

## Evolution of Superheroes and Pop Culture

By Marc R. Levy

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In the 1940's 50's and early 60's for many of us our introduction and experience with super heroes was tied to buying a comic book, a radio story and television shows. Children saved up their allowances to buy the editions of the comics and some of us wandered around our neighborhood selling older versions to help pay for new comics. Superman half hour shows were weekly. Mighty Mouse was a cartoon character. We heard stories on radio and the Batman television series was a combination of acting and comic book sounds for emphasis. We knew a few superheroes. That was then. Now there are many more superheroes. An available website has a list of the top 100 favorite superheroes.

Not only are there many more superheroes today, entertainment and the simplicity of life that existed years ago has evolved. If the last time one read a comic or paid any attention to superheroes was in 20<sup>th</sup> century, the differences are stark in contrast. Those of you who have children or grandchildren probably understand what is being experienced and how superheroes have evolved. For the rest of us it can be a challenge attempting to understand the evolution of superheroes, and with it current Pop Culture including the social, cultural and psychological aspects.

What began in 1920s as stories, comics and radio programs has gone thru multiple changes in the last almost 90+ years. In fact, understanding this history amid the context of what is currently occurring raises questions on the definition of a hero and a superhero and how one differentiates one from the other. It creates questions about people's needs for even having superheroes. And there is the consideration of "Good versus Evil" and our core nature and values when facing difficult circumstances.

I jump ahead here and need to begin by first exploring the very basic concept of "superhero" and then discuss the evolution of modern-day superheroes and the questions and issues raised above. So, to begin this journey, we need to understand the definition of, and what differentiates, a hero from a superhero. Is this about looking different and wearing a costume, mask or cape? There was Danial Boone with his coonskin cap, Zorro with his cape and mask and the Lone Ranger who rode the Wild West with a sidekick Tonto. Is it about cool gadgets and flashy vehicles? There was Dick Tracy, Doc Savage, plus shows and movies such as Get Smart, Austin Powers, and agent 007. Or is it about powers and ability beyond ordinary mortals? There was David and Goliath, the Greek Gods, Aesop's Fables, Gulliver Travels, and all our oral histories passed on to us.

The Oxford Dictionary defines "hero" as a term coming from Greek antiquity meaning "man with special human qualities favored by the gods". It calls a hero an "illustrious warrior" and "a

man admired for achievements and noble qualities". Therefore, a hero then is not about the outfit one wears or the tools one uses to save the day. It is about the qualities, actions, achievements and morals. It is not about being super but rather doing good deeds and getting the attention recognizing these heroic efforts. It is also about being a man.

There are those around us who are heroes, yet they do not get to that next level of recognition. There is the teacher who saves children during a school violence attack, firemen who risk their lives in a big fire, or a doctor who goes into a community or country to provide necessary medical care during a disaster. They are individuals who take an action disregarding the risk of life and limb. They are willing to sacrifice themselves to the greater good knowing that by doing so a person may be saved, a criminal may be stopped, disease that is threatening a community or country may be defeated. While being heroic they do not become identified and recognized as superheroes.

What seems to differentiate a hero from a superhero is that heroes are humans admired for what they achieved, and the actions taken. Superheroes are fictional characters who are more than a man or woman as they transcend mortality and become something timeless and legendary. The fact of being fictional is the key difference as it allows them to have additional abilities beyond what a normal human can have or do. It is about their willingness to take actions beyond what a normal human can accomplish because they see an injustice. And they become a superhero because what they accomplish is recognized as being on a level beyond the everyday hero.

These fictional characters remind us of the importance of self-discipline, self-sacrifice and committing ourselves for good, noble and important causes. Superheroes speak to our nature as well as aspirations and fears. They do not accept defeat. They never give up. They believe in themselves and the cause and go out to achieve their goals. They are able to fight evil without becoming evil. They offer us role models to be bolder and ready to act when facing injustice.

The history of superheroes in American culture started in the 1920s. World War I ended, women got the right to vote, and there was a growing popularity of Jazz. It was a decade of artistic and industrial growth, and technological advances. It was also the start of Prohibition with a growth in organized crime syndicates. In 1929 the stock market crashed, fortunes were lost, businesses destroyed and one in four were unemployed. Headlines in newspapers were about mob bosses, hit men and police officers on the take.

This set the stage for superheroes from radio and newspaper serials like the Shadow, Dick Tracy and Doc Savage. The Shadow "*knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men*" was a pulp hero. He was by day a rich man and at night hunted evil doers. He instilled dread at the mention of his name. He functioned outside the law and would deal with problems that law enforcement could not handle. Dick Tracy on the other hand was a good cop and the master investigator. He was tough, sharp, and persistent plus used the first smart watch- two way wrist radio to

help deal with what was identified as the “Rogues Gallery of evil doers (Big Boy, Flat Top, Prune Face, the Mole etc.) He was law enforcement at its best.

