Sex and the Superman: Gender and the Superhero Monomyth

Christopher Maverick
SEX AND THE SUPERMAN:
GENDER AND THE SUPERHERO MONOMYTH

A Dissertation
Submitted to McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Christopher Maverick

December 2022
Copyright by

Christopher Maverick

2022
SEX AND THE SUPERMAN:
GENDER AND THE SUPERHERO MONOMYTH

By
Christopher Maverick

Approved August 26, 2022

Dr. Magali Michael
Dean of College of Arts and Sciences,
University of South Florida
(Committee Chair)

Dr. Linda Kinnahan
Professor of English,
(Committee Member)

Dr. Terrence Wandtke
Professor of English & Communication,
East West University
(Committee Member)

Dr. Kristine Blair
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate
School of Liberal Arts

Dr. Danielle St. Hillaire
Chair, English Department
ABSTRACT

SEX AND THE SUPERMAN:
GENDER AND THE SUPERHERO MONOMYTH

By
Christopher Maverick

December 2022

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Magali Michael

Since the 1938 introduction of Superman, superheroes have been ever-present in American popular culture. Indeed, with the modern preponderance of comic book movies dominating the American cinematic box-office, superhero fantasy is arguably the most important genre of fiction being produced in the contemporary moment. Peter Coogan, Kurt Busiek and many other scholars have discussed the prominence and relevance of the superhero fantasy as a genre. Still others, including Umberto Eco and Marco Arnaudo, have asserted that the superhero is not so much a genre and as it is the evolution of mythology. In Sex and the Superman, I argue that the superhero fantasy is in truth more than myth; the superhero fantasy is the monomyth. That is to say that over the course of the twentieth century, the superhero fantasy has replaced Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey as the dominant template for epic allegorical storytelling in America.
I trace the evolution of the superhero monomyth from its beginnings as a rough set of genre conventions and tropes into its current matured form as an established thematic paradigm. I theorize that the superhero monomyth creates a malleable template for seeking social justice that is only vaguely defined but can be articulated through performance of masculine violence and feminine sexuality in a kind of exchange economy as the building blocks of heroic narrative. First, I distinguish the superhero fantasy genre from the superhero monomyth and then speak to the ways in which each reflects and informs the other. I then analyze the thematic paradigm that constructs the superhero monomyth and the ways in which it has evolved from but remains distinct from earlier incarnations of the monomyth. I further examine the evolution of the monomyth as it responded to changes in conceptions of gender, race, class and youth culture over the middle of the twentieth century. Finally, I theorize that the superhero monomyth has become the dominant template for heroic storytelling across media and genres. In doing so it creates a framework for how we consider the very construction of gender in social contexts especially in relationship to social justice.
DEDICATION

For Alonzo Thomas, always and forever my very first superhero.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

There’s a weird thing about studying comics. There’s almost an inherent sense of embarassment. So many of the greatest scholarly texts in the field start with an introduction that tries to justify how comics are a serious business worthy of study and essnetially begging readers to take them seriously. I tried not to do that here for a a few reasons. To me, it always feels reductive of the field and insulting to the reader. If you are taking the time to read this, that means that you already consider there to be value in either comics as field or me as a person. Whichever the case, I first want to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to invest in what I have to say in the following pages. In all honesty, even though I obviously see value in what I have written, at the end of the day what I have here is several hundred pages ruminating over what my grandparents would have called “the funny books.” I use that label with pride. I consider it a privilege that I have had the opportunity to work on this at all. The very idea that I was able to spend the last few years analyzing the cultural relevance of my favorite characters from the funny books is a dream come true. So again, first and foremost, thank you for caring enough to read what I have to say.

Next, I want to thank my dissertation committee, Terrence Wandtke, Linda Kinnahan and especially my advisor Magali Michael for sticking by me these last few years of working on this crazy thing. For everything I said about being gratefiul to “the reader” in general in the previous paragraph, the three of you have had to endure this project in its various phases of completion and evolution. Your guidance and patience have been invaluable and helped shape this project and push my thinking. I would also like to thank the faculty of the English Departments at Duquesne University and Carnegie Mellon University (twice!) for molding me into the scholar that I am today. In fact, I would like to thank every educator that I have had the pleasure of
working with over these past several decades from Lorain Head Start through Admiral King High School, onto CMU and then Duquense, and eventually my colleagues at Mount Aloysius College and the University of Pittsburgh, as well as in the Popular Culture Association, Comics Studies Society, Professional Wrestling Scholars Association, and countless others inbetween. I also want to thank the students that I have had the opportunity of teaching (and learning from) since I started this endeavor. Each of you is repsonsible for challenging and expanding my thinking and helping me grow.

Next I would like to thank my cohosts on my two podcasts, VoxPopcast (Wayne Wise, Katya Gorecki, Hannah Lee Rogers and Monica Geraffo) and Oh Gosh, Oh Golly, Oh Wow! (Anna Peppard and Andrew Deman), as well as the cavalcade of guests that we have had on each show, and the hosts of each and every podcast that has invited me to be a guest in the past few years, as well as every single listener who has bothered to download and listen to me rant about cultural studies. I take a lot of pride in those shows and what they mean for the future of public scholarship. Not only do I enjoy doing them, but they give me the weekly opportunity to think about the issues that I discuss within these pages and receive immediate feedback from my most respected colleagues. I am amazed and honored to have people listening as I simply have conversations with my friends about the things that we enjoy. I would extend this thanks as well to the readers of my blog and my now defunct comic strip, my followers on social media, my colleagues and fans in professional wrestling, and my fellow participants in all the podcasts that no one ever hears, which is to say, every conversation that I have ever had about comics at ever comic book shop I have ever visited and every comic book convention I ever worked. In particular, I thank the staff and customers at Phantom of The Attic Comics in Pittsburgh, for essentially being my personal comics research library.
Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, starting with my mother, Lynn Holly, and my grandparents, Mabel and Alonzo Thomas, who either had the foresight… or made the horrible mistake… of teaching a precocious two-year-old to read and ask way too many annoying and complicated questions — something that I have not stopped doing and do not intend to. I thank every other member of my family and all of my friends who have provided support in the years since. You have all enriched this project — and my life — and helped to make all of this possible. Most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Stephanie Siler, for a life of emotional support and partnership, especially from the moment that I had an obvious complete and total mental breakdown and decided to quit my old career and pursue a life in academia studying the funny books! And even more importantly, I want to thank her for her continued support through the 147 complete and total mental breakdowns I’ve probably had since making that decision and the 893,452,908 complete and total mental breakdowns that I will probably have over the rest of our lives.

Thank you. I love you all.

-Mav
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract......................................................................................................................................... iv

Dedication ..................................................................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgment .......................................................................................................................... vii

Table of Figures ........................................................................................................................... xii

Introduction: What is the Superhero Monomyth? ................................................................. xix

Chapter I: The Hero with a Thousand Masks: Exploring the Superhero Monomyth........... 1

- I Know It When I See It: The Myth of Genre ............................................................................ 5
- Cowboys with Capes: The American Hero and the Superhero Thematic Paradigm .......... 21
- Captain America vs. Lizzy Bennett: Multiple Histories and Mythic Gestalts ................. 29
- Often Upon a Time: The Multiple Monomyths .................................................................... 43
- Born Again… and again… and again: The Perpetual Publication Model ........................... 52

Chapter II: Wisdom of Solomon… Strength of Hercules…: Supermasculinity ............ 66

- Mensch and Übermensch: Subjective Ideology and Social Justice ................................. 68
- Deconstruction of the Innocent: The Invention of Adolescence and Juvenile Delinquency .. 82
- Might Makes Right: Hypermasculinity and Subjective Morality ......................................... 91
- Two-Fisted Justice: The Spectacle of Conflict Resolution ...................................................... 106
- Pound for Pound: The Currency of Violence ....................................................................... 119
- Underwear on the Outside: Dressing the Impossible Body ............................................... 129
Chapter III: Grace of Selena… Beauty of Aurora…: Superfemininity .............................. 140

Designated Hostage: Damsels in Distress and the Sweetheart Archetype ......................... 142
Deadly Kisses: The Seductress Archetype and the Sex/Violence Exchange ....................... 161
Like Him, But a Girl: Kid Sisters and Girl Sidekicks as Masculinity Extensions ............... 175
No-one Wants to be a Girl: Wonder Woman and the Resistance to the Superheroine
Archetype ........................................................................................................................................ 191
More Than a Lamp, Less Than a Refrigerator: The Sexpot Archetype and Hyperfeminine
Gender Performativity .................................................................................................................... 206

Chapter IV: And Then There was Sex: Evolving the Superhero Monomyth ..................... 225

A Titan for All Seasons: The Superhero Monomyth Grows Up ........................................ 228
I’m not that Innocent: Canon Innuendo and Fanfic Pornography ..................................... 255
Emma Peel and the Pill: The SuperSexual Revolution Was Televised ............................... 272
Feminism From Fashion to Fornication: The Supermakeover and the Sexual Revolution ... 283
The Forty-Year-Old Virgin: The Rise of the Direct Market and the Gradual Acceptance of
Casual Sexuality ......................................................................................................................... 297
Backs Don’t Bend That Way: Hyperviolent and Hypersexual Aesthetics of “the Dark Age”
........................................................................................................................................................ 312

Epilogue: What was the Superhero Monomyth? ................................................................ 333

Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 338
# TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Action Comics</em> vol. 1 #1, 1938</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>The Argosy</em> vol. 181 #5, 1926</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Detective Comics</em> vol. 1 #27, 1939</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Black Book Detective</em> vol. 9 #3, Sept. 1939</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Spring-Heeled Jack</em> penny dreadfuls, 1904</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lee Falk’s <em>The Phantom</em>, 1936</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Amazing Fantasy</em> vol. 1 #15, 1962</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Captain America Comics</em> vol. 1 #1, 1940</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>The Avengers</em> vol. 1 #4, 1964</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Pride and Prejudice and Zombies</em> movie poster, 2016</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Classic, Disney, and Marvel Comics incarnations of Hercules</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Cerebus</em> #19, 1980</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Daredevil: Born Again</em> trade paperback, 1987</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Mage: The Hero Discovered</em> #15, 1986</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Whiz Comics</em> #2, 1939</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Captain Marvel artwork. 1939 Beck (left) vs 1994 Ordway (center and right)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 17: *The Power of Shazam!* 1994 ................................................................. 63

