

The Superhero Narrative and the Graphic Novel

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For many in contemporary culture, the superhero genre and the comic book industry have become inextricably linked. For example, it seems that, to public perception, a so-called “comic book movie” is synonymous with a superhero movie. It is even possible to overhear people referring to “the comic book genre,” although this is a misnomer. As Douglas Wolk explains, “As cartoonists and their longtime admirers are getting a little tired of explaining, comics are not a genre; they’re a medium” (11). The medium of comic books, a combination of text and images, which Scott McCloud defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9), can be used to tell stories in any genre. In fact, the comic book industry has historically found significant success with other genres. There have been periods in the comic book industry when funny animal stories, romantic soap operas, sci-fi adventures, or horror tales outsold the superhero comic books. Also significant is that the superhero genre has been immensely popular in other mediums. The superhero genre has become a staple on film, television, and in video games.

But despite these distinctions, the connection between superheroes and comic books remains strong. It is easy to understand how the genre and mode of storytelling have become identified with one another. It was in comic books that the superhero genre was fully formed and fleshed out in the late 1930s, and the superhero comic books have been the most successful genre for the industry’s largest publishers in the last several decades.

The superhero genre and comic books came together when Superman appeared on the cover of 1938’s *Action Comics #1*. Larry Tye explains that the “very cover of *Action Comics* No. 1 signaled how groundbreaking—how uplifting—this Superman would be.

There he was, in bold primary colors: blue full-body tights, a yellow chest shield and candy apple cape, booties, and briefs over his tights” (30). Peter Coogan calls Superman the “first character to fully embody the definition of the superhero and to prompt the imitation and repetition necessary for the emergence of a genre” (175). Superman may be the first superhero that codified the elements of the superhero genre into one character and narrative, but Superman didn’t just emerge onto the popular culture scene bursting from his creators’ imaginations. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the writer and artist responsible for Superman, were tapping into various narrative traditions that included all of the elements of the superhero genre. Superman comic books put the pre-existing elements together, establishing the generic conventions consumers now identify with the superhero genre.

Pre-History of the Superhero Genre

The superhero genre has two clear antecedents: classic mythology and American adventure stories. Joseph Campbell explained that many myths follow a specific pattern, a pattern Campbell called the Hero’s Journey. Many superhero adventures, notably origin stories, which often feature calls to adventure and refusals of the call, follow a similar pattern. Additionally, many ancient myths feature fantastical beings, powers beyond mortal men, secret disguises, and death-defying battles. Clearly, the superhero genre has borrowed from these ancient narratives.

John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett identified an American variation of the Heroes’ Journey. In a summary that encompasses the archetypes of the “American Monomyth,” Lawrence and Jewett explain the typical plot found in American heroic adventures:

A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (6).

Significantly, for the early comic book creators who established the genre, there were stories in dime novels, pulp magazines, and radio shows that followed this formula and had elements that would be appropriated into the superhero genre. If we accept that Superman's first appearance in 1938 represents the first full conception of the superhero genre, combining all the elements that would come to be identified as part of the genre, there are still dozens, if not hundreds, of earlier stories featuring do-gooders, mystery men, and adventurers, who come close to fitting into the superhero genre. Coogan identifies four key elements of the superhero genre: Mission, Powers, Identity, and Costume (30–33). All of these are found in Superman's first appearance, but all of these had been seen before.

For example, protagonists with missions to aid the helpless, protect the downtrodden, or provide a service no one else can are found throughout the history of American popular culture (and are certainly not exclusive to American popular culture). Dime novels often featured heroic frontiersmen or cowboys, brave government agents, or detectives who fought to uphold the values of society, even if they themselves did not quite fit in with society's structure. As the dime novels died out, this type of character found a new home in pulp magazines, and subsequently, new versions of this character appeared in newspaper comic strips and early comic books. In non-print media, this character was also popular in feature-length movies, on the radio, and episodic movie serials before naturally transferring into every subsequent form of entertainment media. The character with a noble heroic mission is far from unique to comic book superheroes.

