



# ENTER the SUPERHEROES

AMERICAN VALUES, CULTURE, AND THE  
CANON OF SUPERHERO LITERATURE

ALEX S. ROMAGNOLI • GIAN S. PAGNUCCI

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American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero  
Literature

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Alex: To my Mother and Father, superheroes in their own right, and to Colin, who knew the best superhero stories

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Gian: For Cormac and Loughlin and every other kid who ever dreamed of being a superhero, and for Edel, who is the most super person I've ever known

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# Introduction

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A doomed planet explodes, and its last surviving child is rocketed to Earth. The son of a wealthy family watches his parents murdered before his eyes in a dark alleyway. A noble princess is sent from her isolated homeland to a world of alien values. An unpopular high school student with glasses is bitten by a radioactive spider. A scrawny young man volunteers for a super soldier program to help his country fight a great war. Superhero stories have entertained, enthralled, and inspired children and adults alike for over seventy years. These stories are elemental, simple, inspirational, and powerful. Because they tell of ultimate strength, deep despair, unfathomable longing, and immeasurable bravery, superhero stories have been an enduring form of entertainment reflecting American ideals and celebrating the inherent nobility of man.

Though Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, and Captain America have never ceased their battles for justice, the place of superhero stories remains relegated to the proverbial slums of literacy, literature, and culture in general. Comic books are looked down upon, banned from schools, ignored by academics, and critiqued as juvenile. As Aaron Taylor notes, “comics remain largely ghettoized in North America after almost a century—popularly regarded as infantile subliterature—their ability to impress upon cultural norms remain quite limited.”<sup>[1]</sup> There was even a time when grandmothers would use comics as liners for kitty litter boxes or as last-minute wrapping paper. Time has brought some change, since today comics are valued as collectibles not gift-wrap. However, few graphic novels are ever taught in schools, and the superhero genre is almost nowhere to be found.

The goal of this book is to establish the importance of the superhero, both as a cultural artifact and as a text to be studied. In this volume we will explore why superhero stories have value, what we could learn from studying superhero comic and how superheroes shape American culture and values.

Chapter 1 asserts that the concept of the superhero is socioculturally, sociohistorically, and academically significant to our culture. The lessons learned from these characters and stories have become timeless, and the characters themselves have become entrenched in the collective consciousness. From comic books, to television shows, to major motion pictures, superheroes have undoubtedly become culturally significant.

Despite the importance of superheroes to the larger culture, however, academic contexts have yet to honor and privilege superhero stories as significant pieces of literature. In chapter 2, the question of why the academy has made some moves to embrace a limited set of graphic novels while basically shunning superhero literature is examined. We discuss the significance of *Maus* as the most acclaimed graphic novel of all time while also unpacking the ramifications of that recognition and its significance. We then look at other comics and graphic novels traditionally taught in the academy including *Persepolis*, *Palestine*, and others. We

also discuss Scott McCloud's work and the absence of superheroes in that work. We conclude by examining why the academy purposefully ignores the superhero.

This volume looks to explore the impact of the superhero genre beyond academic contexts as well. In chapter 3, we broaden the focus of the book from academic usage to popular culture implications. This chapter examines debates over continuity and changes to major superhero characters. We look at the new Ultimate Spider-Man, DC's New 52, and major deaths. The focus in chapter 3 is on how fans react to comic creators' artistic directions. For instance, the death of the second Robin (Jason Todd) is examined, along with how fans literally voted on whether or not the character would live. This chapter concludes with an examination of comics as a publicly engaged medium.

Picking up on the theme of the public's influence, chapter 4 looks at how comic publishers interact with their audiences, specifically through the lens of companies' relaunched. We link the idea of the relaunch/reboot to the larger issue of comic books and superhero stories as evolving mythologies. Specific consideration in this chapter is given to major relaunched in superhero literature including DC's "Crisis" events and Marvel's "Ultimate" series.

Chapter 5 looks at the aesthetics of the superhero and explores how the visuals of the superhero genre inform its themes. We explore the large scope of the cultural significance of superheroes as iconographic figures. Additionally, we look at the enduring nature of these characters and why certain heroes have become so popular and why that popularity persists. This includes discussing the phenomenal success of superhero films in the last ten years as well as examining the lasting imagery of the superhero including capes, masks, muscles, and the symbols emblazoned on superheroes' chests.

Returning again to academic contexts, chapter 6 connects the writing of superhero comics to composition theory. The Stan Lee method of writing is discussed in this chapter, and its implications for the teaching of writing. What teachers can learn about the composition process from the writing of comics is also explored. Finally, we discuss the nature of superhero origin stories and how the writing of these origin stories helps make superhero narratives a unique literary genre.

Children are a major audience to which superhero literature caters. Therefore, chapter 7 explores how children are affected by superhero literature and what role comic books play in defining children's value systems. This chapter looks at the ongoing fascination that superheroes have for children and also discusses the perceived notion of comics as a strictly child-oriented medium. The chapter then discusses the significance of comics creators turning their focus away from children and toward adults as well as more recent efforts by publishers to reconnect with child audiences.