Figure 18: Supermen of America membership card and certificate. ............................... 76

Figure 19: Sentinels of Liberty advertisement ............................................................... 81

Figure 20: *Tales from the Crypt* and *Captain America’s Weird Tales* ...................... 94

Figure 21: Covers from *Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* ................................................ 98

Figure 22: *Showcase* vol. 1 #4, 1956 ...................................................................... 100

Figure 23: Superman and Clark Kent, from *Superman* vol. 1 #209, 1968 ............... 101

Figure 24: *Amazing Fantasy* vol. 1 #15, 1962. Page 11 ........................................... 104

Figure 25: *Amazing Fantasy* vol. 1 #15, 1962. Page 8 ............................................... 104

Figure 26: *Batman* (1966) screen capture ..................................................................... 115

Figure 27: *World’s Finest Comics* vol. 1 #143, 1964 ................................................ 117

Figure 28: Batman and Robin vs. The Metalloids from *World’s Finest Comics* vol. 1 #143, 1964 ................................................................................................................. 118

Figure 29: Batman and Superman fight from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 1986 .... 120

Figure 30: *X-men* vol. 1 #100, 1976 .......................................................................... 124

Figure 31: Variations of the Superman costume over time ............................................. 132

Figure 32: *Superman* vol. 2 #123, 1997 ..................................................................... 133
Figure 33: Eugen Sandow ...................................................................................................... 134

Figure 34: Time for Change, Alex Ross, 2008................................................................. 136

Figure 35: “The Insult That Made a Man out of Mac”. A typical Charles Atlas advertisement, circa mid-1950s. .................................................................................................................. 138

Figure 36: Lois meets Superman in Action Comics vol 1. #1, 1938 .............................. 143

Figure 37: Dale Arden and Ming the Merciless in Alex Raymond’s Flash Gordon, Feb 11, 1934.................................................................................................................................................. 147

Figure 38: Dale Arden in Alex Raymond’s Flash Gordon, Feb 18, 1934 ................... 148

Figure 39: Green Lantern vol 3. #54, 1994................................................................. 155

Figure 40: Superman fat-shames Lois in Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane vol 1. #5, 1958 ............................................................................................................................................... 160

Figure 41: Batman vol 1. #84, 1954.............................................................................. 163

Figure 42: Batman vol. 1 #3, 1940................................................................................. 165

Figure 43: Batman vol. 1 #1, 1940................................................................................. 166

Figure 44: Batman (1966 TV show)............................................................................... 169

Figure 45: Batman vol. 1 #181, 1966............................................................................ 172

Figure 46: Green Lantern vol. 2 #16, 1966................................................................. 174
Figure 47: *Detective Comics* vol. 1 #233, 1956 ................................................................. 178

Figure 48: *Batman* vol. 1 #139, 1961 ........................................................................... 181

Figure 49: First Appearance of Hawkgirl in *Flash Comics* vol. 1 #24, 1941 .......... 182

Figure 50: *Captain Marvel Adventures* vol. 1 #18, 1942 ............................................. 185

Figure 51: *Action Comics* vol. 1 #252, 1959 ................................................................. 187

Figure 52: *Powerpuff Girls* (1998 TV show) ............................................................... 190

Figure 53: *Sensation Comics* vol. 1 #1, 1942 ............................................................... 192

Figure 54: *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #2, 1943 ................................................................. 198

Figure 55: H. G. Peter design sheet for Wonder Woman with William Moulton Marston notes, c. 1941 .................................................................................................................. 201

Figure 56: *Wonder Woman* covers from “the Diana Prince era” of 1968-1972 .......... 205

Figure 57: Sheena in *Jumbo Comics* vol. 1 #78, 1945 ................................................... 208

Figure 58: Good Girl Art pulp magazines ....................................................................... 211

Figure 59: Bettie Page photographed by Bunny Yeager, 1954 ....................................... 213

Figure 60: *Police Comics* vol. 1 #1, 1941 .................................................................. 213

Figure 61: *Phantom Lady* vol. 1 #13, 1947 .................................................................. 215

Figure 62: Unpublished Milo Manara Spider-Woman cover, 2014 ............................... 217
Figure 63: Sexy Lamp from *A Christmas Story* (1983) ......................................................... 218

Figure 64: Pamela Anderson in *Barb Wire* (1996)................................................................. 221

Figure 65: Sigourney Weaver and Carrie Henn as Ellen Ripley and Newt in *Aliens* (1986) 222

Figure 66: *Phantom Lady* vol. 1 #17, 1948 ............................................................................ 223

Figure 67: *Zap Comix* vol. 1 #0, 1968 .................................................................................... 226

Figure 68: *Detective Comics* vol. 1 #38, 1940 ...................................................................... 231

Figure 69: *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #1, 1966 .................................................................................. 233

Figure 70: *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #23, 1969 .............................................................................. 237

Figure 71: Wonder Girl in *The Brave and the Bold* vol. 1 #60, 1965 .................................... 238

Figure 72: *Green Lantern* vol. 2 #85, 1971 ............................................................................ 241

Figure 73: Final panel of “Judgement Day” from *Incredible Science Fiction* vol. 1 #33, 1956 ............................................................................................................................................. 244

Figure 74: Mal Duncan fighting off a gang from *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #26, 1970 .................... 246

Figure 75: *The New Teen Titans* vol. 1 #1, 1980 ................................................................. 248

Figure 76: Dr. Strange artwork from *Strange Tales* vol. 1 #128, 1964 ................................. 251

Figure 77: artwork from *Captain America* vol. 1 #175, 1974 ............................................. 253

Figure 78: *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #203, 1972 ...................................................................... 254
Figure 79: artwork from *Superboy in Big Bet*, circa 1950 ................................................................. 258

Figure 80: Superman and Wonder Woman in *Wonder Woman XXX: an Axel Braun Parody* (2015) .................................................................................................................................. 260

Figure 81: Supergirl, Wonder Woman and Superman fanart “Above the Clouds” by Balziku, circa 2017 ........................................................................................................................................ 262

Figure 82: *Action Comics* vol. 1 #285, 1962 ..................................................................................... 265

Figure 83: *Action Comics* vol. 1 #255, 1959 ..................................................................................... 269

Figure 84: Average age of loss of virginity vs marriage for American Women over time.
Source: Finer and Philbin, 2014 ........................................................................................................ 275

Figure 85: American women’s employment vs marriage over time. Source: United States Census Bureau ........................................................................................................................................ 278

Figure 86: the mod fashion of Emma Peel from *The Avengers*, circa 1966 ......................... 282

Figure 87: Wonder Girl’s makeover in *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #22, 1969 ........................................ 288

Figure 88: Diana Prince’s makeover in *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #178, 1968 ............................... 289

Figure 89: Diana Prince overcome by a kiss in *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #182, 1969 ............... 290

Figure 90: Supergirl overcome by a kiss in *Adventure Comics* vol. 1 #402, 1971 ............... 291

Figure 91: Supergirl shows off winning fan submission costume designs from *Super DC Giant* vol. 1 #S-24, 1971 ........................................................................................................................................ 292
Figure 92: Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane vol. 1 #80, 1968................................. 293

Figure 93: Dazzler vol. 1 #1, 1981................................................................................................. 301

Figure 94: Dazzler undressing for the male gaze in Dazzler vol. 1 #16, 1982 ............... 302

Figure 95: Nite Owl and Silk Spectre sex scene from Watchmen vol. 1 #7, 1987 ........... 305

Figure 96: Nite Owl and Silk Spectre post-coital scene from Watchmen vol. 1 #7, 1987 .... 305

Figure 97: Starfire and Nightwing first appear nude in bed in The New Teen Titans vol. 2 #1, 1984 ..................................................................................................................................... 308

Figure 98: Nightwing and Starfire casually share a bed nude in The New Teen Titans vol. 2 #39, 1988 ........................................................................................................................................ 309

Figure 99: Cyclops and Phoenix sex scene from Uncanny X-men vol. 1 #131, 1980 ....... 310

Figure 100: Fanart parodies on The Hawkeye Initiative from PrettyJeff (after Rob Liefeld) and Batwynn (after Mike DeBalfo)...................................................................................... 313

Figure 101: The Punisher vol. 1 #1, 1986............................................................................. 316

Figure 102: The Punisher vol. 2 #88, 1994........................................................................... 322

Figure 103: Batman: No Man’s Land #4, 2001345 ........................................................................ 323

Figure 104: WildC.A.T.S vol 1. #1, 1992 and Youngblood vol. 1 #1, 1992 ...................... 324

Figure 105: Witchblade vol. 1 #4, 1996 ............................................................................... 325
Figure 106: Sara Pezzini fighting while sexy in *Witchblade* vol. 1 #1, 1995 ......................... 326

Figure 107: Sara Pezzini dressing for the male gaze in *Witchblade* vol. 1 #1, 1995 ............. 327

Figure 108: for Sara Pezzini, aesthetics, sexuality, and power are all the same thing in

*Witchblade* vol. 1 #1, 1995.................................................................................................. 328

Figure 109: *Justice Society of America* vol. 3 #25, 2009 and *Supergirl* vol. 5 #1, 2005 ...... 329

Figure 110: *The Incredibles* movie poster, 2004................................................................. 335
Introduction: What is the Superhero Monomyth?