These pulp heroes and others of the time set the stage for what became superheroes like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. Superman, *the man of steel* 1938, was influenced by Doc Savage Man of Bronze who had near super human abilities and had his own fortress of solitude. Superman who came from an exploding planet could run faster than a train, is able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and could fly faster than a bullet. He was a crusader for social justice dealing with gangsters, corrupt businesses and politicians while helping the common people battle for truth justice and the American Way. He is identified as the launching of what is called the Golden Age of comic books and has had radio shows, animated features, television series, films, video games for over 75 years. Superman has endured the times of change.

Batman-The Caped Crusader introduced a year after Superman was a different type of superhero. He had witnessed the murder of his parents and because of that devoted his life to fighting crime. At their funeral he made a pledge, “I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals.” He then took years of training, started using the cape, an assortment of invented gadgets and focused on the Gotham City Criminals. Gotham City was the dark reflection of all American Cities and represented the ugly issues of urbanization. It was riddled with crime and was wholly corrupt. Batman was a billionaire who has turned vigilante and targets everyone who is corrupt. He was aided by two sidekicks over the years: Robin the boy wonder and Alfred his loyal confidant. He was known for his Batmobile running on atomic batteries and power turbines for speed. He battled with a long list of villains including; The Joker, Penguin, Riddler, Catwoman, Scarecrow, Mad hatter, Two Face, and Mr. Freeze.

Wonder Woman has been the most popular female superhero, introduced near the end of 1941. She left Paradise Island to fight fascism with feminism calling “America, the last citadel of democracy and of equal rights for women”. The gods gave her amazing powers: flight and strength, beauty and wisdom, courage and ability to communicate with animals. She possessed indestructible bracelets and the lasso of truth. While battling with “wrong doers” as a superhero she joined other superheroes to battle the evil Axis powers and was literally an American superhero who wore a star-spangled outfit. In 1942, Wonder Woman despite her super-patriotic role, was on the blacklist of “Publications Disapproved for Youth” because she was not sufficiently dressed. There were additional issues raised on the role she portrayed and how she dealt with villains. Even by joining other superheroes including the Justice league of America- Superman, Green Lantern, Batman and Captain America, she remained controversial. Wonder Woman as a superhero was a challenge because it was during a time when many were not ready for her feminism.

After the conclusion of World War II there was a decline of superhero comics and the rise of other sorts of comics focusing on romance, crime, war, and horror or science fiction. This

period became the most negative chapter in comic book history. It was the social, political and economic shifts during this period that set the stage for these changes. World War II had ended with victory and Good had overcome Evil. After fighting the bad guys and winning a world war, the villains and type of battles superheroes had prior to the war could not match up to the ones we had recently faced.

Post-war America was both good times and bad times. The country had come out of the Great Depression followed by a World War and victory. That led to the building of a strong middle class, increased educational opportunities with the GI Bill and significant technological advances. People were able to purchase homes and cars and get their lives back on track. On the other hand women's roles shifted back to be homemakers and minorities continued to be marginalized. It was not until the 1960s that these injustices began to be faced and changed.

In addition, the use of the Atomic Bomb began the nuclear age and a cold war that was based upon distrust and fears between countries. The "Red Scare" began in this context by Senator McCarthy and raised concerns that the country was infiltrated by communist sympathizers who wanted to undermine the American society. This political environment and distrust of each other and those who differed in idea or policy led to the creation of the Comic Code Authority in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America. It was an attempt to self-regulate rather than have government regulation of the industry. The work of German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham coupled with McCarthyism viewed comic books as a cause of juvenile delinquency and this was a growing concern that led to Congressional hearings. The focus went beyond the crime violence and horror comics as Wonder Woman, Superman, Batman and Robin were all suspect. The message and belief were that comic books caused delinquency just as a segment of America believed that rock and roll led to promiscuity and hysteria.

This was a part of the political and social environment of these times. While, as mentioned earlier, some of us were out selling those comic books to buy more of them, there were those that thought we were part of the growing juvenile delinquency across America. As youth, we did not know or understand what was happening around us because the innocence of the comic stories and superheroes was all that was attracting us at that time. Truth, Justice and the American way meant one thing to the followers of each issue of the comics while it meant something very different at Congressional hearings.

