (the) fantastic and imaginary…are depicted in a sharply detailed manner." The enterprise was predicated on a big if: *if Batman could exist, this is how he would be*. The approach worked, and is still working. (8)

Batman the comedian was replaced by the realistic Batman. This new interpretation of an old character had a lot in common with Batman's earliest incarnation, but with more psychological motivation. This Batman was meant for a more mature

audience, one which would not simply accept that a billionaire would don a bat-suit and fight crime because he had nothing better to do. Similarly the art had matured immensely since those early days. The medium was still being created when Bob Kane first sketched Batman, and the boundaries of "sequential art" had been expanded considerably by the 1970s. Not only was the style itself different, but the techniques used in laying out a comic book page had changed. Now Batman was not constrained by windowed panels like those found in newspaper comic strips. Full page spreads could show off Neal Adams's art, and wider spaces allowed for greater use of mise en scene to influence the reader.

Fig. 5 Traditional paneled art. *Batman* 1, Spring 1940.
Fig.6 Neal Adams' less restricted style. *Batman* 251, September 1973.

While a goofy or campy Batman worked during the 1950s, with its naïve optimism within mainstream America, or as a self-referential source of comedy in the 1960s, by the 1970s a grimmer, more serious Batman was what audiences craved. This was possible because the restrictions placed on comic books by self-censorship were being loosened by this time, and the Comic Code Authority would completely revise its guidelines in 1971, because of an anti-drug storyline published in Spider-Man comic books.

While Dennis O'Neil's analysis ends with this realistic Batman in the 1970s, an important change occurred in the 1980s, and in my view another version of Batman was created. Oddly enough, Dennis O'Neil was partially responsible for this shift. As the editor for Batman comic books in 1986, O'Neil had a voice in the decision by DC's editorial board that most of their characters were dated and in need of a revamp in order to maintain the interest of modern readers. Batman's revamp came at the hands of popular comic book writer Frank Miller, who had already redefined the character of Daredevil for Marvel comics. Miller's task was not to reimagine Batman—everyone felt that the character's origin was as good as it was going to get. Rather he was tasked with giving Batman's origin "depth, complexity, [and] a wider context. Details could be added to give it focus and credibility. Bruce Wayne's struggle to become the thing he was trying to create, the Batman, could be dramatized" (*Year One*, ii). The result was the groundbreaking work *Batman: Year One*. Miller, with artist David Mazzuchelli, made Gotham City darker than ever before. The police force was largely corrupt, with the exception of Jim Gordon, and Bruce Wayne became a dark, driven individual. I argue that this marked the beginning of the angry Batman, one different from the realistic Batman of the 1970s.

The new angry Batman was arrogant and kept everyone at arm's length, even his sidekick Robin, who would leave Gotham and take on a new identity as Nightwing. While other individuals have assumed the mantle of Batman's sidekick Robin, none has been shown to have a particularly close relationship with Bruce Wayne. Other heroes too, including Superman and the entire roster of the Justice League, of which Batman was a founding member, have often been at odds with Batman and his methods. The

reasoning behind Batman's arrogance was that he was driven to make his mind and his body perfect, and he had come closer than anybody else. He thus saw everybody as his inferior in some way or other, and often considered them beneath his notice. This angry Batman was maintained in comics for twenty years until May 2006's *Detective Comics* 817, which was part of a massive editorial revamp of the entire DC Universe. This version of the character lasted for so long because *Batman: Year One* was so groundbreaking and so well done for most it became *the* true origin of the character.

In 2005 a storyline carried through all of the titles Batman appeared in involved the discovery that he had been spying on all of the other heroes through the use of satellites. Batman contended that it was for the protection of the world, that with so much power held by individuals, tabs had to be kept in case anything happened. Batman had much evidence readily available to defend his conclusion: superheroes have regularly been taken control of through mind control or hypnosis, or been tricked, or simply gone bad in the DC universe. However, the other heroes saw it as an invasion of their privacy and infringement of their rights. These issues are similar to those debated in America since the Patriot Act passed, and even more so since it was revealed that the government has spied on emails and phone calls of American citizens.

The newest version of Batman, one only recently introduced in May 2006's *Detective Comics* 817, is still so fresh it is difficult to fully analyze his nature. Initially he seems to be an amalgamation of several previous versions, most strikingly the paternal Batman of the 1940s and the realistic Batman of the 1970s. Batman is shown in positive, even fun (an aspect not often seen since the 1950s and 60s), interaction with Robin and Commissioner Gordon, but still is deadly serious when taking on enemies. The

perfection of the angry Batman still seems to be there, but not the arrogance. In short, the editors have recognized the various Batmans that have existed, and taken the best parts of each.

Batman has remained relevant throughout all his various versions. It doesn't matter whether it is Batman-Lite of the 1950s or an angry Batman in 2005, the stories still maintain a level of relevancy to the times. Even though aspects such as censorship enforced boundaries around the stories, cultural relevance remains. Batman has experienced more wild changes of personality and tone than any other character, change understandable because his published history is longer than any other save Superman's, and yet through it all Batman has remained pertinent to the culture of the times.   Batman has remained popular because his storylines have constantly evolved with the changes in America. Batman is not an artifact from earlier decades, but remains vibrant and relevant for each generation which discovers him.

Chapter 3

Spider-Man: The Heroic Everyman

A New Breed of Superhero

The early 1960s saw a new style of superhero emerge onto the comic book scene.

DC comics had been publishing the adventures of Superman and Batman since the late

1930s, and there had been attempts to create rival superhero universes. But none of the

rival universes of proved successful until Marvel comics began producing original

material in 1961. Much of the credit for the revolution in superhero storytelling goes to

Stanley Martin Lieber, who has legally changed his name to match his pen name, Stan

Lee. Lee was the writer of almost the entire line of superhero comics Marvel published

in the early 1960s, but credit must also be paid to the artists, notably Jack Kirby and

Steve Ditko, who helped to define the visually iconic look of Marvel's heroes. The

Marvel universe of comic books broke ground in many notable ways, often going against

the established modes of storytelling for superheroes.

DC comics published the adventures of Superman and Batman as well as other

well-known comic book adventurers such as Wonder Woman, the Flash, and the Green

Lantern. These superheroes demand an emphasis on the super–they are near-perfect

individuals. Superman, of course, is virtually indestructible and has a vast array of

powers at his beck and call. Batman is more human, but a human at the peak of physical

and mental ability. More significantly, these heroes they do not make mistakes. Never is

the outcome of their adventures in doubt, no matter how disquieting the circumstances

there is minimal concern whether or not Superman or Batman will save the day. That

outcome was so reliable because it was editorially mandated by the Comics Code

Authority. Within the code evil could never triumph, but it did not forbid ambiguity or troubled heroes. As would be proven, creativity could exist even in those strict guidelines. But DC so diligently followed the guidelines of the Comics Code creating storylines which, without fail, fit an exact mold which would pass comic's censoring body.

Bradford W. Wright points out that DC comic books "were the image of affluent America. Handsome superheroes resided in clean, green suburbs and modern, even futuristic, cities with shimmering glass skyscrapers, no slums, and populations of uniformly well-dressed white people. There was nothing ambiguous about the hero's character, cause, or inevitable triumph" (184). DC superheroes of the early 1960s existed in a black-and-white world of morality where good always triumphed. The characters of this time almost ceased to be individuals, so repetitive were their personalities, their motivations, and the inevitable conclusions of their tales. Wright further explains "Superman, Batman, the Flash and all other DC superheroes 'spoke' in the same carefully measured sentences. Each reacted to situations in the same predictable manner. They were always in control, never impulsive, and never irrational. […] Helping humanity was their only motivation. Individuality and noncomformity were, by the same token, equated with criminal activity" (185). Stan Lee and his collaborators would soon explore methods of telling innovative and creative stories even within the straight-arrow strictures of the Comics Code.