I once found myself in an argument with a stranger on the Internet who tried to justify his extreme racist and misogynist political beliefs with religion. Completely ignoring the United States specific constitutional separation of church and state, he argued that he knew that he was correct because Christianity was — at least in his mind — the basis for all morality and therefore the foundation for all law. When other people pointed out that not everyone was a Christian and questioned what this person’s theories on Christianity meant for atheists and followers of non-Christian religions, he argued that no one could possibly lead a moral life if they didn’t accept the teachings of Jesus Christ, whom he believed empowered his stances on superiority of white Christian men above other races, religions, and genders. Because I realized that there was no point continuing the argument in intelligent way, I decided to use the rest of the conversation to amuse myself. I responded that I didn’t need Jesus because I had Batman and Spider-man. When asked me for more details, I explained that superheroes taught me far more formative lessons than Christianity could offer that became the basis for a moral code. “Thou shalt not kill” is easy, but Batman and Spider-man taught me that criminals are a “suspicious and cowardly lot” and that “with great power comes great responsibility”. From other superheroes I learned that I should “be the best there is at what I do”, and that “you won’t like me when I’m angry”. Comic books also taught me how important it was to be prepared for anything, that science and intelligence are as powerful as strength and magic, to study and exercise to train both my mind and body, to always wear nice underwear beneath my clothes, and that it is absolutely okay to punch a White supremacist in the jaw and make fun of him while I do it.

While there was obviously a fair amount of snark to that answer, there was some truth to it as well. In Our Gods Wear Spandex, Christopher Knowles specifically argues that comics
fandom is a modern religion and that “superheroes now play for us the role once played by the
gods in ancient societies” and “it is precisely the reverential treatment of these characters—the
essentially religious portrayal of them—that resonates with the mass audience today” (17). He
has a point; superheroes certainly hold a reverential place in my life. I have been a superhero fan
for as long as I can remember. Undoubtedly, the comics I’ve read and cartoons, TV shows, and
movies I’ve watched since the 1970s have had some significant on contribution to my
personality, character, moral fiber, and ideology, even if I am not as consciously aware of it as I
might have pretended in that argument. Furthermore, I am certainly not alone in my love of
superheroes. In the twenty-first century, superhero movies have become the backbone of the
American box office, granting the characters a larger fan following than they have had in
decades. These fans have developed online communities where they analyze the minutia of each
frame of film and with a fervor that rivals if not exceeds the devotion of all but the most
dedicated followers of more organized religions. Finally, for the truly devoted, there is a sabbath
of sorts, as every Wednesday dedicated comics fans journey on a weekly basis to gather in
comics specialty shops for what certainly could be construed as a version of religious worship.

However, calling superheroes a religion feels distinctly false. Unlike Vishnu, Jehovah,
Allah, Yahweh, or other gods, neither I, nor most superhero devotees of which I am aware have
any real faith or belief in the existence of Spider-man or Batman. Instead, it is probably more
accurate to consider superheroes a kind of mythology as does Richard Reynolds, who argues,
“the superhero by his very existence asserts American utopianism, which remains (as has been

1 For complicated reasons that deal with publishing schedules, distribution companies, and marketing finances,
Wednesday is almost universally “new comics day” in the United States. While the particulars of why are
unimportant to this project, most comics retailers receive their weekly shipments and stock the shelves on
Wednesday. As such, it is consistently their busiest shopping day and the one most likely to see comic fans
loitering and discussing their favorite heroes.
ably pointed out by Baudrillard in *America*) a highly potent cultural myth” (83). He believes the ubiquitous popularity of characters like Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman as American cultural icons places them in concert with characters like the mythic Samson, Hercules, Beowulf, or Gilgamesh.

While at first it may seem strange to place a character like Batman on the same mythic level as classic heroes of epic myth like Beowulf and Hercules, comic book fans have been assumed this level of relevance for decades. After all, despite their long-lasting appeal Beowulf’s complete extant text is a mere 3,182 lines and Hercules only has twelve main canonical adventures. Batman, on the other hand has appeared in at least two new separate and distinct chapters of his ongoing story nearly every month since Detective Comics #27 was first published in 1939 as well as countless non-comic extensions to his mythos in films, television shows, video games and other media. Furthermore, comics were directly responsible for my interest in mythology as a young boy. My introduction to the world of Norse mythology came not from Snorri Sturluson’s *Poetic Edda* but from Marvel Comics’ *Thor*. DC Comics’ *Wonder Woman* is as responsible for my introduction to Greek mythos as Homer. Like many kids who grew up reading comics in the 70s and 80s, they were in many ways my gateway into classic mythology.

---

2 At least the original canonical versions of these characters are limited to these relatively few adventures. Given that throughout this project I will argue that all adaptations of expansive multi-creator, multimedia, multi version narratives should be considered equal parts of a given superhero’s mythos, we should consider other versions of the characters here as well. After all, there have been Beowulf films and Hercules does have some lesser-known myths not related to the main twelve labors. However, I would argue that even if all of versions are considered, there is still far less extant text for any of these characters than the literal thousands of individual and distinct Batman stories that have been written in the comics alone.

3 The first appearance of Batman was in *Detective Comics* #27 in March of 1939 (cover date May 1939). A second comic book, eponymously titled *Batman* #1 appeared in April of 1940 (cover date Spring 1940). Both titles have been in near constant publication ever sense and the character has also appeared in numerous other publications with some regularity such as *Justice League of America* and *Batman and the Outsiders*. As of July 2022, Comic Vine, a website that attempts to track all appearances of characters appearing in American comic books, reports that Batman has appeared in 21,626 comic book issues.
Many scholars have noted this connection between superheroes and mythology sought to use this connection to justify the value of comic books as an academic pursuit. Indeed, Knowles’ text *Our Gods Wear Spandex* is a defense of the value of comic book superheroes by directly relating them to their classic mythic inspirations and Reynolds’ *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* seeks to legitimize the superhero by showing that the mythologies that comic book world build can be as deep, rich, and complex as any classic mythology. Perhaps it is in the very nature of the comic book scholar to be defensive. For decades, comics fans have struggled to compare themselves with more established literary media — such as the novel — and argued that their stories can be read with the same critical lens, a tactic that has given rise to referring to comics as *graphic novels*, a term that only exists to lend gravitas and escape the juvenile connotations that the term *comic books* evokes.

As fans and scholars, we continue to be embarrassed by the idea of superheroes even as we seek to legitimize them. When asked to recommend the best graphic novels of all time, fans and scholars will almost certainly point to those that have seen the most critical success outside of comics fandom. Most notable among these recommendations is probably Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus*, a memoir of his parents’ experiences during the Holocaust and his struggles to emotionally connect with them as an adult. Another frequently recommended text is Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, wherein the author reflects on her dysfunctional childhood, her struggles with her sexuality, and her complicated relationship with her parents leading up to and after her father’s suicide. If a superhero graphic novel is recommended at all, it is most frequently Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, the sole graphic novel listed on *Time*’s “List of the 100 Best Novels”. However, while certainly innovative and influential within the superhero genre, *Watchmen* is actually an extremely poor example of both the superhero genre
overall and of superheroes as mythology in specific. In fact, as a superhero deconstruction, much of the work *Watchmen* is doing is attempt to escape many of the more mythic elements of superhero fantasy. It is an attempt to render superheroes as both unheroic and unsuper.

In truth, superheroes dominate the comic book market and have for most of their existence. Dismissing the superhero genre is a mistake. These adventures are ongoing epics that can continue for years or even decades, penned by countless authors, drawn by multitudes of artists, told and retold across different mediums. It is also unnecessary to attempt to justify the superhero genre in terms of other types of literature. Superheroes are not mythic because of a similarity to Hercules, Gilgamesh, Odysseus, or Beowulf any more than they are to Jesus Christ, Moses, Muhammed, or Buddha.

To most comic book readers, superheroes are mythic simply because they are; no further explanation is needed. Like all great myths, superhero comics are a shared experience. While narratives originate on the printed page, they are passed on as an oral tradition. The readers take ownership of the stories. The comic book shop is their town square where they gather to share their favorite stories — endlessly recounting their personal readings and debating the hidden meanings in the most well-known myths like *Watchmen* or *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Sometimes, they might evangelize more obscure tales with each other, attempting to initiate a new reader into the world of *Miracleman* or recommending a lesser-known older adventure of a popular hero, like *Spider-man: Kraven’s Last Hunt*, to a younger fan. They have their own journals and conference devoted to the study of the medium. It is all consuming. Fans might compare and contrast separate versions of the same story, analyzing the differences between the

---

4 The sole exception being a brief period at the end of WWII through the mid-1950s where crime, horror, and romance comics vast outperformed superhero comics.
events of Marvel Comics’ original *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and Marvel Studios’ cinematic adaptation of the same name with the dedication and attention to detail that a medieval literature professor might use to differentiate between Chrétien de Troyes and Thomas Mallory’s versions of King Arthur. The mythology is rich and deep. To question its validity is unheard of. There is no time; there is simply too much to study.

Despite my joking intention of the claims that Batman and Spider-man were the foundation for my morality, in truth, they were influential to my upbringing. But it is a mistake to assume their influence was limited to the ways in which they encouraged me to seek out other literature. Even though comics inspired my interest in classic mythology, that was never why I loved them. I loved them for their own merits. I loved them because even as young as seven-years-old, I truly did see the themes that I argued were present to a White supremacist on the Internet some forty years later. Superheroes gave me exposure to different cultures, and they gave me courage. I loved them because as a child, superheroes truly did inspire me far more than Sunday church services ever did. I truly did not need Jesus if I had Batman and Spider-man, and superheroes don’t need a connection to classic literature or ancient myth.

Superheroes are mythic in that for many fans, they are the only myth they have. They are an ever-evolving reflection of America’s cultural attitudes towards politics, race, religion, youth, war, drugs, gender, and sexuality across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Arguably, Batman and Spider-man are more popular than any mythic or religious figure that has ever been worshipped. When Reynolds called superheroes “a modern mythology”, he was understating their true value. They are the modern mythology; they are the only one that we have.
In his seminal work, *The Hero Has a Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell argued that “the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation--initiation--return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (28). It is Campbell’s contention that the monomyth, a term borrowed from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, is a formula that creates for creating a story that can appeal to all readers by following a template allows any social allegory to be laid on top of it. To Campbell, the monomyth is agnostic to scale, ethnicity, class, or religion. He specifically notes that it can be applied to “tribal or local heroes, such as the emperor Huang Ti, Moses, or the Aztec Tezcatlipoca” just as easily as “universal heroes—Mohammed, Jesus, Gautama Buddha—bring a message for the entire world” (35).