Chapter 8 examines issues of diversity in superhero literature. Because these issues are so complex and far-reaching, this chapter explores questions of race and gender in comics through two case studies: the racially mixed Miles Morales becoming Spider-Man in Marvel's "Ultimate" series and Starfire and Catwoman's depictions in DC's New 52 relaunch in 2011.



The longevity of the superhero is deconstructed in chapter 9 through an examination of superhero literature's "death" stories. Superheroes never truly die and that trope in superhero literature reflects our own desires to live long and our fears of dying. Since we cannot live forever, our superheroes do that for us. Additionally, the few lasting deaths in superhero literature are discussed to explain why certain characters must remain deceased in order to maintain the power of superhero mythology.

Chapter 10 looks at how technology has impacted superhero literature. The development of technology in superhero literature has been both reflective and prophetic of culture. From Iron Man to Batman, technology has influenced the narratives of superheroes for their entire existences. This chapter addresses how technology in superhero literature has affected our culture and how real technology has affected superhero storytelling.

Chapter 11 provides an argument for the development of a Canon of Superhero Literature. By referencing the literary work of Harold Bloom and the comic studies work of Peter Coogan, this chapter is the culmination of the book's argument about the value of superhero literature. This chapter claims that the best way to promote academic acceptance of superhero literature is to define a canon of the genre's most important and historically significant stories. The chapter then outlines how such a canon can best be constructed.

Enter the Superheroes concludes by presenting an extensive list of superhero texts meant to constitute a Canon of Superhero Literature. We list the most seminal superhero texts that have helped create and develop the mythology of superheroes and have fostered their growth into a cultural phenomenon. The list discusses historically important works as well as the greatest superhero stories ever told.

Superhero stories have a seventy-year tradition. They represent an American mythology and significant cultural iconography ripe for exploration today. Within superhero stories can be found all our hopes, ideals, fears, dreams, and longings. It is time to give these stories their due. The time of the superhero has come.

## NOTE

1. Aaron Taylor, "He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): 346.

# Chapter 1

## The Significance of the Superhero Examined

Superhero stories and characters have withstood the test of time, attempted censorship, and the constant evolution of entertainment forms. Their longevity can be attributed to their universality and relatability. As much as these characters may be all powerful, they're simultaneously representative of the common man and all that he stands for in a world that can be inherently corrupt and dangerous. The fact that superheroes are fictitious does little to diminish their significance since nearly all superheroes' origins are grounded in humble beginnings with normal people doing great and noble feats with the powers they've gained. People know, adore, and glorify these stories. As Grant Morrison says, "We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can analyze them out of existence, kill them, ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish we could be."<sup>[1]</sup> The consistent presence of superheroes is their greatest strength. In the remainder of this chapter we'll explore the cultural importance of the superhero including: Historical Significance, American Perceptions of Good and Evil, Power and Its Appeal, and Superheroes and Mythology.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The history of comic books has been well documented over the years, with numerous historians and authors such as Peter Coogan,<sup>[2]</sup> Bradford Wright,<sup>[3]</sup> Gerard Jones,<sup>[4]</sup> and David Hajdu<sup>[5]</sup> making a genuine case for their historical precedent. Nevertheless, like all superhero stories, the origin of comics needs to be reviewed, if only in a much abbreviated way.

It's 1938 and the Great Depression has taken its toll on America. Newspapers, magazines, and radio shows are the dominant forms of entertainment for the masses that yearn for distraction from economic turmoil and the rumblings of war in Europe. The children of this era take their allowances (or what little cash they can spare) to corner soda shops and newsstands to buy penny candy, small snacks, or cheap publications depicting daring characters saving damsels in distress.

Before comic books there was what is now referred to as pulp fiction. These publications were not known for their literary brilliance or for their deep social commentary. Instead, these magazine-length novels were as lurid as the publishers were allowed to make them (and sometimes more so). As Gerard Jones put it in his book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Rise of the Comic Book*, "The plots were crowded with thugs and sinister Orientals and underdressed molls."<sup>[6]</sup> Pulp novels were aimed directly at male readers, with boys naturally being intrigued by them. Needless to say, the more salacious the content, the more the boys of this generation yearned for them. Characters such as Doc Savage, The Shadow, John Carter, and the Phantom punished evil-doers with their fists and asked questions later. If the woman the hero was saving had her already scandalous apparel shredded to pieces in the process of her rescue, this was all th

better, at least from a sales perspective. These pulp novels were everything a boy of the time (or perhaps any time for that matter) could want.

However, while these pulp novels had quality covers created by some visibly talented artists, their content was prose with very few (if any) pictures. To add imagery to the equation, this same generation of boys who craved powerful men saving beautiful women from the clutches of sinister villains was introduced to the first superhero in June 1938.

Action Comics #1<sup>[7]</sup> featured a muscular man dressed in a blue jumpsuit with billowing red cape smashing a car into a building. To boot, men are running away from this mysterious man screaming for their lives. The title of this new magazine blazed across the top of the cover: bright red letters against a white background promising, above all else, "Action." Boys in 1938 were powerless to resist it, and it only cost a dime.