Another shift was occurring as comic stories moved into the Silver Age with a focus upon the power derived from the atomic bomb. This led to myths that spanned the globe and were rich and varied. These discussed the origins of the universe, insights into human nature, and lessons with morality. Creatures like Godzilla came from Japan after WWII. It was a story about a radiation-breathing monster attacking and destroying Japan. It was a giant villain to fight and conquer and by doing so saving the world. Other world saving challenges due to nuclear threats were introduced. There were individuals who became superheroes or villains from

radioactivity or by explosions and chemicals in science labs. Some had genetic deviations that became evident as they grew up or were triggered by a drastic experience.

The growing up of comic books began in the 60's. As the issues evolved, with the advent of the anti-war movement, civil rights and feminist issues, the 70's topics matured to address these issues. The Fantastic Four was Marvel's first Family. Reed Richards, Sue and Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm are exposed to cosmic rays that transform their bodies. Reed can stretch and contort his body, Sue can become invisible, Johnny can engulf himself in fire and fly and Ben is permanently changed into a rock like giant. They become Mr. Fantastic, Invisible Woman, Human Torch and the Thing. Later, other groups are introduced such as The Avengers and The Justice League due to both the increased competition between Dell and Marvel as well as because saving the world or Universe required more than one superhero. The continued introduction of more superheroes followed, such as: Spider Man, Hulk, Wolverine and Ghost Rider as well as Thor, Ant-Man, Iron Man, and Wasp, Hawkeye, Black Panther, Scarlet Witch, Quicksilver, Black Widow, and Falcon. Some of these were mutants and outcasts called X-Men who were superheroes and mutants born with their powers or who got their powers from events that happen in their lives.

Much of what was evolving during this period in superheroes pushed the limits and barriers of the CCA code. The strict comic book controls the industry imposed upon itself during the McCarthy period began to be amended to deal with the changes of the times. Where it had been forbidden to allow drug use to be portrayed, it became approved so long as it was done negatively. When Green Lantern's sidekick abused heroin and had to get treatment it allowed the issue to be addressed. Creating a positive message about dealing with drug addiction opened that door of opportunity. When Spider Man's attempt to do "good" fails and does harm, this also opened up the opportunity to face the fact that not everything that a superhero does will be "Good". Spider Man faced a situation that as his girlfriend is about to be thrown off a bridge to her death he uses his webbing to save her during the fall and in so doing accidentally breaks her neck. She dies because of his attempt to save her and thus his "Doing Good" ends up "Bad". The impact of his action and the unintended consequences shocks people. She dies and this is considered a game changer in the innocence of superheroes and comic books. No longer is it assumed that everything they do or will do is good.

Another example of the shift occurring in comic superheroes was when the Marvel Universe had the Fantastic Four (mentioned previously) face Dr. Doom and Galactus. Dr. Doom was an evil megalomaniac scientific genius and Galactus was a cosmic force and an immense being who in order to survive needed to destroy and consume whole worlds. Dr. Doom and Galactus both use their powers to pursue their own evil desires and agenda while the Fantastic Four use their power for the good of other people. In later comic issues Galactus comes to devour Earth because he needs a good meal to maintain his power. A successful battle to save Earth occurs involving a collaboration of the Fantastic Four, the Avengers and Dr. Strange. As Galactus lies defeated and in a dying state the superheroes face an ethical issue so they resuscitate Galactus.

This causes him great confusion and he exclaims "Galactus lives! But- Galactus is confused. You had beaten me. Why have you saved me?" Reed Richard of the Fantastic Four replies, "We had no choice, Galactus. We could no more stand by and allow you to die than we could turn our backs on any creature in need". This makes a significant impact on Galactus who from then changes and interacts and treats all of them as equals. The Earth is no longer just food for his appetite because his opponents are worthy of respect and recognition.

The story of Galactus is an example of how stories can reflect real life situations. This story reminded me of when I was 18 and a lifeguard in East Los Angeles. A gang leader came into the pool area planning on taking control of it since they already believed they had control of the park. One of the guards (Bob) confronted the individual and challenged him to play "A Thousand Bubbles" in the center of the deep end of the pool. He agreed, and they went into the water, and began the battle to hold each other under the water until one of them released a thousand bubbles. A struggle began and Bob pushed the gang leaders head under water. As he tried to get his head back up to get a breath, Bob kept him under water. He went to the left and then to the right and Bob pushed him further down. As life guards we are trained to help people and save people. So while on the deck or lifeguard towers we are always prepared to act in that regard. What was happening caused a significant dilemma. We are there to save people. Protect people and keep them alive. On the other hand we were watching a battle for life and potential death. Then at the last moment Bob pulled him up and took him to the side of the pool. The gang leader put his arm on the ledge and while taking deep breaths looked at me and said "I thought I saw my last moments alive". He paused and kept breathing heavy for few more moments and then looked at me again and asked, "Why did he let me up?" In his world of gangs and territory and power that probably would not happen. From that point on he treated us all with respect around the pool and also in the park. So we had our own Galactus and Fantastic Four event.