In 1939 Martin Goodman launched a new publishing company called Timely Comics, which would later become Marvel Comics, in an effort to cash in on the success National Publications was having with Superman and Batman. The first comic book

Goodman published, *Marvel Comics,* featured the adventures of the atlantean Sub-Mariner and an android called the Human Torch among others. In 1940 Goodman hired his wife's seventeen-year-old cousin, Stan Lee, as an editorial assistant. The next year the company introduced Captain America as a propaganda tool to fight Hitler. But with the end of the war, and the concurrent super-patriotism in America, the superhero craze died out. By the end of the 1940s Timely Comics was no longer publishing superhero titles (Eury 331-2). Stan Lee continued to edit and write comics at the company through the 1950s, working on science fiction, romance, and animal comic books, but he became increasingly frustrated. When he had been hired at the age of seventeen Lee had already won the *New York Herald Tribune* essay contest three consecutive weeks–they requested he stop entering the essay contest after the third week. Lee hoped then "to pen the great American novel" (Mallory 20). Lee decided to use a pen name, Stan Lee, on all of his comic book work so that he could use his real name when he began to write novels. In the early 1960s Stan Lee was ready to quit the company he had worked with for over two decades when a golf game his publisher played changed his life:

> Sometime in the early sixties [Marvel editor] Martin Goodman was
> playing golf with the publisher of DC Comics. […] The publisher said to
> Martin, "You know we've got this new book, *The Justice League,* and it's
> really selling well. It's a bunch of superheroes." Well, that's all Martin
> had to hear. He came running back to me and said "Stan we've got to put
> out a bunch of heroes, there's a market for it." It just happened that at that
> time I wanted to quit. After all these years I had made up mind, [that it
> was] a stupid business for a grown up to be in. I finally told my wife,

"Honey, I just want to quit and do something else." […] The reason I

wanted to quit: I felt we were writing nonsense. Martin always felt that

the books were only read by young kids or adults that weren't that

intelligent. So he didn't like me to use words of more than two syllables

in the dialogue, he didn't want continued stories because the readers

wouldn't have brains enough to remember from month to month and

things like that. I felt I was writing trash. [My wife] Joanie said to me, "If

you're gonna quit anyway, why don't you do a book the way you'd like to

do it and get it out of your system. The worse that will happen is that he'll

fire you, and you want to quit anyway." So I did that one book, *The*

Fantastic Four, a bunch of superheroes, but I tried to make them different

from the others. (*Stan Lee's Mutants*)

Stan Lee's efforts to make his heroes different were noticed. Whereas the heroes

published by DC were godlike and idealized, Lee's heroes were imperfect. They

bickered, they had tempers, they weren't always happy to be heroes, and they made

mistakes. DC Comics had been publishing the heroes we wish we could be; Stan Lee and

Marvel began to publish the heroes we would actually be. Or, as it says in *Comic Book*

Superheroes Unmasked, "DC heroes, like Superman and Batman, acted like reader's

parents. Marvel heroes often acted like the readers." Remember that at this time Batman

was acting in a paternal role, not as a dark avenger of the night, and this analogy becomes

clearer.

Even before Marvel comics returned to publishing superheroes their titles had a

different tone than that produced by DC. During the 1950s science fiction was a major

comic book genre, and Wright explains that even then Lee was more perceptive at understanding his readership than his rival publisher: "Lee recognized more astutely than his peers at DC the particular themes of the genre that seemed to fascinate contemporary young people the most. While DC used sci-fi to exalt the virtues of scientific progress and the certainty of peace through progress, Marvel spoke to the anxieties of the atomic age" (202). Marvel Comics continued this tradition of less idealistic comic books when the shift to superheroes began.

The first comic book Stan Lee wrote under Goodman's direction to put superheroes back on the comic stands was *The Fantastic Four,* drawn by Jack Kirby, which was published in 1961. There has been much debate about how much of the characters was contributed by Kirby and how much came from Lee, but no matter who was responsible the team broke with several aspects of the traditional superhero formula which was used at DC. The team had no secret identities, they argued amongst themselves, and in the most radical departure from what had come before, the Thing did not want his powers, powers that made him an outcast because of his orange, rocky hide. As Jones and Jacobs point out, "Until 1961, no superhero writer would have suggested that acquiring strange powers might drive a wedge between a man and his society, bringing him more misery than contentment" (51). This theme would be repeated regularly in Marvel comics where heroes are ostracized or feared as often as they are accepted and embraced.

In a few short years Stan Lee would work with artists Jack Kirby, Don Heck, Wallace Wood, and Steve Ditko to create other heroes who were less god-like and more relatable. The Incredible Hulk was a scientist who lost his intellect when he lost his

temper, Spider-Man was motivated to become a hero by guilt over his uncle's death rather than pure altruism, Daredevil was blinded in the accident that heightened his other senses, and Iron Man had to stay in his suit of armor or his heart would fail–worse, his alter-ego, Tony Stark, was an alcoholic. Powers were often curses and the heroes were always imperfect at Marvel.

The different time periods during which DC Comics founded their comic book universe and Marvel actively began to publish superhero stories are reflected in the different natures of the characters. Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman were created in the late 1930s and early 1940s. After trust in the United States government had been shaken by the Great Depression, the promise of a New Deal increased hope, even faith, in America's future. Furthermore, the stylized characteristics of these costumed heroes were solidified during the propagandistic period of World War II. And as America stepped forward with a new role in the world following the war, these indestructible characters of popular culture represented America's newfound confidence and powerful place on the world stage.

In contrast, the essential aspects of the Marvel universe were created between 1961 (with the publication of *The Fantastic Four* 1) and 1963 (with the publication of *The X-Men* 1). This period of history changed America's image both domestically and internationally in ways that made the god-like perfection of DC's heroes less relevant. In the time period surrounding the creation of Marvel superheroes the Cold War dragged on, the Civil Rights act of 1960 was passed, the Bay of Pigs incident occurred in 1961, the Vietnam war officially began when 900 military advisors were sent into south Vietnam in 191, the Cuban missile crisis raised its ugly head in 1962, and JFK was assassinated in

1963. These were troubled times in America, less idealistic and less nationalistic than the period when DC heroes became established as icons. The heroes created at this time reflected this change. The heroes had feet of clay, falling as often as they triumphed. This is not to suggest that they were failures or were pessimistic; there was obvious optimism in their reactions to adversity. The Thing fought alongside his adopted family in the Fantastic Four to protect those who feared him because of his appearance. The X-Men protected a world that hated them. Daredevil overcame his handicap to become a lawyer by day and crime fighter at night. The heroes weren't perfect, but they were moral characters doing the best they could. Jones and Jacobs cite the issues of the period as the cause for Spider-Man's popularity:

> These were years when the civil rights movement was exposing an American hypocrisy, when Kennedy's rhetoric inspired people to action and his murder left them angry. Even kids too young for sit-ins, free speech and *Walden Pond* felt the rumblings. […] How could images of Spider-Man pilloried in the press and fired at by cops while running desperately, torn between his own life and his duty to his aunt, trying to find his own "higher morality," not resonate? (62)

The very natures of these comic book heroes were reflections of their times, whether it be the nationalistic 1940s or the turbulent, individualistic 1960s.

The Amazing Spider-Man

Stan Lee's most successful creation (co-creation actually) was Spider-Man. Some of Lee's other concepts failed commercially, the first adventure of his creation Ant Man was published seven months before Spider-Man's. Other creations struggled before

finding an audience, *The Hulk* was canceled after only six issues, though the character frequently guest starred in other titles before his own was relaunched. But Spider-Man was an instant hit, as soon as Stan Lee could convince his editor to publish it. Lee had had success with altering the traditional superhero formula before pitching Spider-Man to his publisher, Martin Goodman, but this concept was too radical for Goodman to approve. Lee says that he wanted to do "A strip that would violate all the conventions – break all the rules. A strip that would actually feature a teenager as the star […] A strip in which the main character would lose out as often as he'd win–in fact more often. A strip in which nothing would progress according to the formula–the situations, the cast of characters, and their relationship to each other would all be unusual and unexpected" (Goulart, 250). Goodman would not allow Lee to publish a story with Spider-Man until a title, *Amazing Fantasy*, was ready to be canceled. In the very last issue Spider-Man was shown on the cover and his now-famous origin story was found within.

All the non-traditional elements mentioned by Lee were found in this first story. The protagonist is a nerdy teenager, Peter Parker. Parker is not popular in high school. When he does receive special powers because of the bite of an irradiated spider, his first thoughts are not to become a hero. Rather after stating, "I've got to plan what to do with this unbelievable ability which fate has given me" Parker decides to try to defeat a professional wrestler for a one-hundred-dollar prize (Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man* 6). After winning the prize money Spider-Man has the opportunity to stop a thief, but lets him go. The same thief murders his Uncle Ben (Peter Parker is an orphan being raised by his Uncle Ben and Aunt May), and after catching the murderer Spider-Man realizes "With great power must also come–great responsibility!" (Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man* 13).

Since 1962 Spider-Man has become an iconic hero rivaling Superman and Batman in popularity and audience recognition. Spider-Man has become thoroughly engrained into American culture, so much so that it is difficult for modern audiences to appreciate what an innovative character Spider-Man was. There literally had been nothing like Spider-Man before. Teenagers in comic books had always been depicted either as either sidekicks, like Robin, or members of what seemed more like an after-school club in DC's *Legion of the Superheroes*, rather than as independent, fully functioning heroes out to correct moral wrongs.