Inside, readers were introduced to Clark Kent, a mild-mannered newspaper reporter for the Daily Star (it wasn't the Daily Planet yet) who moonlighted as the brightly colored vigilante Superman. In this same landmark issue readers were introduced to Lois Lane, Clark Kent's fellow reporter at the Daily Star. As would be expected, Superman saves Lois Lane from a group of thugs hell-bent on killing her. Lois Lane's first reaction to this mysterious man is that of fear, with Superman reassuring the ace reporter whose dress strap has conveniently fallen off her shoulder, "You needn't be afraid of me. I won't harm you."<sup>[8]</sup> The issue ends with Superman dangling a gangster from a telephone wire with the evil-doer crying for his life. This was completely new to readers of the time and introduced what would become the archetype for the American superhero.

Why was this character successful though? What was the appeal? Looking at the first story of Superman from a modern context yields little reaction because his exploits have become, what some might consider, cliché. Nevertheless, those clichés became the basis for the modern superhero.<sup>[9]</sup> Superman was successful because he represented what every American male wanted to be. He was handsome, immeasurably strong, wanted by women, and inherently noble. His arrival from a distant world made him the ultimate immigrant extending his appeal to include not only boys, but boys who may have come to America from another land. Superman also wasn't affected by the struggles caused by the Great Depression or worried about the rising tensions in Europe. For all intents and purposes, Superman was just that: super.

The appearance of this hero spawned the creation of a multitude of other heroes as well. DC (then called National Periodicals), thrilled with the commercial success of Superman, started releasing more comic books featuring new superheroes: Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, the Sandman, Doctor Fate, and a multitude of other characters. In response to the success that DC was experiencing, other publishers began creating their own versions, including Timely Comics' Captain America and Fawcett Comics' Captain Marvel. Amazingly, all of these characters experienced commercial success, if only for a limited time.<sup>[10]</sup>

And these characters, whose roots can be traced to ancient literature and

classical models of heroic narratives,<sup>[11]</sup> became the image of the modern hero. Propelled by the fantastical suits, bright colors, and comic-style storytelling were tales that embraced the elemental conflicts of society, chief among them, the battle between good and evil.

## PERCEPTIONS OF GOOD AND EVIL

Why were these comic stories successful, though? Much of their success can be attributed to the colorful nature of the medium in which they were featured: the comic book. It has to be kept in mind that color printing was still relatively new at this time, and anything other than the traditional black and white newspaper print was something to behold. The concept of superheroes was also a novel idea. There had been the pulp heroes of old who fought for the innocent, but theirs was a rougher, tougher, and more controversial style of justice. The same boys who had grown up reading the pulps behind their mothers' backs were the boys who now flocked to the Technicolor of the comic book world with its amazing heroes dressed in bright colors and personifying the most admirable qualities of nobility.

When superhero comics hit the newsstands in the late 1930s, the country had never seen anything like it. While a sequential style of storytelling that seamlessly combined image and text was nothing new, the introduction of brightly clad heroes to this medium using their powers for good was exciting and different. This effect still hasn't worn off on people after seventy years with television shows, movies, children's toys, lunchboxes, and countless other culturally significant aspects of life embracing the unique qualities that superheroes exude.

There is a deeper value to why superhero stories work, though. While the flashiness and the aesthetics of the superheroes are certainly a contributing factor to their appeal, their success can also be attributed to their blatant personifications of society's morals. Specifically, superhero stories embody American culture's dichotomy of good and evil.

Superheroes represent a set of timeless values; their motivation to do good, their passion for justice, and their opposition to evil are ageless, and people have admired the pursuit of such values for nearly all of existence. Pick any superhero. No matter which one is chosen, a superhero is likely to have these characteristics:

1. His/her origins are, in some way, informed by a tragedy.
2. He/she is obsessed with achieving his/her goals.
3. With few exceptions, he/she is a solitary figure.
4. His/her goal is unattainable.
5. He/she has a weakness.

These characteristics humanize heroes who possess god-like abilities. Ultimately, the limitations make them relatable to readers. The perseverance these characters exhibit in pursuing good makes them effective storytelling vessels. As such, superhero narratives can transcend the colorful and admittedly fantastic elements of their stories; this enables them to become vehicles for examining and

deconstructing humanity's efforts to balance good and evil.

The line between good and evil is particularly clear in superhero comics. In traditional superhero stories, the heroes are incorruptibly noble and the villains are blindingly evil; Batman is always good, and the Joker is always evil. Granted, more recent comic literature has tested these predetermined notions of good and evil in comic books through character deconstructions. In fact, the stories where a hero's nobility is tested are some of the most powerful and significant stories in comic book history, and these stories will be visited later in this book. For most audiences though, superhero stories draw their line between good and evil very distinctly.

In creating such a clear and present distinction between good and evil, superhero stories reflect the dominant culture's prevailing perceptions of what makes a hero noble. Superheroes, being a uniquely American concept, then reflect what American culture considers the most estimable qualities in a person. There is little room for argument in superheroes' motives and actions because they're so noble. Think of it this way: If Spider-Man saves a child from a burning building, could that possibly be interpreted as a morally ambiguous action? Probably not. It seems logical to assume that most people would consider that feat both commendable and selfless. If the Joker robs a bank simply because he wants money, is that interpreted as morally reprehensible? One would hope so. The point here is that with few exceptions, the heroes and villains in superhero comics represent what mainstream American culture defines as good and evil. The clear-cut nature of this dichotomy is pretty rare in literature.