An important distinction for the superhero genre is that the characters often carry out their missions with the aid of superpowers of some sort. These could be powers that are bestowed through science, as with Spider-Man; mystic arts, as with Dr. Strange; technology, as with Iron Man; alien abilities, as with Superman; or a birthright that sets a character apart from normal humans, as with Wonder Woman or the X-Men.

There were several characters that appeared in popular narratives before 1938 and had more-than-human abilities. The comic strip

character Hugo Hercules first appeared in 1903 and had super strength. Hugo Danner, the protagonist of Phillip Wylie's 1930 sci-fi novel *Gladiator*, had powers very similar to those possessed by Superman in his earliest stories. The Shadow, a character that began as a narrator of radio dramas in 1930, was eventually spun off into a pulp magazine and had pseudo-psychic powers that aided him in his battles with villains. There were many other examples that predate Superman of comic strip adventurers, pulp heroes, and mystery men with powers beyond those of mortal men.

Another key element of the superhero genre Coogan identified is identity, although this could be tweaked to read dual-identity. There are many stories in popular culture that predate Superman and feature characters with secret identities who act in a manner to dissuade suspicion that they are really a costumed adventurer. Baroness Emmuska Orczy wrote *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, first published in 1905, which features Sir Percy Blakeney pretending to be an upper-class fop, when, in reality, he is a competent and brilliant man who saves French aristocrats from the Reign of Terror. However, the Scarlet Pimpernel doesn't have the identifiable costume of a Superman or Batman.

Costume is the fourth element of the genre that Coogan identified. There were several characters that wore costumes before Superman's first appearance. In 1919, the pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly* published the first of Johnston McCulley's stories that would feature the black-masked Zorro. Don Diego Vega (later his surname would be changed to de la Vega), who, like Blakeney, pretends to be an upper class dandy, wears the costume of Zorro to protect the helpless citizens from corrupt government officials. The Phantom first appeared in newspaper comic strips in 1936, and he wore a mask and brightly colored costume, while operating out of a secret base called Skull Cave.

In retrospect, many of the proto-heroes are clear predecessors to Superman. But for a genre to exist there needs to be clearly established conventions. Superman codified these conventions to the degree that there were, after his first appearance, many imitators and even parodies of the superhero genre. The earlier characters had

not put all of the elements together in such a way that a new genre was introduced into the popular culture of America.

The Birth of the Superhero Genre

The superhero genre became one of the most identifiable genres associated with comic books as the industry moved away from simply reprinting newspaper comic strips and began publishing original material. In 1933, a publisher named Maxwell Gaines produced what many consider to be the first American comic book, entitled *Funnies on Parade*. Though there had been previous publications that used images and text to tell a story, *Funnies on Parade* had many of the familiar aspects of the modern American comic book, including its standard magazine size, sequential art, and color printing. However, it lacked original content and was, instead, a reprint of newspaper comic strips. Because of its success, other publishers soon began to reprint newspaper comic strips in comic book format. The first original content in the new comic books came in 1935 with *New Fun: The Big Comics Magazine* (Rhoades 10–12).

In 1938, the Superman comic strip, which had been shopped to newspaper comic strip syndicates, was picked up and the character featured on the cover of National Periodicals' *Action Comics #1*. National Periodicals would later change its name to DC Comics. *Action Comics*, at the time, was planned as an anthology, which contained several different stories and planned to rotate any recurring characters in and out of issues. Superman proved so successful that he was soon the primary feature in the series and was eventually spun off into his own eponymous title. Like most entertainment industries, success bred imitation in the comic books. Soon, other publishers were producing their own costumed, code-named heroes with superpowers. Some, such as a character called Wonder Man, were so derivative of Superman that *National Periodicals* sued (van Lente and Dunlavey 34). This early period has become known as the Golden Age of comic books.

National imitated its own success with Superman by asking Bob Kane to create another superhero to be featured in *Detective Comics*, another anthology title the company published. Bob Kane is legally

credited as the creator of Batman, but Bill Finger played a significant role in defining the look and other attributes of the character. With the dual success of Superman and Batman indicating an audience appetite for superhero adventures, the floodgates opened.