Fig. 7 *Amazing Fantasy* 15, August 1962.

And Spider-Man was not a hero in the eyes of the public in his comic book, thanks largely to the efforts of newspaper publisher J. Jonah Jameson. Batman always has Commissioner Gordon to help him even when other members of the police force do not trust him. Most superheroes were similarly idolized. Marvel had flirted with this less-empowered concept with the Fantastic Four's Thing and the Hulk, but here it became galvanized. The Thing became accepted through his association with the Fantastic Four, and the Hulk really was not heroic, only super-powered and misunderstood. But Spider-Man was a hero vilified by the press. He was a super-hero loner. Typically, in the first issue of his solo title he tries to join the Fantastic Four but doesn't fit in. Rarely does he do more than team up for an adventure with other heroes. It took Spider-Man over forty years of comic book stories before he officially became a member of a superhero team.

In <u>Men of Tomorrow</u> Gerard Jones credits Lee and Ditko with adding to the superhero genre even as they expand already existing aspects of the superhero formula:

> Spider-Man is a hero whose superpowers cause harm to his loved ones, whose anger and impulsiveness lead him into terrible mistakes, who is admired by teenagers but loathed by adults. Like Clark Kent, he is mocked in his human identity by the same people who idolize his costumed self, but he suffers more self-loathing as a superhero than he ever did as a scrawny outcast. Ditko and Lee had taken the idea of a tragic superhero a step beyond Jerry Siegel's Superman: They'd psychologized it, with a superhero who did not simply weep for his inability to change fate but also questioned, every day, whether he was even doing the right thing by being a hero. (296)

Not only was Spider-Man adored by the very classmates who made fun of "puny Peter Parker," but the situation was inverted at home. Peter's Aunt May constantly lamented what a menace Spider-Man was even as she heaped praise on Peter; Peter/Spider-Man could never have the best of both worlds.

Danny Fingeroth, a professor of comic book writing at New York Univeristy, argues in <u>Superman on the Couch</u> that Spider-Man is as important a character to the development of the superhero genre as Superman:

> The mythos of the character has become so much a part of pop culture that it's easy to forget just how different he was. So many characters have built upon or outright swiped from Spider-Man, that his shifting of the paradigm of what defines a superhero–teenage or otherwise–is taken for

granted, which is always the mark of a sea-change character. It's hard to imagine a time before the Spider-Man "type" became ascendant. […] Spider-Man can be seen as the apex of the superhero genre. Unlike the heroes before him, he is not perfect. Unlike many of the current heroes, he's not part of the movement to "deconstruct" the superhero. […] After Spider-Man, there really was really, in many ways, nowhere for the superhero to go. (145-7)

While Fingeroth is correct that it is hard to overestimate the impact Peter Parker and Spider-Man have had on comic books, his statement that there was nowhere for the superhero to go after Spider-Man's creation seems to overstate the case. Only one year later the socially relevant title *The X-Men* would hit the stands, and there have been many innovations since then. The deconstruction of the superhero that Fingeroth rather disdainfully references has created critically acclaimed classic titles such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. But Spider-Man has undeniably altered the parameters of what a superhero is.

In thirteen pages Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created one of the most seminal origin stories for any comic superhero. Ron Goulart says that "The simplicity and power of Spider-Man's origin story were perceived by readers as a breath of fresh air. In particular, reads empathized with Peter's adolescent angst" (252). When the sales numbers of the final issue of *Amazing Fantasy* came back to Marvel a new monthly title, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, was ordered, and the character has not lost any popularity since. As proof of the quality of the origin, it has remained essentially unchanged in any

of the media adaptations of the character, or for any of the myriad retellings of the tale in comic books.

Spider-Man was first adapted for television in 1967 with ABC's animated *Spider-Man* series, which featured the famous theme song with the lyrics: "Spider-Man, Spider-Man, does whatever a spider can. Spins a web any size, catches thieves just like flies. Look out! Here comes the Spider-Man." A live action Spider-Man was featured in almost thirty segments on the educational series *The Electric Company* between 1974 and 1977. CBS aired semi-regular episodes of a live action series, *The Amazing Spider-Man,* from 1978-9, though the series was never officially picked up for a full season. In 1981 NBC began airing *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends,* which ran for three seasons. The highly rated and critically acclaimed *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* showed on Fox from 1994 until 1998, the longest run of any Spider-Man television series. In 1999 Fox attempted a new series, called *Spider-Man Unlimited,* which placed Spider-Man in an alternate universe where many of his villains were heroes who aided him. The series only aired four episodes before being pulled because of low ratings, though the final nine episodes which had been produced were eventually shown. MTV premiered *Spider-Man: The New Animated Series* in 2003, a computer-animated show, with thirteen initial episodes produced. Hollywood long hoped to produce a Spider-Man film, and after many legal battles due to various studios owning portions of Spider-Man's film rights. The film, finally made and released on May 3, 2002, set new box office records with an opening weekend gross of $114 million. The sequel, released in 2004 and also set box office records. The third film in the series is currently being produced.

Spider-Man's popularity has allowed the character to be featured in no less than eighteen separate comic book series since his creation. Currently Spider-Man is featured in five monthly titles in which he is the featured character (two of which occur in alternate universes); he is, in addition, a featured member of one team book. There are regular mini-series and one-shot comic books which feature Spider-Man's adventures as well. All in all, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created one of the most popular characters in the history of American fiction when they broke all the established rules about superheroes.

Evolution of Spider-Man

Lee and Ditko were not through with the changes in Spider-Man's character when they made him realize that with great power comes great responsibility. Spider-Man does not become an instant selfless hero after the murder of his Uncle Ben. Superman went from infant to caped hero in two pages in Siegel and Schuster's origin, and Batman appeared initially as a masked hero without an origin story, simply fighting crime because it was the thing to do. Spider-Man, conversely, evolves slowly towards selfless hero through his early adventures. Stan Lee never expected the character to last more than a few dozen issues, much less for over forty years. In the first year of Spider-Man's comics an evolution towards hero is apparent.

The first issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* features a story in which Spider-Man attempts to join the Fantastic Four but gives up when he discovers they are not paid to be superheroes. Admittedly Spider-Man wants the money to help his Aunt May, but this fiscal ambition was still a new area for a superhero to pursue. Superman has so clearly never sought any financial remuneration for his efforts that the thought is ridiculous.

Other adventures which follow feature Spider-Man saving newspaper publisher J. Jonah Jameson's son's life, then thinking to himself that hopefully he'll now be able to book public performances when Jameson stops turning the public against him. Spider-Man is also lured into a trap because of a promise that "it will be very profitable" for him to be at a certain location (Lee, *Amazing* 34). The reader slowly sees Spider-Man mature. At the beginning of issues he is often show catching non-powered muggers, but he often needs financial incentive to go after more dangerous supervillains. Spider-Man is generally shown to be doing the right thing, but his motivation, though often noble in attempting to help his Aunt May pay the mortgage, is not as selfless as was expected before Spider-Man became a fan favorite. By the sixth issue, however, Spider-Man is shown selflessly putting himself in danger to help a scientist who has turned himself into the mindless Lizard.

How did Spider-Man Become One of *the* Superheroes?

Why did this particular hero catch on? Other animal themed heroes, like Batman, had been popular before. But plenty of others had failed spectacularly, such as the short-lived Green Llama. It is unlikely that Spider-Man's abilities or insect origin had much to do with his resounding popularity, the ability to crawl up a wall is not commonly desired; more often youth fantasize about flight, teleportation, or mental powers. But two specific aspects of the character resonate particularly well with readers: Peter Parker's everyman qualities and Spider-Man's mantra that "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility".

Peter Parker is a far easier character for readers to identify with than other alter-egos. Bruce Wayne was a billionaire and Clark Kent is always Superman underneath the geeky suit and glasses, and most other heroes before Spider-Man were derivatives of

those two. In fact Bruce Wayne is more of an act than Batman is–the character is really the brooding detective, not the foppish playboy. Batman pretends to be Bruce Wayne, and Superman pretends to be Clark Kent. But there is no doubt that Peter Parker is the true character, and he pretends to be a superhero when he puts on the mask. The first panel of *Amazing Fantasy* 15 introduces the reader to Peter Parker, the "bookworm [who] wouldn't know a cha-cha from a waltz" and "Midtown High's only professional wallflower" (*Amazing Spider-Man*, 3). The average reader of comic books or consumer of Spider-Man's TV or film appearances can relate more to not being the most popular kid in high school than to being an heir to billions or the sole survivor of a doomed planet. There is something relatable in Peter Parker which had not been present in any previous superhero.