Take a classic literary example that all American high school students have had to address in survey classes. In John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*,<sup>[12]</sup> the character George kills his mentally impaired friend Lenny by shooting him in the back of the head in order to save Lenny from an inevitable, and likely horrid, fate at the hands of angry farmhands. Earlier in the story, Lenny had accidentally killed his employer's wife, and the angry farmhands are looking for Lenny to exact a brutal revenge and kill him. George's actions can be interpreted in many ways, but most literature classes would look at George's killing of Lenny in terms of euthanasia: was George correct in thinking he had the right to kill Lenny in order to save him from a more miserable and likely painful ordeal? Here is where moral ambiguity comes into play. Depending on the person reading the book, the reaction to George's mercy killing reflects that individual's culture, beliefs, and experiences. Any reaction and subsequent judgment is completely subjective, and either argument (for or against the mercy killing) can be reasonably argued and articulated using evidence from the book, personal life experiences, and studies on mercy killings. There is no clear consensus as to what is right, though.

With superhero stories, there is usually a general consensus as to what is right and what is wrong. Again, there are superhero stories that purposefully blur this line, but the heroes are generally perceived to be correct in their courses of action. This allows for a more concrete discussion of what a culture deems to be "good" and "evil." While *Of Mice and Men* is a powerful and thought-provoking story, the ending calls into question the moral fabric of a man. The discussion is no longer about culture when George kills Lenny; the conversation remains singularly



focused on a specific character at a specific time in a specific context. Generalizing George's actions in order to analyze his nobility at a sociocultural level becomes challenging because of the situation's inherent subjectivity. In contrast, superheroes tend to embody American culture's ideals. In essence, when the actions of superheroes are discussed and analyzed, these actions can be used to examine the values of an entire culture.

For traditional superhero stories, superheroes are the carriers of what society views as righteous and just. As Richard Reynolds puts it in his book *Superheroes: Modern Mythology*, "The superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to re-invent it."<sup>[13]</sup> Since this preservation of society exists in superhero stories, they become valuable artifacts to study traditional/cultural views of good and evil. While characters have naturally changed over their fictional existences, their moral compasses remain fixed on the true north of morality with one important exception.

Batman, whose original incarnation as the dark and vengeful crusader has morphed over the years since his first appearance in 1939, exemplifies the similar yet dynamic nature of a moral compass. Batman's first appearance in *Detective Comics #27*<sup>[14]</sup> featured Batman (then called "The Bat-Man") solving and then foiling a murder plot. The story, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," shows Batman as a ruthless and terrifying vigilante with no relationship with or formal sanctioning from law enforcement. Additionally, Batman is directly responsible for the death of the villain at the end of the story as the villain is intentionally punched into a vat of acid with Batman stating, "A fitting ending for his kind."<sup>[15]</sup> Supporting this extreme vigilantism is Batman's point-blank shooting of two people at the conclusion of *Detective Comics #32*.<sup>[16]</sup> Ask any reader or avid fan of Batman and they're likely to tell you that Batman doesn't kill as part of his moral code. Yet, the Batman of 1939 kills criminals with alarming regularity, and that ruthlessness may have indirectly led to Robin's creation only a few months later in 1940.<sup>[17]</sup> Despite Batman's ruthlessness as a killer and crossing most people's moral threshold and tolerance of street justice, he does still act to a certain extent in the best interest of the society in which he lives.

Batman's earliest actions, in *Detective Comics #27-38*,<sup>[18]</sup> can be viewed as morally ambiguous because of his callousness and apparent disregard for human life. However, his moral code was soon changed to match that of the comic's predominantly adolescent audience when an editorial decision was made by DC to ban superheroes from killing villains. This also fit well with DC's decision to add the adolescent character of Robin the Boy Wonder to the comic. Whitney Ellsworth, the editor of the Batman comic books during its first issues, "declared that Batman should never intentionally kill again, and he didn't."<sup>[19]</sup> In this way, culture influenced the editorial and subsequent creative decisions about these superheroes. This discursive relationship between fans and creators is a major component of the superhero genre, and it is discussed in detail in chapter 3 of this book. The roots of that dialogue began here though, in the late 1930s. Again there exists a link between American culture's view of good and evil and how



superheroes view good and evil. The character Batman, because he openly reflected the value system of his culture (America), was made to evolve to better represent the morality of that culture.

Superheroes then have undeniable anthropological and sociological significance both as artifacts and as examples of evolving embodiments of justice. But while their morality is purposefully aligned with society's, the implication of that morality is proportional to the power superheroes possess.

## POWER AND ITS APPEAL

All superheroes definitely have one characteristic in common: they're powerful. Yes, exceptions can be cited for characters such as Batman who is essentially an extraordinarily fit and smart human, but he's still a billionaire with the power to fund his vigilantism. Basically, though, all superheroes are powerful, and that power is usually of a physical nature. Superman's original radio introduction even celebrated him as being "faster than a speeding bullet" and "more powerful than locomotive." These things are impossible for humans to accomplish; no man can run faster than a bullet. But therein lies the value: the superhero enables the reader to examine the nature of power.