In the following chapters I will argue that over the course of the last century, a derivative of Campbell’s monomyth, the superhero monomyth, has become the dominant model for not only comic book superheroes but the bulk of contemporary American media. I will argue that the superhero monomyth has a peculiar construction of contradictions. It seeks to tell complete and cohesive stories without ever providing an ending. It strives to appear contemporary while remaining historic. It attempts to reflect cultural changes throughout the twentieth century while often actively resisting acknowledging them. And most importantly, that it is fundamentally structured around sexual and gender power dynamics though it often pretends that these do not exist. Ultimately, these contradictions have become baked into the fabric of the superhero monomyth in such a way that allows it to become a malleable template for genre-based storytelling that allows it to naturally adapt to and ignore almost any theme.

I will present my argument in four parts. The first chapter, “The Hero with a Thousand Masks: Exploring the Superhero Monomyth”, sets the framework will define the superhero
monomyth and how it is structured differently from Campbell’s classic version as well as John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett’s American monomyth. In this chapter I first distinguish between the superhero genre and the superhero monomyth arguing that while often conflated, they are distinct constructions that need not coexist in the same narrative. Decoupling the superhero genre from the superhero monomyth will allow for an explanation of how genre defining tropes can inform the monomyth, but the monomyth can remain agnostic to genre and thus more universally relevant. I then explain the structure of the superhero monomyth is defined by its thematic paradigm, its reliance on open ended narratives with multiple adaptations, and its timelessness which allows it to resist what Umberto Eco calls mythic consumption.

My second chapter, “Wisdom of Solomon… Strength of Hercules…: Supermasculinty”, explores historic development of the superhero monomyth in relation to its central protagonist, the superhero. Campbell’s classic monomyth assumes a central heroic figure rising from amongst the common people to complete an exceptional epic journey. Here I will explain that superhero monomyth differs in that the superhero is definitionally an exceptional figure and his journey can never be completed. Furthermore, I will explain how the superhero monomyth owes much of its construction to repetition of genre tropes developed combat ephebiphobic fears of an emerging youth culture, which the superhero monomyth inevitably also serves to shape. I will then explain how the superhero monomyth’s thematic paradigm prescribes specific performance of hyperviolent masculinity for its protagonist which results in the creation of an economy within the monomyth wherein a character’s value is determined by his capacity to perform violence.

In my third chapter, “Grace of Selena… Beauty of Aurora…: Superfemininity”, speaks to the presumption that the protagonist of the superhero monomyth is male and examines the placement of female characters within it, typically as supporting characters within the male
protagonist’s narrative. Here I will examine the historic development of female characters in response to the presumed male protagonist of the previous chapter. I will expand on the two archetypes for femininity offered by Campbell in his classic monomyth to explore how they have been adapted and extended to serve the superhero monomyth. This chapter will show that in a narrative system structured around an economy of masculine violence, where women are primarily defined by their relationship to men, an exchange economy between sex and violence evolves where one is used to give value to the other. I will then examine the superhero monomyth’s traditional complications with creating independent female protagonists within this framework, focusing on the most notable successful superheroine, Wonder Woman.

My final chapter, “Evolving the Superhero Monomyth”, traces the evolution of the superhero monomyth from its inception as a set of genre tropes meant to restrict the maturity level that superhero narratives could address into a thematic paradigm that could reflect a variety of social problems for any subculture in any genre. In particular, I examine the evolution of the monomyth as it matured to address issues of race, youth culture, drugs, sex, and feminism over the latter half of the twentieth century. Finally, I address the state of the superhero monomyth as the twentieth century ended. Here I will establish how, like Campbell’s original monomyth and Jewett and Lawrence’s American monomyth derivative, the superhero monomyth has become genre independent. Instead, it now describes a method of storytelling that can be mapped into multiple mediums to provide modern allegory. In a brief epilogue I will discuss current state of the superhero monomyth as it moves beyond its comic book roots and takes advantage of its cultural ubiquity.
Chapter I: The Hero with a Thousand Masks: Exploring the Superhero Monomyth

To portray superhero comics as serious and respectable literature, rather than childish fantasy, fans and scholars often draw parallels with more established genres and mediums. For instance, the term graphic novel is sometimes employed, largely to appropriate the prestige of the more mature novel. Indeed, the term was only popularized as a marketing ploy to encourage booksellers to devote shelf space to comics they would not otherwise consider because of a presumed juvenile connection. In truth, most superhero comics are rather dissimilar in both form and function from the novel. They are more akin to the legends of ancient myth. In the most trivial sense, superhero narratives follow beings with supernatural powers through continuous battles of ideological good and evil forces. These adventures are ongoing epics that can continue for years or even decades, penned by countless authors, drawn by multitudes of artists, told, and retold across different mediums. Any analysis of the superhero genre should view it through a mythic lens.

However, most mythic analysis of superheroes remains overly concerned with genre structure genre and how to classify which narratives do and do not qualify or comparative analysis of the specific superhero lore as reflective of classic mythology. I am not directly interested in either of these tracts beyond their usefulness as tools for monomythic analysis. Instead, I propose that by simply accepting the mythic nature of the superhero as a given and allowing for a generous definition of superheroic qualification, we can explore how the superhero conceptually functions as a monomyth reflecting cultural phenomena — in this case constructions of gender and anxieties of youth culture across the twentieth century.
In the twenty-first century, superheroes have become a near ubiquitous cultural phenomenon. In 2021, superhero films accounted for 32% of the 1.4 billion dollar North American box-office (“Box Office Performance History for Super Hero Movies”). Furthermore, superheroes are a stalwart of 2020s American media with television programs like the CW’s *The Flash* and videogames like the critically acclaimed *Batman: Arkham* series. However, the superhero has long been most associated with the American comic book industry. What superhero fans now call the Golden Age\(^5\) began with the first issue of *Action Comics* on April 18, 1938 (see Figure 1).\(^6\) The comic featured a thirteen-page illustrated short story by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster — two twenty-three-year-old Jewish men from Cleveland, Ohio — that introduced Superman and changed the world. Siegel and Shuster did not initially intend to make a comic book at all. Their first incarnation of Superman appeared in a short story written by Siegel and illustrated by Shuster in the latter’s self-published zine, *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*. In this story, “The Reign of the Superman,” Siegel imagined the title character as a villain with scientifically engineered

---

\(^5\) Comic readers commonly accept four ages of comics. *The Golden Age* begins with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* in June 1938. *The Silver Age* begins with the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1955 and an industry-wide shift to family-friendly content. *The Bronze Age* refers to the period starting around 1970 when publishers began attempting to address social issues relevant to their teen audience such as race relations, drugs and the Vietnam war while still adhering to decency standards for the Silver Age. *The Modern Age*, beginning around 1985, reflects a shift where mainstream and independent publishers began to create works that ignored the CCA standards to directly address more mature subject matter.

\(^6\) Cover dated June 1938. Because of historic idiosyncrasies of the newsstand distribution system, American comic books traditionally list dates in the future as their publication dates. Originally these dates served as notifications to newsstand retailers when to remove the comics from the shelves and were therefore generally one to two months ahead of when the comic was released.
psychic powers. Fascinated by Nietzsche’s Übermensch from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Siegel wished to further explore the possibilities of posthuman evolution in his fiction and reused the name of “The Superman” in several later works about superpowered characters. After numerous attempts and failures to secure newspaper comic strip syndication contract, the pair sold their most recent illustrated Superman story to DC Comics\(^7\) to be published in the inaugural issue of *Action Comics*.

While initiating the Golden Age, Siegel and Shuster did not invent the comic book. The comic book in its modern form is typically attributed to Max Gaines and Harry Wildenberg, publishers of *Funnies on Parade* in 1933 (Wright 3).\(^8\) Arguably, Siegel and Shuster also did not invent the superhero per se; the exact meaning of that term is the subject of some debate. What is certain is that *Action Comics* #1 solidified the economic future of the American comic book industry. Superman comics quickly became the leading sellers, with print runs nearing 1,000,000 per month — doubling or even tripling their closest competitors (Wright 13-14).\(^9\) DC Comics and other publishers quickly sought to capitalize on the character’s popularity. By the mid 1940s superhero fantasy was the predominant genre in American comics. Consequently, to this day, for many people, comic book automatically implies superhero as though they are one and the same.

\(^7\) At the time, the company was publishing under the name “National Comics.” They began commonly calling themselves DC Comics (short for Detective Comics, another leading title) as early as the 1940s but did not officially change their legal corporate identity until 1977. For consistency, I will refer to all publishers by their modern names except in cases where distinguishing between a modern name and a prior incarnation of the company is strictly necessary.

\(^8\) Even this is debatable. Dell Publishing originally began printing tabloid sized weekly magazine of comics, *The Funnies*, in 1929 (Wright 3). Gaines and Wildenberg’s actual innovation was to print the magazines in a smaller form by shrinking the artwork and folding the tabloid pages in half, thus reducing printing costs. Arguably the form predates even this, as comics were being published in newspapers and pulp magazines for decades earlier. Some comic historians like Scott McCloud and Chris Gavaler argue that comics as an art form predates printing press and includes manuscripts and even cave paintings.

\(^9\) For comparison, the top-selling comics in 2020 have print runs of around 100,000 copies with most successful comics from top tier publishers in the 20,000 to 30,000-copy range (Comichron).
However, the introduction of Superman did more than launch a profitable publishing sector. While Superman comics may not be the most critically respected literature, Superman himself is almost certainly among the most recognized and prominent fictional characters in the world, familiar even amongst those who have never read a comic at all. In creating him, Siegel and Shuster gave birth to the modern incarnation of the epic myth. Through Superman and the superheroes that followed him, primarily those published by DC Comics and Marvel Comics — collectively known as the Big Two\(^{10} \) — a new heroic archetype was created with tropes exemplifying American masculinity: strong, powerful, just, white, and heterosexual.