These shifts in how superheroes struggle with new challenges continued in the 80s to evolve and move into what is considered the modern age of comics. Stories became grimmer with more ethical issues in the lives of the superheroes. This created a new period of self-reflection and questioning whether the means justify the ends. And what happens if the ends are not as good as expected? Does that change the justification of the means?

Two books -- The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen -- are identified as bringing the Modern Age into its own. Both books presented a deviation from the way things had been. The movies that followed brought these stories to the broader market. The Dark Knight Returns tells the story of Bruce Wayne coming out of retirement to battle the crime problems in Gotham City. Crime and violence have gotten a lot worse and the criminal elements are aligned with business and political leadership. People do not feel safe on the streets and there has been an erosion of freedom. There is a battle between Batman and Superman which sets the stage for an ongoing series of stories that end in 1989. Batman kills Superman and several years later Batman brings him back to life when the Justice League faces a challenge to save the Earth. Superman when

brought back to life wants to get revenge on Batman. Lois Lane has to convince him about the importance of saving the earth rather than trying to kill Batman.

This period is a reframing of Batman as a vigilante who in his attempts at dealing with criminals is no longer seen in as positive a view as he was long ago. Law enforcement distrusts and dislikes him. His previous honorable treatment by community leadership and those he helped is dwarfed by those who see him negatively. He is not viewed with the noble quality that was part of his identity in the past. He continues to attempt to do “good” yet the consequences of his actions do not always turn out as good as desired.

Watchman is equally gripping with a story within the story reimagining the world of superheroes. It presents a whole new group of crime fighters and Ozymandias who is a new superhero. The story offers the premise of real people as the crime fighters. They wear costumes and masks. They are functioning in a world that is equally dark as the one the Dark Knight had returned, where people are oppressed by criminals, a negative corrupt controlling local government and dishonesty in news. There is an identified plot to kill off some of the superheroes and villains which further threatens the stability and safety of people. At the same time, it is also about the challenges of civilization and the potential of a nuclear war that could be the end of planet earth. The focus is upon the Doomsday clock getting closer and closer. It is a dark story that paints a society in the negative ways people treat each other. The redefining of good and bad in the end becomes an issue of survival of the planet. Ozymandias as the main superhero or villain saves the day, yet the consequences are devastating and force one to face upon life and death decisions as a moral dilemma. He believes the only option to save the earth is a nuclear conflict that will kill off 200 million people in major cities around the world and in so doing prevent destruction and death of the entire planet. The choice is destruction of part of the earth or the total destruction of the entire planet. This leaves the viewer needing to consider this set of circumstances and choices.

The Hero and Antihero age has now come into its own. It is a period where those who are “good” do some things that are “evil” while the villains are evil yet do things that are “good”. Conflicting values come up against each other and in many ways also challenge core concepts of how one determines the value of things in our lives. What is safety worth and are we willing to give up some or all of our freedoms for safety? When faced with a moral or ethical choice would we save one life with the possibility that the consequences could be more people may die? Is it worth deciding to have millions die to save the rest of the planet? There may be no right answer but how do we determine what is the best option within the options that exist?

Who are the people engaged in this Superhero Pop Culture? In the last 20 years, changes in who is engaged reflects major shifts in the overall superheroes phenomena. Previously this was a primarily white male dominated area of interest with 63% male and 37% female. That has shifted to more balanced participation. Not only do we see a balancing between genders but also ethnicity and sexual orientation. The introduction of female superheroes has drawn in more female participation. As superheroes better represented ethnic and racial diversity there

has also been a wider diversity in representation reflecting the diversity of our communities, nation and world. When the Xmen superheroes were created, it open the door to a fuller more diverse superhero population by creating mutant superheroes and with that directly reflecting diversity. In March 2018, the results of increased diversity were demonstrated when Disney and Marvel brought out the Black Panther movie which grossed over one billion dollars with an African American cast. This not only broke records but surpassed all expectations on what an African American based movie could do in this market. The comic book culture is changing once again.

Comic conventions have also seen enormous growth. The San Diego Comic Con started in 1970 and in 2000 had 30-40,000 attending that by 2015 was over 170,000 attending. This was true everywhere: Denver had 114,000, New York had 151,000 while Tokyo had 590,000 people. These gatherings have developed and grown significantly. And it is normal to see people dressed up in costumes representing their favorite superhero and interacting with others over the course of a weekend long event.