What if a man could run faster than a bullet? What if a man could be stronger than a train engine? What if a man could fly through the sky? If there was a man who could really do all of these amazing feats, the societal implications would be astounding. People would need to rethink the limitations of the human body. Science would need to reexamine physics and where Newton and Einstein might have been wrong. The collective psyche of humanity would struggle with the inherent and simultaneous majesty and danger of this extraordinary man. As Grant Morrison said of legendary comic writer Alan Moore's stories addressing this very hypothetical notion, "Moore argued that the arrival of a genuine superhuman being in our midst would quickly and radically alter society forever."<sup>[20]</sup> Superhero stories provide an outlet for these types of sociocultural and hypothetical scenarios. In examining these hypothetical scenarios, the human condition is put through tests of nobility. For superhero comics the nobility of the character is again usually quite clear-cut. The heroes in the stories are the characters who embrace their new powers while having an awareness of those powers and the inherent dangers of their misuse. Villains are the characters who abuse their power for selfish reasons.

This exercise can even be done on a sociohistorical level. What if the United States really made a super soldier serum during World War II? What if this new super soldier turned the tide of the war for the Allies? What if this man was then frozen in ice and reawakened decades later? For Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, these questions are possible; it's a kind of historical fiction and a study of the human condition at its finest. The question this story then evokes is what would you do if you had Captain America's powers?

The truth is no one knows what he/she would do with new powers if they were somehow gained. What is known is how the writers and artists of these stories

interpreted the possibility of amazing power and how they thought it should be used. Apparently, to the people who write and draw superhero comic books, the responsibility that comes with being powerful is paramount.

The often cited quote from Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's first Spider-Man story, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, sets the tone for this discussion beautifully: "With great power must also come—great responsibility!"<sup>[21]</sup> In the story, Peter Parker inadvertently allows a robber to escape from the scene of a crime despite his amazing abilities because he feels the situation doesn't concern him. Upon Peter's return home, he finds his uncle has been murdered by the same man he allowed to escape only hours earlier. The result of Peter Parker's inaction is tragic and eventually becomes the catalyst for his donning of the superhero's signature red-and-blue suit.

Spider-Man's moral ambiguity in this story was one of the first examples of effectively addressing nobility and the introduction of powers. Unlike Superman, Captain America, The Flash, Wonder Woman, and many other characters who came before him, Spider-Man was faced with deep and significant life choices that would affect him going forward as both Peter Parker and as Spider-Man.

This balance of great power and responsibility becomes the cornerstone of superhero stories. People like to think they'd use super powers for good, and maybe they would, and that is the wonderful nature of Spider-Man and other superheroes. When faced with these new powers and gifts, their altruism shines through personal desires. Spider-Man had to experience a profound tragedy, but his morality after that tragedy becomes paramount. It is impossible to determine whether people in reality would utilize super powers in the name of good, though. Unless a scientist inadvertently gives himself super spider powers in reality, the world may never know the truth. However, the possibility can be explored in psychological, cultural, and sociohistorical contexts with superhero stories.

Stories of power intrigue audiences with their possibilities, their scenarios, and their blatant analyses of power's effect on people. Traditional superhero stories are modern-day deconstructions of the human condition and ultimate power. As with Spider-Man, who selfishly allowed a criminal to continue evil deeds unchecked, power both enhanced and diminished Peter Parker's quality of life; he gained superpowers, but he also lost his father figure, Uncle Ben, in the process. Like many literary characters who struggled with their actions and/or inactions, Spider-Man became a tragic hero that a generation of readers could relate to. The fact that Peter Parker/Spider-Man was a teenager who fought crime was really the commercial appeal of the character. Sure Spider-Man looked aesthetically awesome hanging from spiderwebs in New York and punching super-villains across the panels of comic books, but Spider-Man's real appeal came from his relatability beyond the super powers.

While teens could not possibly relate to fighting Doctor Octopus, they could relate to Peter Parker needing to get home in time so he wouldn't upset his Aunt May. Teenage boys could also relate to Peter Parker struggling with talking to girls on a daily basis at school. More so than other superheroes before him, Spider-Man/Peter Parker lived an actual life that reflected a "real" reality. Could someone

possibly relate to Clark Kent? Absolutely, but Clark Kent was an adult with a job, and his superpowers were always a part of his identity development. Could someone possibly relate to Bruce Wayne? One would hope not, as Batman watched his parents being murdered. Could someone possibly relate to Captain America? The Flash? Green Lantern? Wonder Woman? Iron Man? Daredevil? The list could go on for pages, and it seems feasible that every one of the major superheroes are relatable at some level or else they wouldn't be successful franchises, but Spider-Man just seemed to address the reality of power and responsibility in a coherent and semi-realistic fashion: "Peter Parker brought the specky Clark Kent archetype back and gave readers a teenage hero who felt like a teenager."<sup>[22]</sup>

Since all superhero comics have an underlying theme of power and its effects on people, they also address human desires and experiences, making them essential readings on the human condition for twenty-first-century audiences. For seventy years superhero stories have analyzed, reanalyzed, and critiqued human power. For the twenty-first century, superheroes are the premiere form of literature concerning humans' interactions with powers beyond their understandings.