Some of the subsequent characters, such as Wonder Woman and Captain America had notably patriotic and propagandistic origin stories. The superhero genre as a whole became associated with the war effort and the concept of American exceptionalism. With the end of World War II, interest in the superhero genre waned, although comic books as a whole continued to sell well. Audience interest and publisher focus simply shifted to other genres. These included the funny animal comics, such as Walt Disney's *Scrooge McDuck*; horror comics, such as EC Comics' *Tales from the Crypt*; crime comics, such as EC Comics' *Crime Suspense Stories*; sci-fi comics, such as DC Comics' Adam Strange, who appeared in *Showcase*; and Westerns, such as Atlas Comics' *Two-Gun Kid*. While Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman comic books continued to be published throughout the 1950s, almost all other superhero comic books disappeared entirely.

The comic book industry came under close scrutiny in the late 1940s and 1950s from public officials. Accusations linking the reading of comic books with juvenile delinquency became prominent enough that the U.S. government held hearings on the matter. Bradford W. Wright argues that “the debate over comic books was really about cultural power in postwar America,” and as Cold War fears rose, “influence over young people became hotly contested terrain” (87). Perhaps the loudest voice raising these claims belonged to Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychologist who first presented his research in a paper called “Horror in the Nursery” and later published a book entitled *Seduction of the Innocent*, which purported to prove that reading comic books was directly associated with criminality, homosexuality, and other perceived social ills of the time (Nyberg 32, 50). The government hearings resulted in thinly veiled threats that, if the publishers did not control the content of its comic books, the government may step in to regulate the industry.

The publishers collectively formed The Comics Code Authority, a self-censoring board that would examine every comic book published and literally bestow a stamp of approval on comics that met their standards. Comics without the Authority's seal of approval would not be sold by most comic book vendors in the United States. The Comics Code Authority produced a strict code that all comic books would have to adhere to in order to be approved, and these guidelines essentially eliminated several of the most popular comic books from distribution. The Comics Code ensured that all comic books published would adhere to a strict moral code and avoid what were perceived as potentially corruptive influences in their narratives (Duncan and Smith 39–40).

The Maturation of the Superhero Genre

In an era when publication guidelines mandated that good always triumph over evil and that strict moral codes be enforced within the narratives, the superhero genre seemed a natural choice to replace the horror and crime comic books that had largely been censored out of existence. DC Comics was still publishing Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman comic books, but decided to reintroduce a character from the Golden Age, the Flash. They gave the character a new origin, a new secret identity, and a new costume, and launched what many identify as the Silver Age of comic books with 1956's *Showcase #4*. Sales were good enough that DC continued to reintroduce Golden Age characters, and in 1960, the company reintroduced a team comic book, *The Justice League*. This new iteration of the old Justice Society was so successful that other publishing companies took notice.

The publisher of Atlas Comics, which would be renamed Marvel Comics, asked his editor to produce superhero comic books. Stanley Lieber, who published comic books under the pseudonym Stan Lee, would write and collaborate with an extremely talented and prolific artist named Jack Kirby to produce *Fantastic Four #1*. Following the success of this new comic book series, Lee would collaborate with Kirby and other artists to transform Atlas Comics into Marvel Comics, home to one of the two most popular and

expansive superhero narrative universes. Among the most popular creations from this period was Lee and Steve Ditko's Spider-Man, an instant and enduring success for Marvel. Some other series introduced concepts that did not succeed at the time, but in time matured into iconic characters. Lee and Kirby's *Incredible Hulk*, for example, was canceled after only six issues, but the character has become a staple of Marvel Comics and has been adapted for film and television. Similarly, the X-Men was canceled after sixty-six issues, but after being re-launched in the 1970s, the series would become one of the most successful franchises in comic book history.

Marvel's Silver Age superhero comic books introduced new elements that were missing from earlier examples of the genre. The characters were more flawed, the stories more complex, and the fans more invested. Whereas impediments had often been external in the Golden Age, such as Superman's weakness to Kryptonite, Marvel's Silver Age heroes were often their own worst enemies because their flaws were internal. Spider-Man's "Kryptonite" is not a glowing rock, rather it is his own guilt, self-doubt, and self-loathing. The Justice League came together to fight as a team, but the Fantastic Four were a bickering family that was thrust into the roles of superheroes. While Bruce Wayne chose to become Batman to fight criminals, Bruce Banner feared becoming the Hulk and facing the U.S. military.