Stan Lee himself believes that one of the main reasons Spider-Man caught on was "the I-can-relate-to-him" aspect. "He was shy, he wasn't that successful with girls, he had to worry about his family, I think most teenagers reading it thought to themselves, 'Hey, that could be me.' There certainly was that identification" (*Stan Lee's Mutants*). Even if readers did not naturally think it, Stan Lee told them to. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 9, the narrator promises in the last panel that the next issue will reveal "More fascinating details about the life and adventures of the world's most amazing teenager– Spider-Man–the superhero who could be–YOU!" (222). Joe Quesada, the editor-in-chief of Marvel comics, points out that adventures of Spider-Man were unique because "It's not about that red and blue suit, it's about Peter Parker. The sick aunt, the girl problems, the school problems, the work problems. It's not just a suit jumping off a building" (*Superheroes Unmasked*). Peter Parker's troubles do not go away when he gains super

powers, he ends up with more problems than ever before. Not only was Peter Parker easier to draw connections to, so was Spider-Man, because unlike his predecessors he was a hero imperfect.

Spider-Man's very origin is dependant on the character thinking selfishly and acting foolishly, both of which are universally relatable character traits, even if not universally admitted. And that human aspect of Spider-Man has never changed in the forty years since the character was introduced. As Fingeroth argues in Superman on the Couch:

> Everything we ever learn about Spider-Man reinforces this key element about the character: we know that, if we got superpowers, we would probably act like Peter Parker. How *he* feels is how *we* would feel. Not eternally chipper like Superman, not obsessed to the point of having no enjoyment in life like Batman, but human in the truest sense of the word. (146)

Spider-Man gets nervous. He makes jokes to distract himself from the gravity of the situations he finds himself in. Spider-Man doesn't know what the outcome of every fight will be before he goes in.

In a diverse country such as the United States, Spider-Man's costume allows for a less racially-specific identification, even if his secret identity is widely known to be white. While Marvel would introduce the first ethnic superhero in mainstream comics in 1966, Spider-Man's costume allows for more ambiguity than the unmasked white face of Superman. Lee says "You could be any kid. You could be Black, you could be Asian, you could be Indian, you could be anything and imagine you were in that costume. I

think that made it relevant to everybody everywhere. And that was accidental, I don't

think we planned it that way, but it was very fortuitous" (*Stan Lee's Mutants*).

Power and Responsibility

America has long held itself in a position of power, and often cited a moral

responsibility to use that power for good in the world. From the days of John Winthrop

proclaiming the Puritans to be under a covenant with God that America would be "as a

city upon a hill" with "the eyes of all the world upon" us, settlers in America have set the

country above others (105). The responsibility Americans bear because of their "power"

in the world to act has been used as justification for everything from breaking away from

Britain, the expansion west after the Civil War due to (white) America's Manifest

Destiny, the country's inaction during the Cold War, and recently, the removal of

Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. Whether or not altruistic responsibility is the true

reason for these actions is debatable, but it's clear that the concept of power being

inherently tied to responsibility was not introduced in comic books. It has long been a

part of the American character.

Spider-Man's origin contains the famous warning "With great power must come

great responsibility." By contextualizing the 1962 comic book origin of Spider-Man and

the 2002 film version and considering their variations, it becomes clear that the power

that comes with great responsibility is not the proportionate strength of a spider. Comic

books in many ways function as a mythology in America, and mythic truths are adapted

as they are passed down to fit the needs of the contemporary society. The fears and

prominent issues of a society will filter into the literature and popular culture of a time.

This effect can occur unconsciously as well as consciously. Lukacs argues that writers

purposefully "contrive imaginary worlds that accurately depict the realities of their moment of history" (Rivkin 240). Whether or not this is purposeful is a matter of some debate. Stuart Hall argues in his essay "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology'" that "just as the myth-teller may be unaware of the basic elements out of which his particular version of the myth is generated, so broadcasters may not be aware of the fact that the frameworks and classifications they were drawing on reproduced the ideological inventories of their society" (1054). A story reflects the ideology of the teller, even if the teller believes it to be neutral. The retelling of Spider-Man's origin with a forty-year gap allows for a consideration of how the concerns and fears in America have changed.

The most notable difference between the two origins is the nature of the spider which bites Peter Parker and imbues him with spider-like powers. In the 1962 version it is a spider that has been exposed to nuclear radiation; in the 2002 film adaptation the spider has been "genetically altered." The power which must be used responsibly in 1962 is radiation, or nuclear power; while in 2002 the concern is with genetics. There were contemporary reasons each of these issues were concerns in those periods. Following the discovery and harnessing of nuclear power, it was used to end a global conflict. The utter destruction that atomic power proved capable of demonstrated the need that existed for it to be handled responsibly. In 1962 as the Cold War carried on there were constant reminders of the nuclear build-up, and with the Cuban Missile Crisis occurring that same year, there was ample contemporary concern that nuclear power be used responsibly.

The shift to a genetically-altered spider in 2002 demonstrates a change in the concerns in America. Americans had not made their peace with nuclear power, nor were

they no longer fearful about its abuse, but with the end of the Cold War the constancy of nuclear concern had lessened. "Duck and Cover" was now a joke to high school students, not a threat. In 1997 the science of genetics was thrust into the public spotlight when scientists successfully cloned the lamb Dolly. Other scientific undertakings, such as the Human Genome Project and stem cell research, have maintained genetics in public awareness. Much of the talk concerning genetics is quite similar to the concerns that were raised over nuclear power in the 1960s. Is man playing God? Are we meant to have this power? Many of the prevalent fears concerning radiation in the 1960s are currently applicable to genetics. Though the theme of power and responsibility has remained constant, the specific power being addressed has altered with the times.

Spider-Man and Changing Times

Marvel, realizing that Spider-Man was one of their most popular characters with young people, made efforts to maintain his appeal. Real-world events often cross over into Spider-Man's fictional universe, and the nature of Marvel's comic universe makes that easier. Spider-Man does not patrol and protect a made-up city like Metropolis or Gotham, he is based in New York City. Marvel Comics has purposefully tried to make their world more realistic and less escapist than DC's in an effort to create a distinctive niche in the superhero comic book genre. As one of Marvel's flagship characters, Spider-Man has often been used to draw parallels with actual society. Perhaps the most poignant example of this was when the December 2001 issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* dealt with 9/11 from Spider-Man's point of view, but this is just the culmination of a long tradition of historical parallels.

While Spider-Man aged slowly, he did eventually graduate from high school and enter college. Wright draws a parallel between student protests at Columbia University in 1968 and a storyline published in *Amazing Spider-Man* 68 in which Spider-Man finds himself at the center of student protests at the college he is attending. The storyline follows student protests on the campus over the administration's decision to convert an empty building into an alumni house instead of low-rent housing for minority students. As Wright explains, "Peter has to reconcile his natural sympathy for the students with his assumed obligation to combat lawlessness as Spider-Man. As a law upholding liberal he finds himself caught between militant leftists and angry conservatives" (234-5). In the end Peter chooses a moderate approach, which is vindicated as the two sides meet and reconcile their differences.

The government also recognized that Spider-Man could be a valuable tool in communicating with younger readers because of the character's inherent resonance with youth. The United States government requested that Marvel Comics use Spider-Man to tell an anti-drug story, but the publisher could not obtain the seal of approval required to be able to sell the comic book in many locations because the Comics Code Authority forbade any mention of drugs. In an effort to avoid government censorship the industry created the code to police itself, yet because of the code Marvel Comics was prohibited from publishing a story that the government requested of them.

Stan Lee was writing *The Amazing Spider-Man* at the time an anti-drug story was requested. Knowing full well that his story would not receive the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval, Lee wrote the story anyway. A three-issue storyline in which Peter Parker discovers his roommate, Harry Osborn, is a drug-addict was written

and planned to be published 1971, beginning in *Amazing Spider-Man* 96. Stan Lee describes the reaction the story received from his publisher, Martin Goodman, and the public reaction:

> When I told [Martin Goodman] I wanted to put those books out without the Code seal, he said go ahead and do it. It was a gutsy call. In those days, you wouldn't be distributed and you wouldn't go to heaven if you didn't have the Comics Code on your books. Martin felt we were doing the right thing by publishing these stories and I must say the stories got some great publicity. *The New York Times* gave us a great write-up, and I got letters from parents and teachers and religious leaders who all commended us. (DeFalco 17).