As one last example, the Silver Age Green Lantern from DC Comics provides yet another dynamic scenario of power and its effects on humans. Hal Jordan was a test pilot for the United States Air Force until a purple alien named Abin Sur crashed and landed on Earth. As a member of the Green Lantern Corps, Abin Sur was required to pass on his ring of power to a worthy successor. Upon his crashing on Earth, Abin Sur's power ring (the weapon of the Green Lantern Corps) summoned Hal Jordan, as he was the most worthy successor on Earth. Hal Jordan receives the ring and becomes the Green Lantern of Earth and the sector of which Earth is a part: Sector 2814.<sup>[23]</sup>

It's a great Silver Age story and the brain child of Julius Schwartz's revitalization of many Golden Age superheroes when he was made the editor of DC Comics.<sup>[24]</sup> Nevertheless, Hal Jordan is given a ring of immeasurable power that could be used selfishly for personal fame, fortune, and power. Of course, Jordan does not use his newfound ring for personal gain and instead upholds the Green Lanterns' values. The question then becomes this: what would you do with a ring of immeasurable power? Even beyond that question and the burden of having immeasurable power, the parallels between Hal Jordan's ring and J. R. R. Tolkien's Ring of Power in *The Lord of the Rings* are evident. The powers of the rings are different, as are the circumstances in which the protagonists gain their respective rings. However, there is still an examination of humans and the lure of power from an object that is endowed with incredible energy. Coincidentally, *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954,<sup>[25]</sup> only five years before Hal Jordan's first appearance in *Showcase Comics #22* (1959).

## SUPERHEROES AS MYTHOLOGY

If superheroes are characterized as being near physically perfect and morally incorruptible, then they're worthy of being included in academic and other discussions of culture and society. Viewing these characters through a

mythological lens puts a unique spin on the cultural significance of the genre, as mythology transcends generations and audiences. Superheroes achieve this level of significance in culture through both their physical stature and their propensity for being moral compasses.

As gods among normal men, superheroes introduce dynamics into discussions of culture and society that are unique to modern audiences. There are, of course, numerous mythological figures that are similar to superheroes in both stature and personality including Achilles, Hector, Odysseus, and Gilgamesh.<sup>[26]</sup> While these characters are undoubtedly important and worthy of intense academic analysis, they all have one characteristic in common: they're thousands of years removed from their initial audiences. This point of contention is not intended to diminish the historical, cultural, and social significance of these classic characters. What this is intended to do is make a case for studying the modern-day representations of the ideals these characters hold.

In *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Douglas Wolk discusses the importance of the superhero to comics. While much of Wolk's analysis of superheroes focuses on the academic perception of superheroes (as a necessary evil that needs to be appeased for the greater and economic good of the art form), it does see superheroes as embodying universal concepts. Specifically, "Superheroes are, by their nature, larger than life, and what's useful and interesting about their characteristics is that they provide bold metaphors for discussing ideas or reifying abstractions into narrative fiction."<sup>[27]</sup> So while the story of Daredevil can be read at face value, as that of a lawyer who moonlights as a masked vigilante in New York's Hell's Kitchen,<sup>[28]</sup> it can also be read in a way that questions the intentions of a lawyer who uses his special powers to fight crime and disrupt the very system of law he has sworn to protect. In such a reading, Matt Murdock's motives and intentions take on a whole new context: he is right in stopping criminals, but he's also wrong in interfering with the law. Duality, hypocrisy, social/professional ethics, and legality are all major themes that can be studied by examining the stories of the blind superhero who secretly doubles as a lawyer in Hell's Kitchen.

Mythology is really a reflection of what a culture values, and superheroes have become, as Richard Reynolds said in 1992, a modern mythology. As a modern mythology, superheroes then take on the burden of being a representation of what culture and society value at a given moment. In the case of superheroes, their temporal influence as culturally significant characters ranges from 1938 (when Superman first appeared) all the way through today. This is not much different than other mythology that has come before. Taking an example from Greek mythology, Achilles is the epitome of physical strength and prowess. While he does have a weakness (his heel), his strength is an inspiration to people, as he is the ultimate in human physique. However, Achilles' propensity for killing and his ruthless tactics much better represent ancient Greek culture than they do modern American culture. This dichotomy can create conflict in studying the character from a modern context, as part of the character's significance can be generalized (his strength) and the other can be purposefully identified as almost anachronistic



(his propensity for killing). For ancient Greeks, Achilles was a superhero, but he does not work as well as a superhero in today's society.

For modern audiences Superman is undoubtedly a superhero, and much of his appeal can be attributed not only to his physicality and limitless power but also his moral compass. While Achilles's morality can be called into question by modern audiences, Superman's morality and actions are much more in tune with modern culture's moral standards. When present-day audiences read Superman's stories, their analyses of these stories become much more relatable than those of Achilles because Superman's actions more closely resemble the actions of a person holding twenty-first-century values. In other words, modern audiences relate better to Superman than they do to Achilles. This doesn't mean that Superman is "better" than Achilles though. In fact, people have been studying Achilles for thousands of years, and rightly so. It is just time to promote superheroes to the same basic level of academic respect that ancient mythological characters have.