Stan Lee had many roles at Marvel. He was an editor, a creator, a writer, but also an extremely successful salesman. Wright explains that Lee "cultivated an image of Marvel as a maverick within the comic book field, much like the outsider heroes themselves" (217). Lee's role in nurturing the fan culture that has become an important element of the comic book industry should not be underestimated. Lee created a sense of camaraderie between creators and fans through his narration boxes, his editorial boxes, his columns, and in the letter pages. Even when the creators themselves weren't getting along with each other, Lee created the sense that Marvel's fans and creators were part of one big, happy family.

The Deconstruction of the Superhero Genre

In the 1980s another shift occurred for superhero comic books. The Golden Age saw the introduction of iconic, perfect heroes. The Silver Age saw the introduction of flawed, imperfect heroes. In the 1980s dark anti-heroes were introduced or surged in popularity. Another trend was stories that deconstructed the genre. Now that the elements of the genre had been firmly established, and stories had spent decades telling stories while mostly adhering to those conventions, writers began to deconstruct the genre. Stories such as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* were firmly entrenched within the superhero genre, but extrapolated inherent flaws and limitations within the genre while telling their stories.

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons, carried the end result of superheroes enforcing their values on society to its terrifying conclusion. *The Dark Knight Returns*, written and drawn by Frank Miller, explored the end of the career of a superhero after a society has become dependent on protectors with superpowers. While these are excellent stories with complex themes, one thing that has been frequently noted is that they represent comic books that are distinctly not for children. As Wolk says, “The initial praise outside the comics world for *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* didn’t mention that they were well-wrought as much as they were ‘grown up’ (102). The target comic book audience was no longer implicitly children. Comic books could be published carrying the warning on the cover that the content was intended for “mature readers.”

Simultaneous with these darker stories from DC Comics, Marvel was enjoying success with darker anti-heroes, including Wolverine and the Punisher. Wolverine had been created in the mid-1970s, but experienced a surge in popularity in the 1980s. He headlined his own series and guest-starred in numerous mini-series, one-shots, and other characters’ series. Whereas Spider-Man webbed villains to incapacitate them, Wolverine had sets of retractable claws that emerged from the backs of his hands. This undeniably more violent method of dealing with enemies was a marked departure from the early Silver Age of comics, where violence was often implied and

rarely gratuitous. The Punisher was even more violent, as he chose to kill rather than wound or incapacitate most of his enemies.

Other stories from this period, such as DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths* are indicative of a new style of superhero comic books coming from mainstream publishers. These stories represent a loss of the assumed innocence that seemed to permeate Silver Age superhero comic books. In keeping with the age names from earlier eras, some have proposed that comics after the mid-1980s be called the Iron Age. Although this name has not been used as widely as Golden Age and Silver Age, most agree there was a change in superhero comic books in this era.

Considering the Superhero Genre

The superhero has several clear generic elements already discussed, including the protagonist's mission, identity, and powers. But there are many other elements of the genre worthy of consideration and in-depth analysis, including the concept of continuity and some of the problematic race and gender issues that are embedded within the tradition of superhero comic books.

The narrative universes of the most popular mainstream superhero stories, notably DC Comics and Marvel Comics, include a complex continuity. This continuity is the consistent ongoing storyline of the entire line of superhero comic books published by the companies. This means that the stories found in an X-Men comic book are supposedly happening in the same world and may have an impact in the narratives found in other Marvel comic book titles. Ostensibly, this continuity encompasses the entirety of the published history of Marvel and DC Comics. DC Comics has rebooted their entire continuity more than once, notably with a storyline called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in the 1980s, and recently following a story called *Flashpoint*, DC launched what was termed the "New 52," a new continuity that restarted their superhero universe. However, both of these reboots came out of stories that began in the previous continuity and ended with the new continuity. Thus, there remains some connective narrative tissue between the pre- and post-crisis DC Universe and the pre- and post-New 52 DC Universe.