It is ironic that Marvel comics had to circumvent the Comics Code in order to publish a story requested by the government, a story confronting a controversial social issue, which went on to garner the praise of parents, educators, and religious leaders.

Comic book superheroes mirrored current events since their earliest incarnations during the Great Depression. Costumed heroes seemed innately capable of serving as propaganda during certain periods of America's history. They had fought alongside the allies during World War II, helped to roll back the "commie" threat, and been featured in Vietnam. But there was something different about 9/11. While comic books were among the first entertainment industries to narrativize the tragic events of that day, the result was far from the classic mode of paralleling reality with optimistic images so classically seen in their pages.

The December 2001 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* featured an all-black cover (the first such cover in the history of comic book publishing) and told the story of Spider-Man arriving at the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center. An overwhelmed Spider-Man holds his head and says "…God…" staring at the wreckage. An internal monologue accompanies images of Spider-Man and other costumed figures attempting to help public servants clean the wreckage. It's no accident that Spider-Man, as one of Marvel's most prominent heroes, and the one who is most clearly a New Yorker, was chosen to explore the effects of this event. Although the ultimate message is a tribute to real-world heroes and optimistism that America's spirit will overcome, there are undeniable moments of helplessness throughout the dialogue. "Some things are ond words … beyond comprehension … beyond forgiveness." "We could not see it coming." "Only madmen could contain the thought."   The sane world will always be vulnerable to madmen because we cannot go where they go to conceive of such things." The issue covered a range of feelings, encompassing the reactions of that day from shock to anger to helplessness to hope. This issue of Spider-Man attempted to encapsulate all the reality of 9/11.

Spider-Man has been adopted into American mythology. His origin, his personality, his mantra all capture the imagination of Americans in ways no other comic book hero had for twenty years. Spider-Man was a landmark creation both in the world of comic book adventurers, and also in American culture.
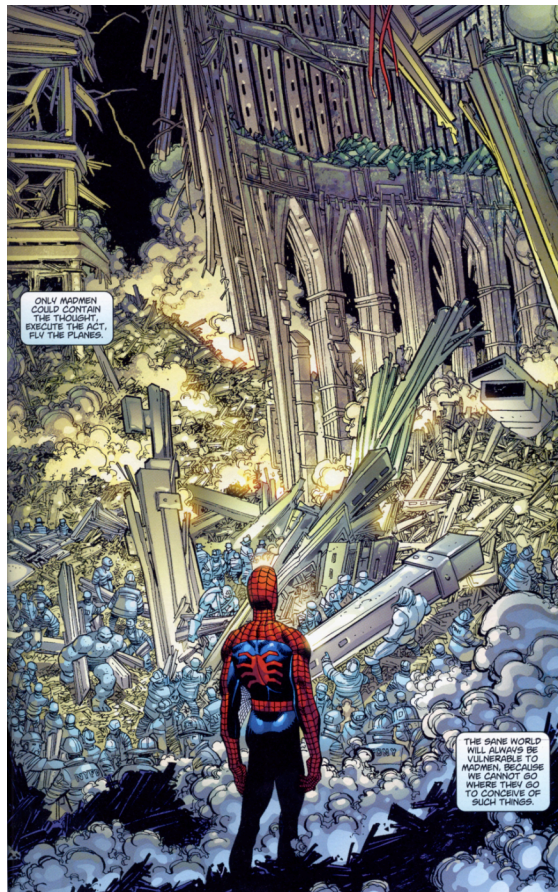
Fig. 8 Spider-Man arrives at Ground Zero.
Amazing Spider-Man 36, December 2001.

Fig. 9 Spider-Man cannot comprehend this level of destruction.
Amazing Spider-Man 36, December 2001.

Chapter 4

X-Men: The Minority Superhero

Enter the X-Men

The first published adventure of the X-Men hit the shelves in 1963. It was not an instant success, but the concept of a heroic team of outsiders was one that would become foundational to comic books, a concept that still used to this day as evidenced by the launch of recent team titles such as 2002's *Runaways* and 2003's *Outsiders*. The minority metaphor inherent in the comic book allows for exploration of issues not commonly associated with what is often considered a juvenile genre. Michael Chabon says, "The X-Men are the most consciously, deliberately, successfully metaphorical of any comic book superhero" (*Superheroes Unmasked*). Perhaps it is for these reasons that the X-Men would eventually become one of the most successful comic book franchises in history. Though the comic book initially struggled to find an audience, the X-Men have overcome that obstacle dramatically, gaining a fanbase unrivaled in comic book history, except for pre-WWII fervor around Superman. The X-Men have, more recently, parlayed this popularity in comic books into similar success in other media adaptations.

The X-Men's publishing history is one of extremes. While the title would become the biggest selling comic book series in the history of the industry, at first the concept had difficulty becoming approved by the publishing company. Marvel did not take issue with the concept of a mutant race, but rather with the title proposed by Stan Lee, who along with artist Jack Kirby created the X-Men. Lee explains the process of getting the title of the comic book approved:

Originally, I proposed naming the chronicle of our merry little misfits *The Mutants*. I thought it would make a great title. But I was outvoted by the powers-that-be in the front office. I was told, with much conviction, that nobody knew what a mutant was, therefore that couldn't be the title of the magazine. I tried, in my stumbling, bumbling way, to say that some people knew the word, and those that didn't would soon learn after the book was published. But, as you can tell by the present title, yours truly didn't always emerge victorious! However, undaunted and unbowed, I returned with another name–*The X-Men*. I truly expected to be booted out of the office for that one. I mean, if people didn't know what a mutant was, how in the would they know what an X-Man was? But I guess I'll never make my mark as a logician–everyone okayed the title. (vi)

Stan Lee not only lost the battle to name the comic book *The Mutants*, he nearly lost his efforts to make a successful title. The X-Men were not as popular as Spider-Man was in the 1960s, the title failed commercially for the company and by the early 1970s their only published adventures were reprints.

In 1975 Marvel decided to relaunch the title and it did so to great critical acclaim and financial success. New writers, artists and fictional characters were key to the success of this relaunch. *X-Men* was reintroduced to the public with a one-shot in 1975 entitled *Giant-Size X-Men* (the title referred to the extra number of pages in the issue, not the stature of the X-Men themselves). When that title proved successful the monthly series was relaunched with Chris Claremont writing. Claremont would continue to write

the title for sixteen consecutive years, leaving in 1991, but he has written the title on and

off since 2000. Bradford W. Wright explains some changes made in the relaunch:

> Between 1977 and 1981 Claremont and artist John Byrne transformed it
>
> from a second-tier monthly title to the best selling in the industry. [Much
>
> of this success was because] Claremont created strong female characters
>
> who played more than the token supporting role traditionally allotted to
>
> women in comic books. [These strong women] helped to expand the
>
> title's appeal across the gender barrier, and *The X-Men* became one of the
>
> very few superhero titles to win a significant female following. (263)

The series, newly christened *The Uncanny X-Men*, would quickly rank among the

most popular titles. The title was so popular that Marvel would shortly inspire a spin-off

series, *The New Mutants,* about the next generation of mutants being trained to protect the

world. This series also proved popular, and since that time the X-Men universe of

characters has inspired no less than twenty ongoing comic book titles and hundreds of

limited series and mini-series. It has been condescendingly suggested that any time

Marvel was looking to launch a new title with good sales they simply added an "X" to the

title. However, Marvel could hardly be blamed if they did adopt such a practice, the X-

titles proved immensely popular and incredibly profitable. The single greatest selling

issue in comic book history was *X-Men* 1, published in 1991. This new series was

created to allow two teams of the core X-Men characters to have published adventures

each month. The first issue was written by Chris Claremont and drawn by Jim Lee and

sold an unprecedented eight million copies. By comparison the top selling titles in 2006

are fortunate to sell 200,000 copies.

Much as the X-Men found their published success long after they were first introduced, they struggled to be successfully adapted into other media until the 1990s. The X-Men were first brought to television in 1966's animated *The Marvel Super-Heroes,* when they guest-starred in a three-part storyline featuring the Marvel hero, the Sub-Mariner. Their next appearance would not be for over a decade, when they were often featured in 1981's *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends*. In 1988 a half-hour animated pilot was produced entitled "Pryde of the X-Men" (the story involved Katherine Pryde joining the X-Men), but the pilot was not picked up by any station. Then, in 1992 the cartoon series titled simply *X-Men* premiered on Fox and immediately garnered such great ratings that seventy-six episodes were produced between 1992 and 1997. A made-for-television film, entitled *Generation X,* based on a younger group of mutants aired on the Fox network in 1996. In 2000 a new cartoon series *X-Men: Evolution* aired on the WB network and remained on the air for five seasons. Currently a new series, *Wolverine and the X-Men,* is in production; and plans it is planned to begin airing in the fall of 2006.