In the 1978 motion picture *Superman: The Movie*, Lois Lane dies during an earthquake caused by Lex Luthor. Superman becomes so enraged (which looks awesome onscreen by the way) that he races into the sky only to experience conflict about his next course of action. As an audience we don't know what Superman is going to do, but we do know that his actions might be rash because he has just lost the woman he loves. After contemplating for a few seconds, Superman proceeds to fly around the Earth causing it to spin backward and subsequently turning back time to a point where he can save Lois from dying.<sup>[29]</sup> Ignore the implausibility of this (I know it's hard) and analyze this course of action. Even though Superman is not human, modern audiences can relate to Superman because he shares many of the same ideals. Furthermore, his reaction is uniquely human in that he wants to go back and make things right, something humans cannot physically do. But this is Superman, and he does have the power to change the world in such a significant way. The question becomes this: does Superman have the right to turn back time in order to save the person he loves? This is a heavy question and one that can only be analyzed from multiple perspectives. It taps into the very soul of audiences, as it is something everyone has wanted to do at one point or another: turn back time to save someone we love. We have probably all thought, at one time or another, that if we could just change one little thing to fix a mistake in our past, we would do it in a heartbeat and without hesitation. At that point in *Superman the Movie*, this powerful alien from Krypton becomes so human that he succumbs to his personal desires to save his own sanity; this superhero experiences human emotions despite the powers that separate him from ordinary people.

Superheroes exist because the world needs them to. Superman's actions in *Superman: The Movie* seem omnipotent, but they're probably the same actions we would take in order to save a loved one we had just lost. Audiences need these fictional archetypes to reference, even if only subconsciously. As Peter Coogan says, "The superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda."<sup>[30]</sup> Superman's actions in

Superman: The Movie are selfish, but that rare scene of Superman being selfish is what makes the film powerful and timeless.

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## GOING FORWARD

These superheroes are the characters that many children grew up with, learned their morality from, mimicked during play, and followed into adulthood. Superhero stories haven't gone anywhere, either. Instead of disappearing into thin air and becoming a footnote of history in America, they've spread like wildfire into nearly all areas of life and around the globe. Sports stars get tattoos of superhero emblems on their arms, little trinkets in thousands of stores across the country emblazon superhero images across their products, children wear pajamas with detachable capes, and movies are made at an alarming rate designed to ensnare even the most casual of fans into their undeniably entertaining web. Almost no one can escape the influence of the superhero: "It should give us hope that superhero stories are flourishing everywhere because they are a bright flickering sign of our need to move on, to imagine the better, more just, and more proactive people we can be."<sup>[31]</sup> Instead of losing their influence on society, superhero stories are becoming stronger.

Like the heroic stories of ancient mythology, today's superhero stories refuse to go quietly into the history books, to languish unread for countless years later with little understanding as to why they were even recorded. Instead, the tales of superheroes endure because they represent culture, society, values, hopes, dreams, fears, and humanity all wrapped up in colorful stories that can be effectively explored in any medium. Superheroes aren't going anywhere anytime soon because they are us.

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## Chapter 2

# The Academicization of Comics

Where Are the Superheroes?

Superheroes are the public and private shame of American comics. They're the Peter Pan façade that refuses to grow up, the idiot cousin that the whole family resents for being the one who supports them and brags about it. They're omnipresent, they're eternally the same; they're the part that acts like it's the whole.

—Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics*

Like the superhero, the work of the comic scholar is never ending. On the one hand, comic studies has made some inroads toward academic legitimacy. The field has even reached a level of importance in which there is now a new reader available: Heer and Worcester's *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009) published by the University Press of Mississippi. However, while the medium of the graphic novel has achieved a kind of faddish acceptance, one of the genres that helped create this form still languishes on the outskirts of academic discourse: the superhero genre.

### THE TRADITIONAL COMIC CANON

To be sure, graphic novels have gained some traction in literary studies. In fact, there are more graphic novels being taught now in at least some English courses across the country than ever before. However, those graphic novels are a very select group. While only a handful of literature teachers use graphic novels in their classrooms, if you can find one who does, you'll get some consistent answers if you ask what graphic novels they teach in their courses. Most likely the graphic novels the teacher uses will be one of the following:

- *The Complete Maus* (2003) by Art Spiegelman
- *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi
- *Palestine* (2002) by Joe Sacco
- *Pride of Baghdad* (2008) by Brian K. Vaughn & Niko Henrichon
- *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang
- *A Contract with God* (1978) by Will Eisner
- *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) by Chris Ware
- *Watchmen* (1986) by Alan Moore and David Gibbons

Though not exhaustive, we would argue that the above list, for all intents and purposes, represents a canon of graphic novels. There are a few other major works that could possibly be added to the above list, but this represents a significant portion of the graphic novel canon being taught in the United States today. We include this list to highlight two important facts: First, certain graphic novels have

achieved a level of respectability and reverence in academia, which is a promising development for the field of comics studies. Second, and much more problematic, is what is not on this list: superheroes.