This continuity is simultaneously a positive and a negative for both creators and consumers. On the one hand, it invites consumers to read all the comic books published by the company, potentially creating a rewarding depth to the reading experience and adding to the sales for the company. However, with several decades of continuity built up, there are undoubtedly errors and contradictions, which plague stories. Also, the faithfulness a publisher has felt to continuity has varied over the years. For example, in the 1980s, when Chris Claremont wrote a mini-series detailing Wolverine's adventures in Japan, he wrote Wolverine out of the X-Men comic books so that he wouldn't seem to be appearing in two places at once. But in the 2000s, with Wolverine having become one of the most popular characters in the industry, Wolverine appeared in multiple team books as well as several individual titles and mini-series that were all ostensibly occurring at the same time. With a tight continuity, it would be impossible to explain his appearances in so many comic books within the same month, but with Marvel's looser continuity in the 2000s, readers were expected to simply go along with it.

Another aspect of superhero storytelling is the repetition. Superhero comic books belong to two narrative traditions. As Umberto Eco argued, superheroes exist as an unchanging archetype that means the characters "must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable" (149). Simultaneously, comic books are telling a grand continuing narrative requiring that characters "be subjected to a development which is typical [...] of novelistic characters" (149). As a result of serving the two narrative masters of unchanging archetype and novelistic advancement, the illusion of change must be provided with very little change actually occurring. Thus, Superman can be killed for a storyline, but he will eventually return and resume his role as Clark Kent, reporter for the *Daily Planet*, love interest to Lois Lane, and protector of humanity. Even seemingly long-term changes may eventually be undone to return the character to an earlier state. Peter Parker was married to Mary Jane Watson for

twenty years when, due to an editorial mandate, the marriage was undone to return Peter Parker to a more iconic single status.

Nat Gertler identified four of the most commonly repeated storylines in superhero comic books. These include 1) stories of a hero striving to stop badness—a villain has a plot to take over the world and a hero stops him, 2) stories exploring why heroes strive to stop badness—more introspection from the heroes as they stop the villains, 3) stories of the results or repercussions of heroes stopping badness—deconstructions of the traditional superhero story, and 4) the never-ending cycle of villains attacking the heroes—harming the hero has become the villain’s focus rather than robbing a bank or world domination (Duncan and Smith 228–9). Versions of these stories can be found repeated across the decades of DC and Marvel’s publications, often repeated in the same title in consecutive stories.

Unfortunately, another aspect that is repeated often is a stereotypic identity of the heroic protagonist. With the genre having been codified in the late 1930s, the standard look and appearance of superheroes was established in a time where many of the protagonists in popular culture fit a particular type. While there were some early female superheroes, most prominently Wonder Woman, the vast majority of superheroes in the earliest superhero comic books were male. The first superhero appeared in 1938, but the first black superhero to appear in mainstream superhero comic books was Marvel’s Black Panther in the 1960s. And while romance was a key part of early DC and Marvel superhero comic books, it was exclusively heterosexual romance. The first homosexual character in mainstream comic books was Northstar, a character created in 1979, but not officially outed until 1992. The portrayal of female characters, minority characters, and homosexual characters has improved through time in terms of representation and non-stereotypical characterizations, but the default superhero remains a white, heterosexual male.

Because of the preponderance of heterosexual male protagonists in superhero comic books, female characters have all too often been relegated to supporting cast roles, often as love interests. Even when a female is a member of a team, she has often been cast into a more

subservient or domesticated role than her male counterparts. For example, Wonder Woman was the secretary of the original Justice Society of America and Marvel Girl was shown acting as a cook and nurse for the male members of the X-Men in the 1960s.

Minority characters that appeared in the earlier eras of comic books were much more likely to be villains than heroes. Even in X-Men comic books of the 1960s, a series which has a reputation for a progressive thematic core, the only prominent minority characters were a group of villains, while the team itself was entirely white until the mid-1970s.

There are certainly positive aspects of the superhero genre. It can be both inspirational and aspirational. It can demonstrate moral codes that benefit society. It can entertain and provide escape. But to ignore some of the problematic aspects of the genre would prevent necessary correctives from taking place. The superhero genre has lasted for 75 years. It doesn't seem to be going away in the foreseeable future, but it will inevitably change and alter, along with the society that consumes these stories. Hopefully, the positive aspects of the genre will be maximized and the problematic history of stereotyped minorities and objectified females will be minimized.

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