Though much scholarly attention has examined the construction of the superhero genre, little has focused on its status as a myth and the ramifications that entails. The little work that does either focuses purely on the comparative aspect, likening modern superheroes to their classic mythic and religious counterparts, or takes a wider view on myth’s influence on modern society, combining superheroes with other American mythic types. Furthermore, because of superheroes’ close association with the comic medium, many scholars tend to fold the study of superheroes into the study of comics. The conflation of these factors leads to a lack of understanding of the distinct manner in which superheroes function as both genre and myth, leading to disagreement in both the academic and popular comic communities as to what a superhero or a superhero story even is.

\(^{10} \) Although many companies have published superhero comic books over the years, Marvel and DC have always maintained market dominance since the inception of the genre, with the possible exception of the now-defunct Fawcett Comics’ Captain Marvel character in the 1940s. In 2022, DC and Marvel currently combine for roughly 70% of US market share in comics and have for decades. The next closest competitor, Image Comics hovering around 10% and no other publisher achieves more than 5% (Comichron). While sales records are poorly reported, it is commonly accepted that Marvel commanded more than 70% of the market alone in the 1980s. As such, the Big Two (sometimes called the Big Three when combined with Image) have primarily determined industry trends for the bulk of comics history and will account for the bulk of the examples used here unless otherwise noted.
I argue that the superhero monomyth derives from, but is a distinct construction from, the classic monomyth theorized by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While the superhero monomyth shares much of its genesis with the American monomyth, many of its traits derived separately from its history in the hybrid visual and textual comic book medium and specific incidents that occurred during its development over the last century both inside of the comic book industry and in American culture at large. Because of its unique origins, the superhero monomyth thus became an allegorical template for a specific approach to social justice based on the tenets of American exceptionalism and hardboiled masculinity.

**I Know It When I See It: The Myth of Genre**

“There's something about the superheroes and the idea behind their relationship with humans, whether it's a metaphor for the better part of ourselves, or the more flawed part of ourselves. So, it seems to really be our own pop-culture version of Greek mythology.”

- Clark Gregg

While fans and scholars often speak of the superhero genre, I contend that the cultural strength of the superhero is in his function as a monomythic structure agnostic to genre. That is to say, the superhero functions as a cultural surrogate who exists outside of genre tropes and conventions and may be inserted into multiple genres. To decouple the monomythic superhero from the genre which birthed him, it is useful to first consider a closely associated mythic archetype with a longer academic tradition. The cowboy frontiersman is perhaps the premier figure of American myth. He provides the basis for the Hollywood gunslinger and is the

---

11 Clark Gregg is an actor who portrays the character of Agent Phil Coulson, a government agent who works alongside superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe film series and its companion television spin-off *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

12 While female superheroines have existed in some form or another since the advent of the genre, for reasons that will be explained in later chapters, the focal point has traditionally been on heteronormative masculinity. As such, male pronouns will be used throughout this project except in the cases where the examples are specifically female or other genders.
prototype for American action heroes from gritty hardboiled detectives to swashbuckling space pirates. Sociologist Michael Kimmel argues that the American cowboy, as portrayed in media, is and an entirely fictitious invention that never existed (109). Kimmel traces the cowboy archetype to Prentiss Ingraham’s biography of Buck Taylor in 1887. While real-life cowboys of the time were livestock herders and attendants, Taylor was an entertainer working for Buffalo Bill Cody’s traveling circus. Ingraham’s hyperbolized account of Taylor’s exploits became the template for the cowboy myth, transforming the cowboy from a working-class journeyman into the pinnacle of idealized nineteenth century masculinity, “fierce and brave, willing to venture into unknown territory, a ‘negligent, irrepressible wilderness,’ and tame it for women, children, and emasculated civilized men” (Kimmel 110).

The Hollywood western and the superhero comic book came to prominence in the same period and social context: 1930s America. Both owe their genesis to the frontier cowboy tradition established in late nineteenth and early twentieth century pulp magazines. The first of the pulps, The Argosy (see Figure 2), began as an all-purpose magazine in the 1880s before shifting its focus towards fiction in the mid 1890s and eventually settling into the fantasy, science fiction and western genres. Authors —

---

13 Kimmel freely mixes language from period cowboy literature and writings in with his history. In a footnote, he attributes the characterization of “negligent, irrepressible wilderness” to author and historian Owen Wister. Wister not only wrote several pieces of cowboy novels and short stories but also detailed the evolution of the genre on the 1893 essay “The Evolution of the Cow Puncher.”

14 Pulp magazines were the name given to American fiction anthologies with a heavy focus on genre published from the 1890s through the 1950s. They were so named because of the inexpensive wood pulp paper they were printed on to keep the prices down for popular consumption. The pulps gave rise to several prototypical superheroes that predated the comic book golden age including Doc Savage, John Carter of Mars, The Shadow, and Tarzan.
paid by the word on a work-for-hire basis and often writing under pseudonyms or anonymously with no expectation of copyright — relied on formulaic patterns of tropes and style to maximize output that came to be known as pulp fiction: purple prose; an emphasis on hyperbole, action, and suspense; a fascination with both the mysterious occult and scientific innovation; xenophobic fear of other cultures; hardboiled heroes with stoic demeanors and a penchant for punching their way out of problems; and beautiful women defined more by sex appeal than character. By the 1930s, westerns also became the dominant genre in Hollywood film, in part because of their relative cheapness to produce but also, I would argue, because of their popularity in pulp magazines and their nostalgic celebration of the near past of a country rapidly entering the era of modernization. The cowboy frontiersman and other pulp heroes spoke to the exceptional nature of the American spirit — masculine heroes able to triumph over any adversary, including fears and anxieties over modernity.

Though comics existed prior to Superman, comic fandom\textsuperscript{15} nearly universally considers his first appearance in the 1938 premiere of \textit{Action Comics}\textsuperscript{16} as beginning of the modern superhero. The story introduces Clark Kent, a seeming unexceptional man with a secret dual identity. Whenever injustice threatens his city, Clark changes into his alter-ego Superman, a muscle-bound champion of virtue with otherworldly powers. The tropes of this story would be

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{15} A \textit{fandom} is a subculture devoted to a particular pop-culture interest. Fandoms may be distinct to specific properties (for instance the Star Wars fandom), an entire genre (the horror fandom), a medium (comic book fandom) or any mix between. While they are largely officially unorganized and organically constituted, they often maintain their own jargon and customs. Fandoms often provide the opportunity for socialization and discussion between members with similar interests in both casual small-scale relationships and large, structured, formal events, commonly called \textit{conventions}. Because of their historic relationship, the comic book and superhero fandoms remain inextricably intertwined.

\textsuperscript{16} Like most comic publications of the time, \textit{Action Comics} began as an anthology series featuring several unrelated pulp adventure style stories per issue. Superman quickly became the magazine’s premiere success story with customers asking at newsstands (Wright 9). This would eventually lead to DC Comics not only spinning the character off into his own eponymous solo publication but transitioning away from the anthology style of storyline for \textit{Action Comics} until it was simply a Superman solo publication as well.
\end{quote}
duplicated repeatedly over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first (Wright 8-11) including a skintight costume with a logo on the chest, a flowing cape, a secret identity, miraculous powers, a devotion to social justice, and the capacity to solve most conflicts through righteous violence. Superman became an American pop culture sensation, spinning off into a radio series within a year of his debut, followed quickly by animated and live-action film shorts over the next decade and television series soon after in 1951. That said, while *Action Comics #1* provides a convenient tent pole around which to formalize the superhero genre and begin the discussion of its tropes and construction, it fails to completely describe the superhero myth because the superhero genre and the superhero monomyth, while related are separate and distinct entities. While both are aspects of the superhero story, one does not necessarily require the other.

While there is a lack of consensus on the exact definition of the superhero genre, much work is devoted to enumerating its characteristics. In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, comic scholar Peter Coogan defines the genre in relations to the protagonist, arguing that the superhero must have three qualifying aspects: mission, powers, and identity — or MPI (39). That is the superhero must be devoted to a prosocial ideological mission serving his community (30-31), he must have powers or special abilities beyond the capacity of normal human beings (31), and finally, he must have an iconic identity that signifies his superhero persona separate from his personal life (32). To Coogan, the MPI structure is essential in recognizing the superhero genre as distinct from others. If any part of the equation is missing, Coogan argues that the character ceases being a superhero and by extension the story no longer qualifies as a superhero narrative.

Coogan’s MPI structure is tailored to fit Superman perfectly. Superman’s prosocial mission is clear; he has devoted his life to the protection of innocents and the pursuit of justice. He has fantastic powers of flight, x-ray vision and strength well beyond the capability of
humanity that he uses in service of that mission. His identity as a superhero is clearly announced, not only by his name which includes the word “super” but also by his blue and red costume with its flowing cape and iconic S chevron logo emblazoned on the chest. Given that the rest of the American superhero genre specifically sought to duplicate the popularity of Siegel and Shuster’s creation and uses the character as a template, it is unsurprising how well the Man of Steel fits well within the bounds of Coogan’s MPI taxonomy.

However, a flaw in the MPI taxonomy is that Coogan must massage his definition to make certain characters traditionally accepted as superheroes fit within the framework. Batman, who debuted in *Detective Comics* vol. 1 #27 (see Figure 3) just under a year after the premiere of Superman and is universally acknowledged by fandom and creators alike as a superhero, is somewhat problematic to the MPI taxonomy. While Batman is a highly trained athlete and martial artist as well as a brilliant detective and scientist, he lacks *superpowers* in the traditional sense. Coogan argues that Batman is clearly a superhero, because “while he has no distinctly ‘super’ powers his physical strength and mental abilities allow him to fight crime alongside his more powerful brethren” (41). At the same time, Coogan disqualifies the Black Bat, a very similar but lesser-known costumed crimefighter appearing in pulp magazines from the
same era (see Figure 4), because his costume lacks a chevron or identifying sigil (35). That is, at least to Coogan, the Black Bat’s identity is not announced formally enough to register as qualifying under the MPI.