Among the popular academic graphic novels listed above, only one book, *Watchmen*, focuses on superheroes. And although *Watchmen* is a superhero graphic novel, the goal of *Watchmen* is to deconstruct the entire idea of the superhero. To some extent, *Watchmen* is designed to rethink the superhero genre to the point of oblivion. As *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore says of his book:

My main concern was to show a world without heroes, without villains, since to my mind these are the two most dangerous fallacies which beset us, both in the relatively unimportant world of fiction and in the more important field of politics. Human instinct seems to categorize the world continually in terms of heroes and villains.<sup>[1]</sup>

Now to be clear, *Watchmen* is a masterpiece and a graphic novel highly worth of being taught. *Watchmen* is also one of the finest examples of superhero literature ever created. Nevertheless, because the purpose of *Watchmen* is largely to rethink the entire value of the superhero, this graphic novel does more to eliminate superheroes from the canon of graphic novels than to support their teaching. Ultimately, Moore wants us to realize how bad the world would be if superheroes existed. As Grant Morrison notes about Moore's work in general, "Moore argued that the arrival of a genuine superhuman being in our midst would quickly and radically alter society forever."<sup>[2]</sup> It's a fascinating idea to explore, but it also works against most of the superhero themes written about in the past seventy-plus years.

Thus, while *Watchmen* certainly merits inclusion in what we are, later in this volume, labeling "The Canon of Superhero Literature," we also become very worried when *Watchmen* is the only superhero book students are taught. *Watchmen*'s gritty deconstruction of the superhero genre is explored later in this chapter, but its content represents a departure from what most people would consider traditional superhero literature. And setting aside *Watchmen* for the moment, one can see that the rest of the most popular graphic novels taught in academia all fall outside the realm of superheroes. These other graphic novels are what the art critic Douglas Wolk labels as "art comics."

Wolk defines the term "art comic" in his book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. According to Wolk, "As an art critic, I can (tautologically) describe [an art comic] as the kind of comic I find it most fruitful to discuss critically."<sup>[3]</sup> Since Wolk has a vote in the annual Eisner Awards (the comics equivalent of the Academy Awards named after the legendary comic book writer and artist Will Eisner), Wolk is certainly a credible expert in the field of graphic literature. What is surprising about his approach to comics is the way he so ardently separates art comics from superhero comics. While Wolk never specifically says he disapproves of superhero comics, his book certainly devalues the form. One can't help but feel that Wolk is somewhat ashamed of even having to consider

superhero comics at all in his book on graphic novels.

Wolk isn't alone in his dismissal of superhero comics, either. Martin Baker's 1989 book *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* doesn't even mention superhero comics. It's rather disappointing that a 256-page book about comics doesn't even mention in passing the impact superheroes have had on the comic book form. It is also troubling that the highly esteemed comics scholar Scott McCloud also generally ignores superhero comics. Scott McCloud is renowned for his work on graphic novels and comic art in general, and McCloud's book *Understanding Comics*<sup>[4]</sup> has been cited ad nauseam in academic circles as the premiere text for learning how to read and understand comic books and graphic novels. There is no doubting the brilliance and style of Scott McCloud's work; writing about how comics function using a comic book format is quite revolutionary. Additionally, McCloud's work was a pivotal early part of the struggle to make graphic novels more accepted within academia. Even though McCloud's work is commendable, he makes a point of singling out the superhero genre as something shameful: "I've been trying to understand comics for about 15 years. Here's what I've come up with so far. The first step in any such effort is to clear our minds of all preconceived notions about comics. Only by starting from scratch can we discover the full range of possibilities comics offer."<sup>[5]</sup> The visual that goes along with this narration is a huge panel where Scott McCloud's avatar is standing in front of a vast array of small panels, each depicting a popular comic book character. Sure, there's Archie, Bugs Bunny, Betty Boop, Blondie, and other Sunday morning staples, but the overwhelming majority of characters present are superheroes. It appears, from the illustration, that McCloud feels superhero comics are a limitation, so he wants readers to clear superheroes out of their minds.

Claudia Goldstein further contributes to the differentiation many scholars make between comics worthy of academic study and comics that are strictly for entertainment. Goldstein's commentary on the subject is geared more toward art theory and history than literary or English studies. As many scholars do, Goldstein works from the premise that only certain comics are worthy of serious study: "I ask the class to consider whether all comics are art, or whether, as intelligent readers, we can begin to distinguish the truly interesting, thoughtful, and creative comic artists from the hacks."<sup>[6]</sup> While Goldstein never specifically mentions superhero comics, her distinguishing between tiers of comic book art is itself quite interesting. There have always been distinctions made by scholars about art quality, but the natural subjectivity of that distinction has been artificially standardized. The same could be said for the traditional literary canon as well, where the value of texts has already been predetermined through years of repeated usage of certain standard texts in public schools and universities.

Peter Coogan attributes the lack of academic respect for superhero texts to the basic characteristics of the superhero genre. Specifically, the genre of superhero is, according to Coogan, perceived as a subgenre instead of its own genre with all the inherent dynamics thereof. In regard to superheroes and genre, Coogan says, "Despite the attention currently given to superheroes, the superhero genre is little studied. Typically, it is either taken for granted or dismissed as a genre and

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