After many false starts the X-Men were brought to the silver screen in 2000. *X-Men,* directed by Bryan Singer, is credited with reviving the comic book film genre that studios had been wary of since Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*.   The film series has remained popular. *X2: X-Men United*, also directed by Bryan Singer, was released in 2003 to even greater financial success than the first film, $214 million compared to $154 million in the U.S. box office. The third film in the successful series, *X-Men: The Last Stand,* was released in May of 2006 and set box office records in its first weekend. The films domestic gross of $123 million dollars during the Memorial Day weekend was the most ever for that period. The film is directed by Brett Ratner, who replaced Bryan

Singer when Singer's contract to direct the film was bought out by Warner Bros. so that Singer could direct *Superman Returns*.

In comic books, television and film the X-Men have taken some time in order to discover their voice. The X-Men struggle with slow starts in every medium, but in the end the X-Men always seem to become more popular than most of their comic book counterparts. Something about the concept of the X-Men seems to resonate with audiences in America.

Where's the race in this metaphor?

From the beginning the X-Men featured obvious metaphor. The issues of race relations and prejudice were worn on the proverbial sleeve of the series. Bryan Singer, director of *X-Men* and *X2* says of the comic book, "This was Stan Lee and Jjack Kirby's way of commenting on prejudice […] This is the comic book version of *The Crucible*" (*Origin of the X-Men*). The X-Men were created at a time when race and prejudice were among the most pressing issues in America. When America was focused on the Civil Rights movement, the X-Men directly paralleled Civil Rights issues. The mutants who made up the X-Men were literally a separate race in this narrative, and the issue of prejudice has long been the prevalent theme in the series. Just as Peter Parker is known for his mantra that "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility," the X-Men have identified with the theme that they are "Sworn to Protect a World that Hates and Fears Them."

Many have noted this correlation between the X-Men narrative and American historical events and some have even noted direct parallels between the leaders of the mutant race and civil rights leaders. Professor X, who preaches peace between the races,

seeking equality above all else, is considered to have been inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. Conversely, Magneto who sees mutants as superior to all other races and has a supremacist point of view is often seen as reflective of Malcolm X and the black power movement. Ralph Winter, a producer of the first X-Men film, said Bryan Singer particularly emphasized this aspect of the X-Men mythology: "Bryan [Singer] embraces this Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X approach to the values that are being presented" (*X-Men* Special features). As further evidence, one of the final lines spoken by Magneto features a quote lifted directly from Malcolm X. Malcolm X said "We declare our right on this earth [. . .] to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence *by any means necessary*." The words spoken by Magneto in the first film are, "The war is still coming, Charles, and I intend to fight it... by any means necessary." The parallels in the statement provide greater evidence to the argument that Magneto is meant as a parallel for Malcolm X while Professor X is representative of Martin Luther King's more pacifistic point of view.

Stan Lee has flatly denied that he ever intended to include a racial metaphor in the X-Men. Lee contends that the concept of the mutant race was born out of his own laziness as a writer. Lee has said, "My biggest problem was how did they get their super powers […] and I took the lazy way out. It suddenly occurred to me, if I could say people were mutants, I needed no further explanation" (*Origin of the X*-Men). Lee had become tired of trying to come up with new explanations for heroes gaining super powers, and he had already come up with several. Other heroes created by Lee include the Fantastic Four, who received their powers from "cosmic rays"; the Incredible Hulk,

whose alter ego Bruce Banner was caught in "Gamma radiation"; Spider-Man, who was bitten by an irradiated spider; and Daredevil, who lost his sight when his eyes were splashed by radioactive isotope while his other senses were heightened.

However accidental, the similarities between the narrative of the X-Men and America in the 1960s are remarkable, and Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the creators of the X-Men, did have a history of sensitivity to minorities, even when such efforts went against corporate policy. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, in The Comic Book Heroes, explain some of Lee and Kirby's earlier treatment of minorities in a comic book called *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*:

> It was startling for its brazen acknowledgement of ethnicity: in the comic book world of Clark Kents and Peter Parkers, Izzy Cohen was explicitly fighting the Nazis because he was a Jew, Dino Manelli because the fascists betrayed his ancestral land. More startling still was Gabe Jones. In those years comics publishers forbad portraying black people, unless bongo-beating "natives" were called for, fearing that Southern retailers would return books unsold. The same year *Sgt. Fury* appeared–the year after the Civil Rights Movement's march on Washington–DC reprinted an adaptation of Ian Fleming's *Dr. No*, originally published in England, and had all the locals colored *pink* […] even though the story was explicitly sent in Jamaica […] Jack and Stan weren't just doing "realism" either; the US military had still been segregated in World War II […] When the color separators made Gabe look white, Stan wrote memos until they got it

right. He and Kirby were doing more than selling comics, they were

making a statement. (71)

The Marvel comic books of the 1960s, for which Lee and Kirby were main

architects, continually demonstrated a greater sensitivity to social issues than had

previously been present in the genre. Bradford W. Wright explains:

Marvel's comic books at this time rarely mention the civil rights

movement, yet Marvel was the first publisher to integrate African

Americans into comic books. In 1966 Marvel Marvel debuted the first

black superhero […] the Black Panther [..] Just as significant, perhaps,

was Marvel's gradual introduction of random African American citizens

into common street scenes, in which they appeared as policemen,

reporters, or mere passers-by. It was a belated but meaningful comic book

illustration of America as a multiracial society. (219)

Lee and Kirby, with their history of minority awareness and sensitivity in their fictional

works, made a complete narrative metaphor for minorities and prejudice in the X-Men.

The X-Men struggled against societal segregation and sought tolerance from those with

bigoted prejudice, the metaphor in the racially-sensitive times of the 1960s is obvious.

However, it should be noted that for such an obvious metaphor about prejudice in

the United States, they seem to have forgotten to include race. While there are certainly

other minorities in America besides racial ones, in the 1960s the prevalent concern was

race. Eventually, Marvel would introduce the first black superhero, but it would not be

until 1966. In 1963, with the X-Men's initial roster, the team meant to represent

minorities was entirely white and middleclass, the only exception was Angel, who was still white, but upper class.

Consider the initial roster of this group: Scott Summers, codenamed *Cyclops* who could shoot energy beams from his eyes; Hank McCoy, the *Beast* who had larger than normal feet and hands and was extremely agile (it was not until much later that the character sprouted blue fur all over his body); Bobby Drake, who as *Iceman* could turn his body to snow and control ice; Jean Grey, originally codenamed *Marvel Girl* who possessed telekinesis; and Warren Worthington III, who was called *Angel* because of the wings which sprouted from his back. All of these characters were white, middle-to-upper-class Americans. In short, this was a very WASP-ish group to be struggling against prejudice in a minority metaphor. Further complicating this particular group as representative of a racial metaphor is the fact that none of these mutants were in any way distinguishable from white Americans. While later mutants would often have distinctive features which would set them apart from all of humanity, such as fur, horns, or different skin pigmentation, the original X-Men could pass as non-mutants whenever they wished. Even Angel, who had wings on his back, could use "restraining belts" to prevent "wings from bulging under [his] suit" which allowed him to pass as a non-mutant (*X-Men* 1, 18).

One reason that the X-Men struggled so much to find an audience in their initial issues could be that they lacked key elements of the prejudice metaphor. As a possible indication of this, it should be noted that when Marvel relaunched the title in 1975 there was a hypercorrection which occurred. This relaunch triggered the era of popularity for the X-Men that the characters still enjoy. This new team consisted of *Nightcrawler* (a German teleporter named Kurt Wagner), *Storm* (Ororo Munroe, a weather controller

from Africa), *Colossus* (the Russian Peter Rasputin who could turn his flesh to steel),

Banshee (the Irishman Sean Cassidy who had a sonic scream), *Warpath* (John Proudstar,

a Native American with super-strength), *Sunfire* (a fire-wielder from Japan named Shiro

Yoshida), and *Wolverine* (the Canadian with claws and a healing factor known only as

Logan).