Comic book author Kurt Busiek, seeking a looser, but still formalized genre definition, addresses the seeming inconsistency in Coogan’s taxonomy. Like Coogan, Busiek defines the genre as any story containing superheroes, but argues a less absolute definition of a superhero. According to Busiek, “The primary hallmarks of the superhero are superpowers, costume, code name, secret identity, heroic ongoing mission, and superhero milieu. If the character has three of those six, he or she is probably a superhero” (133). Busiek’s mission and superpowers elements work in much the same way as the MPI taxonomy. Coogan’s heroic identity, encompasses Busiek’s criteria of code name (a public identity that the superhero is most readily identified by), secret identity (an alter ego that the superhero uses during his private life, unknown to the general populace), and costume (a uniform visually distinguishing the superhero’s role as a crimefighter). Superhero milieu is Busiek’s catch all that argues a character can be considered a superhero by close association with other characters already recognized as such. That is to say, Batman’s lack of superpowers is rendered moot because diegetically he is recognized as a superhero by Superman, Wonder Woman and scores of other characters who clearly qualify.

Busiek’s wider taxonomy includes a greater range of texts as superhero stories, allowing him to make subtle distinctions that mark some characters as more superheroic than others. He naturally includes Superman but also adds Buffy Summers, from television’s Buffy the Vampire

17 Busiek maintains that a key aspect of the mission is that it be “ongoing,” something that Coogan does not specifically concern himself with. This distinction between the two is of little consequence when comparing their arguments to each other but will be pertinent when discussing the superhero’s mythic incomsumability in the sections that follow this one.
Slayer, because of her special skills and abilities, her ongoing mission to protect the world from vampires and other supernatural creatures, and her codename of “the Slayer” that identifies her with her mission (135). At the same time, Busiek identifies the legendary folk hero Robin Hood as a “borderline case” (135) for missing half of the criteria and only tenuously meeting others. Coogan specifically excludes both Buffy (124) and Robin Hood (48) because they fail to meet the MPI construction of identity, as do essentially all characters not wearing an iconic superhero costume. Because of these differences, where Coogan argues Superman is the first superhero, Busiek sees Superman as only the definitive example most closely associated with it.

Some scholars define the superhero genre by specific story tropes rather than simply character tropes. Comics scholar Richard Reynolds argues that the superhero genre represents a new “modern mythology” but laments that “the superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership — often to the exasperation of writers and artists, many of whom have proclaimed it to be a worn-out formula” (8). Reynolds then goes to explain that the superhero genre is defined by seven tropes established by Action Comics #1: the superhero has lost parents, is a man-god, fights for justice, must performatively contrast with normal non-superpowered beings, has a secret identity, must be political, and uses science as a substitute for magic (12-16). While Reynolds allows for a very loose interpretation of each of his tropes for and argues in favor of the superhero myth being a more substantial phenomenon than a genre, he still sees the superhero myth as inherently tied to the superhero genre.

---

18 It is worth noting that Coogan makes a point of distinguishing between what he considers two separate terms, superhero and super hero, noting the space between the two words in the latter. To Coogan, characters, like Buffy, who fall outside of the purview of his specific definition for the superhero, may be considered super heroes, inferior to the more exclusive archetype but superior to other heroes (48-49). The distinction is, even by Coogan’s own reckoning, somewhat pedantic. It will be ignored throughout this text as I find it arbitrary and orthogonal to the greater argument that I make here. As such, I will use only the single word variation.
Other comics scholars continue the mythic argument, using Superman as a metric to establish the superheroness of other characters, sometimes arguing that the superhero genre began far earlier than 1938. In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, comics artist and pop-culture critic Christopher Knowles takes the suggestion of superheroes as myth literally arguing that the genre represents “the emergence of a strange kind of religion” where “superheroes now play for us the role once placed by gods in ancient societies” (16). Knowles traces the superhero back to the gods and heroes of ancient myth, starting with the Sumerian legend of Gilgamesh (23) and suggesting that the word “hero” even derives from Horus, king of the Egyptian gods (24). For Knowles superheroes are extraordinary beings of great power worshipped as gods — or heroes — by the common man, essentially taking the man-god portion of Reynolds’ argument but extending it forward to its ultimate conclusion — the superhero as religion. Knowles then builds his case for superheroes as myth by examining a collection of popular characters from classic myth, modern religions, pulp fiction magazines and superhero comics to show that the genre conventions of superheroes are essentially identical to those of religious mythos.

However, taken together, these arguments point to a flaw in defining the superhero as a genre convention. In each case, the author argues the superhero genre as prescriptive. They attempt to establish specific formulae which encompasses that which is a superhero and that which is not. It bears noting that even though Reynolds argues that the genre is “tightly defined”, his definition and those offered by Knowles, Busiek, and Coogan widely differ. In reality, the genre is not “tightly defined” nor has it ever been. Indeed, arguments about whether Buffy Summers, Robin Hood, Gilgamesh or even Batman truly qualify as superheroes occur in comic book shops across America on a nigh-weekly basis.
Like Knowles, comics and literature scholar Chris Gavaler sees superheroes as a natural extension of classic myth. However, Gavaler reaches even further back, arguing that the Lascaux Cave paintings in Montignac, France — which appear to illustrate the epic story of a hunter battling a horde of beasts — should be considered the “published” first superhero comic, thus dating the genre to 15,000 BCE (18). Like Knowles, Gavaler uses comparisons to Superman and other commonly accepted superheroes to argue that the genre is simply the natural evolution ancient of myth. However, Gavaler recognizes the inherent difficulty in defining the superhero generically, noting that “they defy conventional definitions because they contain too many conventions” (3, emphasis mine). He argues that for any possible list of tropes a group of comic readers might generate to define superheroes, they will immediately find exceptions to their own rules. Instead, Gavaler attempts to define the superhero inductively. He casts a wide net that presumes that the superhero genre might encompass all stories about supernatural heroes and then examines the merits of each story individually. This allows him to easily consider the likes of Gilgamesh, 007, King Arthur and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde alongside Superman, Batman, Spiderman and the Hulk.

Gavaler’s sentiments about the folly of conventional definitions for the superhero genre are somewhat predicted by semiotician Anne Freadman, who warns against what she calls the recipe theory of genre (39) or privileging any set of rules for definitive inclusion of exclusion in any literary genre. Like Gavaler, Freadman sees genre prescriptivism as futile because any set of rules will ultimately have so many exceptions as to render the strong definition useless. She argues that “recipes are a genre; but genres are not recipes” (42), and that scholars fall into the trap of recipe theory because the typical assumption that “a text is ‘in’ a genre” and “that genre is ‘in’ text” are both fundamentally incorrect (41). Instead, Freadman offers that genre should be
viewed as a set of tools for contextual inquiry and discussion of a text rather than a true
descriptor. Genre is a semiotic lens with which a text can be discussed in comparison to other
texts. As such, the superhero genre, like any genre, remains abstract to the point that a true
comprehensive definition is impossible. I believe that it is also unnecessary.

Instead, I offer that the definition of what is and is not a superhero story can be side-
stepped by presuming a rough familiarity with the base concept of the superhero genre is
ubiquitous in contemporary American culture. In 1964, the United States Supreme Court heard
the case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. The dispute centered on whether or not Nico Jacobellis, the
manager of a Cleveland, Ohio cinema, had violated local anti-pornography ordinances by
screening the 1958 French art film *Les Amants*. Ultimately, the court found in favor of Jacobellis,
arguing that the film did not qualify as obscene because it was not “hard-core pornography.”
However, the seven-justice majority was unable to come to a consensus as to what the exact
definition of “hard-core pornography” was, with Justice Potter Stewart ultimately writing, “I
shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within
that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know
it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that” (197). That is to say, that
while Stewart suggests a genre may be described by common tropes that occur within it, the
occurrence of those tropes does not necessarily imply the genre, and that sometimes inclusion or
rejection is an undefinable personal feeling.

Justice Stewart’s words extend to genres beyond pornography. Returning to the cowboy
action hero, fans of the Hollywood western know that Clint Eastwood’s *A Fistful of Dollars*
(1964) is a classic example of the genre and likely also include his film *Unforgiven* (1992) nearly
three decades later. A side-by-side examination of the two films presents several similarities that
might be used to define the western genre. Both are studies in stoic masculinity featuring an outlaw gunslinger protagonist with a non-conventional but strong moral code. The cowboy hero wears late nineteenth-century period southern dress, complete with ten-gallon hat and leather riding boots. Like the superhero genre’s reliance on the superhero archetype, the western might be defined as story featuring a cowboy protagonist. But clearly there are cinematic westerns that do not meet all of these criteria. Many John Wayne westerns, such as *Fort Apache* (1948), portray him as a far more conventional and moral hero, often a lawman or soldier in the Union Army during the United States Civil War. At the same time, Clint Eastwood has starred in many similar films with these tropes that are arguably not westerns. *The Beguiled* (1971), while a period piece about a Union soldier set in the South during the Civil War like *Fort Apache*, is more of a gothic thriller than a western. *Dirty Harry* (1971), while thematically similar to Eastwood’s western films, fits more neatly in the crime drama genre. Conversely, Jon Favreau’s *Cowboys & Aliens* (2011) is clearly marked as a western by its setting and the cowboy archetype denoted by half its title, even though the other titular characters seem to push the film into the science fiction genre. Finally, while *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) may have a western setting and its protagonist characters are cowboys — and in fact far more historically accurate cowboys than occur in any of the other films mentioned here — its theme and plot concerning the secret homosexual relationship between two men in an unfavorable society seems to separate it entirely from the western genre. There is no clear-cut rule for the film’s exclusion. It includes many tropes of the western genre: the cowboy occupation, clothing choices, and southwestern setting. Other cowboy films have challenged traditional standards heteronormative masculinity. While *Brokeback Mountain* goes further than any film before it, certainly, other westerns contain homosocial and even homoerotic undertones. Yet, to paraphrase Justice Stewart, while I may not
be able to intelligibly qualify the inclusive requirements of the western genre, I know it when I see it, and *Brokeback Mountain* does not fit.