To conclude -- what we have in comics and radio that started off in the 1920's has roots in the long-standing cultures of oral history going back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The superhero phenomena was in its infancy in the 20's where people listened to radio, read comics and enjoyed the entertainment value. Over the years we have witnessed an evolution that increasingly addressed more serious and complex social and political aspects yet maintained the entertainment value. In more recent time it has also engaged an increased segment of the national and international markets.

People in large numbers have adopted favorite superheroes and even villains as their favorites. What was hundreds or thousands of fans has become millions of people. It is like a parallel process whereby sports fans have a favorite team and even a favorite player where they purchase a shirt or uniform with that individual's number on it. The adoption, in this case, of a superhero may come with wearing that outfit, going in costume to a convention, interacting on social media with others to solve global and galaxy threats. It seems for many, it is an act of becoming that hero and not just dressing the role but acting out the role. It is about becoming a part of a sub-culture -- for many observers even a cult -- with norms, values and beliefs.

This is matched by the growth in this industry and its portion of the economy. Costumes and paraphernalia are created and sold. Comics, movies, videos, television programs and series are developed and consumed. The conventions attract hundreds of thousands, run several days and are complete experiences with the full range of superheroes and villains in attendance and participating. Comic book stores are now evolving into full service locations that are gathering places. Corporations are actively engaged in growing this market, keeping people fully engaged and meeting the needs of the consumers.

What we are witnessing is both the need for superheroes and about meeting the needs of people. In a world where technology has contributed to less personal interaction and social



interactions have changed, maybe this offers a different way for people to connect. It is not inviting people over to one's house for a meal or sitting on the porch to be part of the neighborhood. Yet, it does create temporary communities that gather for a common good. In general, we are learning how it fits into meeting needs and addressing what is important in people's lives. For those of us on the sidelines we may have not even recognized it is happening. However, what began as merely comic books and radio shows to entertain and be part of storytelling has evolved over time into a much deeper role for many. It presents situations and raises questions for us all. Is there a real benefit beyond entertainment? Can all of this create people who are motivated to do "good" and treat others with respect? Will our sense of community and commonality be redefined by these experiences? Will we live our lives concerned about what is happening around us on a daily basis? If there are crimes and violence in our community are we attempting to step in and deal with these problems or standing on the sideline? For those that attempt to make a difference will they be viewed as a hero or a vigilante? Would they be a person admired for achievements, noble qualities, lofty character or ideals?

The evolution of comics and superheroes continues right now as new movies, television shows and comics continue to be created. The impact these will have upon those who are fully engaged may also evolve around us. Now that you are aware of what is happening do you know if the people you work with, family, or even your neighbors are taking on roles of superheroes? Are you on the sidelines or actively part of this continuing to evolve Superhero Pop Culture? Much of what is happening is going on without being fully noticed and the future evolution of superheroes and the pop culture is yet to be defined. This is a part of all wonderment in our world around us.

## Resources and References

There are numerous resources available on-line, film/video, and printed. The following is merely a short listing of some of what was utilized in the research and writing of this paper.

The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History offers a full course entitled **The Rise of Superheroes and Their Impact on Pop Culture**, SmithsonianX. This is a self-paced course exploring the history of the comic book and the rise of superheroes. Experts such as Stan Lee and Michael Uslan and Dr. Richard Robichaud join many others to offer insights, written and video presentations.

**SUPERHEROES and Philosophy** Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way, Edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris, Popular Culture and Philosophy Series by Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois 2005

### **Articles by:**

Jeff Brenzel Ph.D. Notre Dame

C. Stephen Evans Ph.D. Yale

Richard Hanley University of Delaware

\_Rebecca Housel University of New South Wales

Keven Kinghorn, Oxford University

C. Stephen Layman, Seattle Pacific University

Craig Lindahl-Urben, St. Olaf College

Jeph Loeb, St. Edwards University

Matt Morris, UNC-Chapel Hill

Tom Morris, UNC-Chapel Hill

Dennis O'Neil, Award winning comic writer and editor

Christopher Robichaud, Ph.D. M.I.T.

Craig Rousseau, original cover artist

Chris Ryall, Editor-in-Chief IDW Publishing

Aeon J. Skoble, Bridgewater State College

J.D. Smith. Super-colorist and Legendary cover artist

James B. South, Marquette University

Charles Taliaferro, St. Olaf College

Felix Tallon, St. Andrews University, Scotland

Michael Thau, Ph. D. Princeton University

Scott Tipton, Editor of Pop Culture Web and design consultant action figures

Mark Waid, writer of superhero comics

Jerry Walls, PH. D Notre Dame