There was not a single white American on the team, and every minority group

represented had been the subject of widespread prejudice in the United States, much of it

institutionalized by the government. Germans were mistrusted after World War II and

the well-publicized horrors of the Holocaust. Africans have a long history of suffering

from prejudice in America beginning with the slave trade. The general feelings toward

Russians during the Cold War, which was at its coldest when Colossus was introduced,

Fig. 10 The original team of X-Men.
The X-Men 2, November 1963
Fig. 11 The second team of X-Men.
Giant-Size X-Men 1, 1975

were far from friendly, and having an Eastern European accent could lead to accusations of Communism. Anti-Irish sentiment was strongest in the mid-1800s in the United States when discrimination in the workplace included the posting of NINA signs in want ads (No Irish Need Apply). Native Americans have been mistreated within the United States since settlers first reached the country's shores, and the forced movement onto reservations is only one of a long list of grievances. During World War II the federal Government forced Japanese Americans to live in internment camps because of mistrust. The only exception to this trend of characters from groups who had suffered prejudice in America is Wolverine, the Canadian, but he was the only pre-existing character on the roster, and had been added because of the popularity of his first appearance in the pages of *The Incredible Hulk*. Wolverine's lack of an overt minority-group makes his character-specific role as an outsider amongst outsiders, or cowboy loner, more intriguing.

The X-Men have created the most international cast of characters of any team in comics books. Whether America is termed a "melting pot" or not, the fact is that America is as diverse a nation as has existed in the history of the world, and the X-Men have mirrored that in the cast of characters. The pages of the X-Men comics have included prominent characters from Kenya, Morocco, South Africa, Vietnam, Japan, India, Israel, Austria, Afghanistan, England, France, Germany, Russia, Netherland, Poland, Scotland, Australia, Mexico, and Brazil, and from Native American tribes such as the Apache and Cheyenne. This list, while incomplete, demonstrates the multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the X-Men's universe. But the X-Men have come to represent more than simply racial minorities. Overt efforts have been made to draw

parallels between the X-Men and many types of prejudice that have plagued America and the world.

This 1975 relaunch was a concerted editorial effort to increase minority presence in the title, so the issues of prejudice would hit closer to home for the readership. Joe Quesada, the current Marvel editor-in-chief, explains:

> The plan was to create a team of characters that were not only diverse in their powers; their diversity would be compounded by their ethnicity, genders, political views and preferences within. A super-powered team that reflected the diversity of a world that was shrinking by the minute. A world whose future could be glorious if we all learned the lessons of tolerance and acceptance, or could end up as a black pit of despair if we let fear rule our lives. Needless to say, this struck a chord within all of us, and the X-Men were reborn. (4)

As Quesada explains, the X-Men would come to symbolize more than simply a racial "other," representing many varied "others" which exist in America. The X-Men are now identified with minorities ranging from homosexuals to religious groups, and each individual reader is likely to find relatable instances of otherness.

Prejudice Besides Race

Though the element of racial metaphor was missing in debut issues of the X-Men, the characters have come to represent all outsiders who suffer from prejudice. The X-Men have had stories which mirror hate crimes, lynchings, religious intolerance, AIDs, and the Red scare. And the X-Men have not come to solely represent prejudice in America. Storylines have purposefully criticized Apartheid in South Africa, racial

genocide, and the holocaust of World War II. The first X-Men film establishes its central theme of the film, prejudice, not by showing racial prejudice in the United States with which the comic book is so often identified. The film begins with a scene of one of the most well-known historical acts of prejudice in the world: a Nazi concentration camp. The racial metaphor is easily drawn because the series premiered in the racially-charged times of the 1960s and because mutants are called a "separate race".

But the comic book series has become a metaphor for all prejudice. Avi Arad, the CEO of Marvel studios saw a different meaning in the X-Men than a racial metaphor, "Growing up in Israel I understood the metaphor, it was about the right to live and the right to exist" (*Superheroes Unmasked*). The power of the X-Men is that it is not strictly a race metaphor, if a reader is black, or homosexual, or a Jew, or a Catholic, or an adolescent who feels the world is against them there is something that can be identified with within the universe of the X-Men.

A mini-series premiering in 2006, entitled *X-Men: Mythos*, written by Paul Jenkins, is meant to distill the essence of the X-Men's characters down to their core. The series opens with a sequence in which Magneto lectures three skinheaded teenagers who are at his mercy. Magneto's reasons for what he does are explained when he tells them, just before killing them,

> They say history is written by the winners. Let's have a history lesson. Florida, 1958–a young black man named Edgar Myers, is tied to a tree, flogged with barbed wire and subsequently lynched by white supremacists for refusing to leave his suburban home. Wisconsin, 1997–a teenager named Matthew White is suspended from a bridge by four members of his

high school football team and struck by a passing train. Matthew White is gay. His murderers received a suspended jail sentence. Four days ago–a twelve-year-old girl named Sarah Cullen, who has developed a third vestigial arm near her uppermost left rib is kidnapped by three red-blooded American youths and thrown from the back of their moving pickup truck to a chorus of "Have a nice day, Mutie!" The child is pronounced dead upon her arrival at a local hospital."

In addition to racial prejudice, prejudice against homosexuals is also explicitly addressed by Magneto. This is another theme which has been established in the comic books.. The X-men introduced one of the first homosexual superheroes into mainstream comics with Northstar, though because of editorial policy he was not allowed to say the words "I am gay" until 1992's *Alpha Flight* 106. But the character's creator, John Byrne, has explained that the character was gay in his mind since he was created in 1983. Ian McKellan, who played Magneto, has strongly identified with this particular form of prejudice and its metaphorical meaning in the X-Men comic books. In an interview while filming the first X-Men movie he stated:

> I think that's been the particular appeal of this comic strip, that it has taken a fantasy look at what it is like to be considered so unusual by society at large that they're prepared to think of you as less worthy than they are to live […]Being a gay man I am often thought to be too dangerous and too unusual, too abnormal to be allowed into society as a whole. And therein lies my interest in mutants. (*X-Men* Special Features)

X2: X-men United furthers this homosexual metaphor in a scene in which Bobby Drake reveals to his parents that he is mutant, a scene constructed to resemble a teenager "coming out" about his homosexuality to his parents.

Furthering the links between homosexuality and the X-Men was a storyline which began in 1993 and was carried throughout the 1990s featured the "Legacy Virus." The Legacy Virus was a disease which only targeted mutants, and was always intended as a metaphor for the AIDs virus. The link between a disease and a persecuted minority was established early on in the storyline, but as the story progressed through the years normal humans began to succumb to the Legacy Virus. No longer was the disease indicative of a minority status. This is similar to the history of AIDS, which at first was closely associated with homosexuality but has since become a far wider epidemic.

In 2001 the Church of Humanity was introduced in *Uncanny X-Men* 399 by writer Joe Casey and can be read as a critique of religious groups' condemnation of homosexuality. As its name implies, the Church of Humanity is a religious group that stands against mutants, and views them as an aberration against God's plan. Though some writers have emphasized mutants as a

Fig. 12 Mutants are crucified in a hate crime by the Church of Humanity and left on the lawn of the X-Mansion.
Uncanny X-Men 423, July 2003.

metaphor for homosexuals, the metaphor reaches other cultural parallels. Even as Ian

Mckellan explained that he related to mutants because of the prejudice he saw as an

openly gay actor, he continued to say: "But I know speaking to Marvel comics that it's

not just gay people who identify with mutants, it's other minorities too […] religious

minorities, racial minorities" (*X-Men* Special features).

The first new character introduced to

the X-men comic book after the 1975 relaunch was Kitty Pryde, whose defining

characteristic (besides being able to walk through walls) was that she was a faithful Jew.

The metaphor of anti-Semitism has been often used in the X-Men universe, perhaps most

famously in the first scene of *X-Men* with a young Magneto in a Nazi concentration

camp. Internment camps for mutants were shown in a futuristic storyline called "Days of

the Future Past," and at these camps mutants were branded and made to work before

being slaughtered in inhuman fashion, referencing one of the most gruesome acts of

prejudice in history, the treatment of Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Other storylines

have included mutants being branded with numbers and having their heads shaved by a

dominating government. Links between Jews and mutants extend as far as Magneto's

dream of creating a mutant homeland, similar to the Zionist movement in the Jewish

faith.

Other specific historical instances of prejudice besides the Holocaust have been

critiqued as well through the X-Men. The first X-Men film drew direct parallels between

government concerns about mutants and the Senator McCarthy-inspired Red Scare. In

one of the earliest scenes of the film, which takes place on the senate floor, a character

named Senator Kelly proclaims, waving a sheet of paper, "I have here a list of identified

mutants living right here in the United States" which is meant to bring to mind Senator McCarthy's famous claim, "I have here in my hand a list of fifty-seven people that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party, and who, nevertheless, are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department."