Therein lies the essential disconnect of genre classification. While *Brokeback Mountain* does not fit my personal conception of the western genre, for others it might fit very well. Even with strictly defined rules like those Coogan and Busiek present, some amount of subjectivity will always exist when determining if individual cases qualify and the individual reader may come to individual conclusions. Since Buffy uses her real name and “vampire slayer” is more of a job title than a codename, does it truly qualify as a superhero identity? While Batman is in peak physical and mental condition for a human being, does this count as having superpowers? The answer is *maybe*! To those devoted to creating a fully qualified definition of the superhero genre, this may be disheartening. I argue, however, that the imprecision is part of what pushes the superhero narrative into the realm of myth. The lack of specificity gives readers authority to extend the genre in the way most meaningful to them.

In fact, as I will argue in this project, the monomythic *superhero archetype* has in a sense become completely decoupled from the *superhero fantasy genre*. In the same way in which a cowboy character might exist outside of western, a detective might exist outside of a mystery, or a vampire hunter might exist outside of gothic horror, the superhero can exist outside of the superhero story. As Freadman notes, genre is a tool used to discuss a text in a certain context. As such, Buffy and Batman count as superheroes whenever we as readers choose to read them as such. They are also a vampire hunter and a hardboiled detective in other contexts. However, the same could, and should, be said for Abraham Van Helsing and Sherlock Holmes, both of whom have appeared in Marvel Comics titles connected to other superheroes. Accordingly, for this project I will focus on themes connected to archetypal superheroes characters, rather than the
tropes that define why they are included. I will presume that for any example I use, a reader will be able to grant that even if they personally disagree, they understand why I am qualifying that character as a superhero. I am not only allowing for the possibility that superheroes exist outside of the superhero fantasy genre, but I am also presuming they **must**!

For instance, an obscure but key character that highlights the imprecision of superhero genre, and the fluidity of superhero archetype is Spring-Heeled Jack. Jack is a figure of British Victorian folklore. If Jack was a real person, his true identity is unknown, but he had reached the status of urban legend by the mid-nineteenth century. In 1838, British newspapers began reporting of an unknown assailant terrorizing London women by night (Matthews 57). The man stopped short of murdering, raping, or even physically harming his victims and instead seemed to focus on frightening them as much as possible (25). Sensationalized reports increasingly began to attribute supernatural abilities to the attacker, claiming that he could disappear into the night like a ghost, breathe fire, and could leap several yards into the air from the ground. This last ability caused newspapers to dub him with the moniker “Spring-Heeled Jack” (13).

Sightings and attacks attributed to Spring-Heeled Jack persisted into the early twentieth century, seven decades after initial reports. Over time the reports of his activities became so unbelievable that there was little doubt that they were pure fantasy and by 1863 completely fictionalized adventures of Jack began appearing in penny dreadfuls.\(^1\) While the original Spring-

\(^{1}\) Penny dreadfuls were the nineteenth century British equivalent of the American pulp-fiction magazine. They were low-cost periodicals printed on cheap paper, which published fiction, often serialized novels, targeted at lower income consumers. Their name derives from their inexpensive cost and an insinuation about the low culture quality of the literature contained within. Along with pulp-fiction magazines, they are in many ways the precursor to the modern comic book.
Heeled Jack, if he ever existed, was a criminal, beginning with the anonymously penned

*Spring-Heeled Jack: The Terror of London*, Jack became a Robin Hood-like antihero who

protected helpless women from other villains and opposed corrupt authority figures (Matthews 222). The illustrations accompanying these stories depict Spring-Heeled Jack as a powerful figure, towering over evildoers or pouncing upon them from above (see Figure 5). His bat-like wings and horned helmet evoke an appearance similar to what DC Comics artist Bill Finger adopted for Batman some decades later.

Gavaler’s broad taxonomy of superheroes explicitly includes Spring-heeled Jack because of his supernatural abilities and heroic behavior (68, 85). Conversely, Coogan argues that

Figure 5: *Spring-Heeled Jack* penny dreadfuls, 1904

---

20 Like modern comic books, penny dreadfuls often focused on a single continuing story with the primary goal being to encourage the reader to buy every issue. As such, the publishing company-maintained copyrights and writers were assigned on work-for-hire basis, like the model employed by Marvel Comics and DC Comics currently. Very infrequently were the stories attributed to any particular author and sometimes several might pen individual chapters over the period that serialization was occurring. In his archive of the historic and fictionalized accounts of Spring-Heeled Jack, literary scholar John Matthews theorizes that this story, *Spring-Heeled Jack: The Terror of London* was possibly written by either journalist George Augustus Sala, war novelist Alfred Burridge, or prolific penny dreadful author Edwin J. Brett (Matthews 222, 243).
because Spring-Heeled Jack appeared so long before the timeframe when other superhero narratives arose, Spring-Heeled Jack must be considered an anomaly and not part of the genre proper (176-177).\textsuperscript{21} I contend that — regardless of whether Spring-Heeled Jack technically fits the mold of a superhero story by any genre convention — his supernatural abilities, on-going epic adventures from multiple creators, and the manner in which his legend grew more fantastic over time certainly begins to move him into the realm of superhero myth.

A more well-known character speaking to the tension between superhero genre and myth is Lee Falk’s *The Phantom* (see Figure 6), a costumed adventurer who debuted as a syndicated newspaper strip in 1936, two years prior to *Action Comics* #1. Falk’s protagonist, Kit Walker, is a highly intelligent Caucasian man with exceptional athletic skills and combat abilities. Kit is the twenty-first Phantom, the first being his ancestor Captain Christopher Walker, who was marooned in the fictional African jungle nation of Bangalla after his ship was attacked by pirates in the early 1500s. Through a series of adventures, Captain Walker became recognized as ruler and protector of the jungle by the native African tribes and fashioned the mysterious masked identity of the Phantom to utilize when striking back against the pirates threatening his adopted homeland. Walker married and sired a son who replaced Walker when he died, beginning a tradition where every Phantom takes the responsibility to sire a male heir. When the father dies, the son swears the Oath of the Skull — “I swear to devote my life to the destruction

\textsuperscript{21} Coogan’s genre designation does not include a requirement that the superhero genre inspire repetition and offers no further explanation for why Jack does not count beyond the somewhat circular reasoning that had Jack been considered a superhero then “the superhero genre would probably have started in 1867” (177).
of piracy, greed, and cruelty, in all their forms, and my sons and their sons, shall follow me” — takes over the mantle of the Phantom, and perpetuates the myth that the Phantom is “the Ghost Who Walks”, an immortal spirit who by the time of Falk’s twenty-first Phantom, has been ruling the jungles of Bangalla for four centuries.

While Busiek considers The Phantom a superhero (134), again Coogan disagrees (182). The Phantom’s codename, secret identity, costume, and heroic mission all clearly fit within Busiek’s taxonomy. Coogan, however, argues that the Phantom’s uniform is not iconic enough to be considered a costume in the classic superhero sense because the rather nondescript formfitting purple bodysuit is devoid of any obvious logo like Superman’s S chevron thus failing to satisfy the identity portion of the MPI framework (Coogan 183). Similarly, Phantom has no actual superpowers. He is merely a dedicated crimefighter who uses his above average, but still well within human-range abilities to defend innocents. The supernatural abilities ascribed to the Phantom within the narrative are explicitly intended to be a ruse that he perpetrates to increase his own mystique.

However, many superheroes lack logos on their costumes, and some of the most popular modern superheroes, like Marvel Comic’s Luke Cage and Jessica Jones, lack costumes and codenames altogether. It would also be nigh impossible to find a comic book fan willing to argue that DC Comics’ Green Arrow, or Marvel Comics’ Hawkeye, both normal human beings with exceptional archery skill, were not superheroes, and yet many — including Busiek who offers one of the broader definitions — argue Robin Hood, who is archetypically the same character, does not count. Like Spring-Heeled Jack, I propose that the Phantom must be viewed as more than just a collection of superhero genre tropes. However, Falk deviates the Phantom’s narrative from Tarzan and other pulp fiction jungle heroes in a key way. Diegetically, he is a legend
spanning more than four centuries. The Phantom’s dual nature, supernatural to other characters while mortal to the reader, marks him as decidedly mythic. His power comes from the belief in his legend both inside of the narrative and by the reader. Arguably, more than any other character of his day, he is both myth and superhero even if the immediate reasons for why seem unclear. I know superheroes when I see them and both the gothic adventurer Spring-Heeled Jack and jungle defender Phantom look like superheroes to me. However, in certain contexts so do Tarzan and Robin Hood. So, rather than seeking define the superhero genre, it may be more useful to consider the contexts of the superhero mythic archetype.

**Cowboys with Capes: The American Hero and the Superhero Thematic Paradigm**

> “Each of you brings something different to the table: strength, speed, stealth, whatever. But we all have one important thing in common. Each of us is willing to make the sacrifices a hero needs to make, including the ultimate one. Since there are so many of us, we can do more than just put out fires, both literal and figurative. We can be proactive; we have a chance to do real good in the world. But we're going to have to work together. J'onn will be up here keeping an eye on things. He's the one who'll decide who's going where, and when. I know that some of you are used to making those decisions yourself, but we have to be more coordinated than that. We can't just be cowboys anymore. Or cowgirls.”

> -Superman, *Justice League Unlimited* (S01E01)

Film critic Robert B. Ray advocates sidestepping the trappings of strict genre definition within the Hollywood western by focusing on the *thematic paradigm*. Rather than identifying the traits associated with cowboy heroes and films, Ray assumes that he and his readers share a consensus on what constitutes a western (13) — viewers know them when they see them. Instead, Ray suggests examining the themes that a genre’s unique construction encourages it to explore. In the case of the western, Ray argues these themes of *Aging* (59), *Society and Women* (60), and *Politics and Law* (61), reflect central elements of early to mid-twentieth-century American ideology. According to Ray, the cowboy archetype is emotionally stunted,
representing the “propensity to whims, tantrums, and emotional decisions derived from America’s cult of childhood” (59). Furthermore, the cowboy represents American “distrust of civilization, typically represented by women and marriage, constituted [as] a stock motif in American mythology” (60). Finally, the cowboy’s “outlaw mythology [portrays] the law, the sum of society’s standards, as a collective, impersonal ideology imposed on the individual from without. Thus, the law [represents] the very thing this mythology sought to avoid” (62).