Apartheid, the government-mandated segregation system in South Africa, was critiqued through the fictional nation of Genosha, which was located on a small island just off the coast of South Africa. The government of Genosha, first introduced in *Uncanny X-Men* 235, segregates mutants into a worker class, and does not allow mingling between mutants and non-mutants. The storyline involving Genosha began in 1988, before Apartheid had ended and at a time when international criticism of the system was rising.

Why Are the X-Men still Relevant?

While some of the issues of prejudice the X-Men reference are historical, such as the holocaust, others are more generally relevant to the times they are written. The racial issues were very applicable to the 1960s when the X-Men were created, and though race was largely absent from the title, the mutants were a race struggling for acceptance. It would be uninformed to claim that those issues have passed from American culture, and nor have they passed from the X-Men comic books which more recently have seen the purposeful introduction of Latin American and Arab characters. And the prejudice explored is not limited to racial groups, the metaphor is extended to all minorities and all outsiders.

This may be one reason for the appeal of the X-Men: everyone at some point feels they are an outsider. The comic books even explain that it is most typical for mutant

powers to appear in early adolescence, and trying to fit in is a hallmark of adolescence. Even if a reader of the comic book is not a member of any minority, the awkwardness inherent to adolescence allows for some connection to the outsider nature of the X-Men.

Furthermore, the X-Men feature many characters who purposefully are designed to defy their outward appearance and possess hidden, inner attributes. This trend began when Lee and Kirby introduced Professor Xavier, in his wheelchair. The founder and leader of an action team is incapable of walking, and also this seeming cripple is the most powerful telepath, and therefore arguably the most powerful being, in the Marvel comic book universe. In a universe peopled by the Incredible Hulk and Greek Gods, a man in a wheelchair is more powerful than them all. Other characters in the X-Men similarly go against their outward appearance. The Beast who is covered in blue fur and has animalistic features is the most intelligent and erudite individual in the comic book. Nightcrawler, who has the appearance of a demon, is a deeply religious Catholic, and is, in fact, an ordained priest. Wolverine, who is the most dangerous fighter on the team stands only a diminutive 5'5" in the comic books. These characters, and others in the X-Men comics, force readers to look past the outward appearance if they are to see who these characters truly are. The initial reaction, or prejudgement, is shown to be false every time these characters speak or act.

As long as the X-Men struggle to eliminate prejudice in their own comic book world, they will remain relevant to the real world unless prejudice is eliminated. Patrick Stewart, who played Professor X in the films, says "These issues are very relevant in society today. [Issues] of how we live with people who are different from ourselves, who we may fear or feel uncomfortable about. How we can create a society in which

everyone can coexist together happily and creatively and productively is what lies at the center of this" (*X-Men* Special Features). Singer, in commenting on the universality of the characters said, "It grew [in popularity] because the ideology is very strong, and I think that every young person, whether they are in a minority or not, any young person at some point in their life feels separated, feels strange, feels different" (*Origins of the X-Men*).

The X-Men have always highlighted the metaphor of outsiders seeking to end prejudices; it is an integral aspect of the comic books. But initially there were almost no minorities of any sort in the comic books. It is significant that the X-Men began to gain in popularity only when the diversity of the characters increased. As the similarities between the characters in the X-Men and groups struggling with racism in the real world became more pointed, the X-Men became more relevant, and with that relevance came more popularity. The direct links between the X-Men and the creators, writers, and artists who have worked on the series can be seen most dramatically in the hope for the day when the X-Men no longer maintain the relevancy which makes them popular.

Conclusion

When I was nine years old I bought my first comic book. It was an issue of *Uncanny X-Men* and emblazoned across the cover were the words "Pyrrhic Victory." I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but that was only the first sign that this was not a simple child's story. I came in time to appreciate the complexities of both the narratives and the medium itself. The sheer breadth of the narratives told in comic books is impressive and worth consideration—shared universes of thousands of characters, continuity running through decades, and hundreds of stories published a year. The comic book medium is unique, a mix of prose and image, falling somewhere between books and film. Perhaps more so than any other medium comic books require the interaction of the audience, as they must participate in the storytelling to fill in what happens in the gutters between panels. A medium that is often derided as childish fascinated me, and many of the characters created in it have fascinated America.

There is no single unifying theme which can explain why Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men have become so embedded in American popular culture. Each has distinct aspects which sets it apart as American and which can explain individually why it is so popular. Superman embodies the immigrant's tale and the ideals of America. Batman is the self-made man who continues a tradition of loner heroes in America, outsiders who operate beyond the bounds of society in order to uphold it. Spider-Man's alter ego Peter Parker is the everyman, allowing for personal identification by the reader. The X-Men are the fringe groups, the minorities, who show that in America minority social issues still prevail, however different the minority groups which come to the front of America's social concerns.

If any of these characters had remained stagnant, resisting changes which occurred in the culture, becoming rigid remnants of decades past, they would not be as popular with today's children as they were in the 1930s and the 1960s. But the continuous narratives have allowed for a flexibility in the stories even as the American aspects of the characters remained.   And each of these characters has proven that reflections between society and culture do occur, as is evidenced by the different kinds of stories told throughout their individual published histories and in other media adaptations.

Superman was the first comic book superhero and his creators established the generic conventions for the costumed hero. Superman is emblematic of an American ideal, of what we hope to see in ourselves. Superman represents the best possible America, not American politics, American government or American military. Superman symbolizes the ideal America, the honorable America, the moral America. The first stories told featuring Superman vary greatly from current interpretations of the character, but those variances make the study and analysis of the character intriguing and useful. From his early days battling street-level crime to his space adventures in the 1950s to his battles with similarly empowered beings throughout the cold war Superman's adventures have evolved and adapted to the times.

Batman quickly followed Superman onto the comic book page, but the character is hardly derivative of what came before, as so many other comic book characters are. Where Superman is a super-powered alien, Batman is merely human. Where Superman is motivated by morality, Batman seeks revenge. Superman approaches the world with unambiguous moral certitude. Batman operates in gray areas, so Batman resonates in America for different reasons than Superman. Superman represents moral authority,

even superiority, while Batman gets the job done against the weightiest odds. Batman is an underdog in a universe of super-powered beings but rises to whatever challenge he faces.

Spider-Man broke with many of the established norms of superhero storytelling, proving that there could be new and innovative ideas that would resonate with an audience in a medium that many thought had peaked in the 1940s. Spider-Man was the first teenage hero to be more than a sidekick. Peter Parker was more flawed, too, than his predecessors. Spider-Man became a hero because of guilt, not because of moral duty. Peter Parker and his heroic alter ego are the everymen to the god-like ideals that populated comic books before. Peter Parker is not glamorous; Spider-Man makes mistakes.

The X-Men are the most recent comic book heroes to embed themselves into the American cultural consciousness, because it took time for the writers to discover what elements worked best in the series. The X-Men function as a group of others in their universe, and they have come to represent the outsiders of the heroes. While initially the membership of the X-Men was white middle-class, the group has since come to embrace minorities of all types. The X-Men have been used as metaphors for prejudice against race, religion, gender, and political views. As the X-Men came to embrace the minority metaphor inherent to the concept of mutant outsiders, the series found popularity.

Comic books are a viable subject for analysis, but in many ways the medium remains marginalized. Still there are many insights which can be gained by exploring why the characters created in comic books have become iconic in American culture. The decades-long nature of these narratives uniquely positions comic books for an

illuminating look at American popular culture and its character-specific evolution. Other critical theories and academic analyses are also well-suited for considerations of the American art form of comic books, though they have largely been unemployed. A Marxist reading of the values and power structures in superhero narratives could provide insights into American ideologies. The only crimes are against property, the heroes do not battle poverty. Clark Kent and peter Parker are employed by reporting on their own heroic exploits, are they truly selfless heroes? Many have noted religious overtones in comic books. Superman has been compared to both Jesus Christ and Moses, and other heroes have similarly filled savior roles, but there has been little professional criticism in this area. The Jungian concept of universal archetypes has been employed to explain the cultural phenomenon which is Mickey Mouse, is it possible that Superman also taps into the collective unconscious? There are many other questions which should be asked about comic books, but the medium thus far has received little attention from the academic community.

Just as Spider-Man and the X-Men have joined the ranks of Superman and Batman in an American mythology, other new comic book creations who strike a resonant chord in America might also join their ranks. But it seems unlikely newcomers to the superhero universe will replace any of these. All have demonstrated an adaptability which allows for continual cultural resonance despite changing attitudes and societal concerns. As new stories are written, new adaptations in film are produced, and new media is explored, Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the X-Men will remain flexibly evolving American icons.

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