Thus, for Ray, the Hollywood western is defined by ideological themes rather than recurring tropes. While *Brokeback Mountain* might not quite mesh with the conventional understanding of the western genre, it certainly is a cowboy story about a struggle to escape the social trappings of southwestern American heteronormative masculinity and the institutions that impose them. *Brokeback Mountain* may not fit the western genre, but it does fit the thematic paradigm. *Dirty Harry*, displaced in time from the conventional western fits the thematic paradigm as well. Regardless of their genres, the films are western myths.

Ray’s use of the term “mythology” in his discussion of the western is striking. For him, the western represents an evolution of the classic myth. He considers Hollywood cinema inherently allegorical as its “underlying premise dictated the conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas” (57). So, while the western genre may be identified by the stoic cowboy antihero dishing out justice with a pair of six-shooters, the western thematic paradigm is defined by the symbolism of those tropes. By representing societal problems with clearly evil human antagonists and representing American exceptionalism with the stoic cowboy protagonist, the western implies that no problem exists that American ideology cannot ultimately overcome — usually by shooting its way through it.
I argue thematic paradigms are not limited to Hollywood films. Thematic paradigms extend to all forms of media, particularly media tied heavily to genre tropes. Whatever the conventions of the superhero genre, taking the “I know it when I see it” approach and examining the similarities between the origin stories of the most well know superheroes from comics or other media — Superman, Batman, and Spider-man — some repeated elements that establish a thematic paradigm begin to emerge. Superman is Clark Kent, an alien whose parents rocketed him to safety as an infant just before their planet exploded. On Earth, his alien powers allowed him to become a costumed champion of truth and justice. Batman is secretly Bruce Wayne, the son of a wealthy couple who were gunned down in a mugging. Bruce dedicated himself to becoming a master detective and peak martial artist so that he could defend other innocents from a similar fate as a costumed vigilante. Spider-man is Peter Parker, an orphaned high school student being raised by his aunt and uncle who is granted extraordinary powers when he is bitten by a radioactive spider. He initially uses these abilities to become a costumed entertainer. However, when Peter by chance witnesses a robbery, and opts not to get involved, the same thief later murders Peter’s uncle. Peter thus learns the lesson that “with great power comes great responsibility” and refocuses himself on using his powers to protect the innocent. Taking these three popular characters and others together, obvious patterns emerge. Tabulating these similarities is what leads superhero genre prescriptivists to their definitions. The traits I highlighted here are notable because they are extraordinary aspects of the superhero protagonist — traits that separate him from the average human being.

22 While it is impossible to objectively rank every superhero character that has ever been created in popularity, Superman, Batman, Spider-man are popular enough that they clearly eclipse any others. Not only have these three characters appeared in far more comic books than most other characters, but they are more often adapted into other media as well with more than thirty theatrically released films between them as well as numerous television series, video games, toys, and countless other merchandising efforts.
However, genres do not require that their protagonists be extraordinary or even unusual. The Arthurian romance is defined not by magic or battles but courtly love and chivalric code. While the protagonist knights may be unwavering in their chivalric devotion and may be at the pinnacle of physical prowess, their skills are often well within the bounds achievable by their real-life swordsmen or horsemen. Similarly, the protagonists of Victorian romances and cowboy westerns are generally ordinary humans. These genres are almost entirely thematic. Even science fiction, which may contain unbelievable technology and fantastic events, often focuses on ordinary individuals and contemporary social problems in extraordinary circumstances. Sci-fi is really defined by heavy attention to scientific discovery and innovation and the speculation about the social ramifications of exploring that science. A genre may have any number of tropes, both fantastic and mundane. To focus on the fantastic tropes is to ignore the greater thematic elements that the genre is attempting to address.

Similarly, Superman, Batman and Spider-man possess many mundane commonalities beyond the fantastic elements that superhero genre taxonomies track. All three were orphaned at a young age and raised by surrogate parents, owe their unwavering devotion to social justice to a specific traumatic event, and present a very specific vision of masculinity through physicality. They are physically perfect specimens — visually Caucasian and handsome with sculpted muscles. Furthermore, their masculinity promotes the use of violence in the service of social justice. At the same time, all three are scientists with genius intellects. They represent a flawless vision of manhood defined by the striving for perfection in the body and mind, suggesting that to achieve one coincides with achieving the other. While the relative ordinariness of these

23 Batman and Spider-man are certainly Caucasian. Superman, while technically an alien, is visually presented as an attractive white male and is typically treated as such by other characters he encounters in his stories.
internalized traits might seem counterintuitive when trying to determine what makes the heroes "super" in comparison to the abilities that are beyond the readers’ capability to achieve, overlooking them clouds most scholars from a firm understanding of the thematic paradigm.

Superman’s origin story closely parallels the biblical tale of Moses. This is unsurprising as his Jewish creators, Siegel and Shuster, were the sons of immigrants, living in 1930s America during Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in Nazi Germany. Superman’s birth parents place him in a small rocket and launch him into the unknown depths of space to escape his planet’s destruction, recalling the story of Moses being floated down the Nile by his mother. Orthodox rabbi and comics scholar Simcha Weinstein recognizes the presentation of Superman as an allegorical Jewish messiah in the lead up to World War II, noting that Kal-El literally translates from Hebrew as “the vessel of God” (loc. 186-190). Like Moses’s Jewishness, Superman’s alien heritage also marks him as Other. Finally, Superman and Moses’s separation from their birth removes their parental safety net.

Unable to rely on typical familial protection, the orphaned superhero has no trusted domestic sphere to return to. Superman has an adoptive family, the Kents, but unlike him they are human and frail. They teach him that in order to fit in with humanity he must hide his natural superiority. He adopts a disguise which is cowardly, clumsy, and bumbling, thus isolating him even further from society. Similarly, Spider-man’s uncle and aunt love him as though he were their natural son, but he goes through a second traumatic loss of a paternal figure when his uncle is killed. Peter believes he could have prevented his uncle’s death and is wrought with constant guilt. Furthermore, because his aunt is elderly and frail, he becomes more responsible for her welfare than she is for his. As such, Spider-man is both without parental protection and takes on added familial responsibilities most teenagers lack, thus increasing his isolation from his peers.
When Batman’s family is killed, his butler, Alfred, becomes his legal guardian. Despite being amongst the wealthiest men alive, Bruce Wayne employs no other mansion staff. Furthermore, Batman bases his operations out of a massive cave beneath his mansion. The artwork often utilizes large panels detailing the vastness of the cave and mansion, underscoring Bruce’s social isolation. The solitude all three superheroes face parallels the alienation that teen readers may feel as they enter adulthood. The added responsibilities of adventuring and the inability to rely on others mark the superhero hero as self-reliant but a loner. He is implicitly stoic.

Despite the superhero’s isolation, he is devoted to the society’s protection. Here Spiderman’s motto of “with great power comes great responsibility” is most indicative of the superheroic ideology. Amazing Fantasy #15, the character’s first appearance (see Figure 7), is a parable. Upon receiving superpowers, Peter Parker’s first instinct is to monetize them. His human selfishness and refusal to get involved when he witnesses a burglary directly results in that same criminal being free to murder his father figure. As such, guilt leads him to an overdeveloped sense of morality. He believes that inaction in the face of injustice is wrong because that inaction leads to further injustice that he would be indirectly responsible for. Batman does not feel guilt over his parents’ death; he was a child incapable of preventing it. However, he continuously relives his trauma and is driven to prevent similar tragedy from befalling others. While tragedy led to Superman being rocketed to Earth, it is not directly responsible for his sense of justice. Instead, his myth argues that altruism

Figure 7: Amazing Fantasy vol. 1 #15, 1962
is simply the most heroic quality to have. His innate goodness and morality are as much a part of what makes him heroic as his superpowers.

Finally, the superhero is innately masculine. Because superhero comics are a graphic medium, conflicts are generally resolved in a visual manner. The superhero engages in dynamic fights that display his superior abilities over his opponents. The superhero’s power is only as impressive as his ability to display it. Violence becomes performative and conflict resolution is thus coded in masculine power. Batman is a definitive example; since Bruce Wayne lacks true superpowers, the violence that he can perform is limited to that which he can physically produce with his masculine body. Furthermore, he understands that the key to honing that masculinity is via performance. Before embarking on his career as Batman, he thinks to himself “criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So, my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible… a… a… a bat!” (Detective Comics #33 2). His adoption of the bat alter ego is an explicit attempt to amplify his masculinity by taking on the animalistic appearance of a creature that he believes will be seen as powerful. While Batman takes the costumed performance most literally, the same applies to other superheroes as well. Batman, Superman, and Spiderman are immediately recognizable from their outfits’ color schemes, logos, and other design elements. As Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon explain, “the superhero identity does not exist independently of the costume. In many ways, the costume is the superhero” (29). Furthermore, those costumes are decidedly hypermasculine coded; the superhero costume owes its genesis to the outfits of early twentieth-century circus sideshow strongmen.24 Siegel and Shuster likely mimicked this uniform to give their readers a cultural touchstone immediately marking Superman as more powerful than ordinary human beings

24 More on this in Chapter 2.
Since the sideshow strongman has subsequently faded from the cultural zeitgeist, the motif of the spandex clad muscleman has instead become synonymous with the superhero and a signifier of his masculine power.

The superhero thematic paradigm is thus composed of three recurring elements: Social Justice, Independent Autonomy, and Performative Masculinity. In effect, all three of these themes can be rolled together as a meta-theme of hypermasculinity; to be a hero, according to the superhero monomyth, is to be independent and self-sufficient and to use masculine power for the benefit of society. The superhero’s power, independence, and sense of justice are all coded in masculine terms.

In a sense the superhero thematic paradigm is rather similar to Ray’s western thematic paradigm. This is unsurprising given their similar origin; the comic book superhero and the Hollywood cowboy both evolved from the pulp magazine cowboy over the same time period. They respond to the same cultural forces shaping mid-twentieth century notions of masculinity as the industrial age gave way to the atomic one between the World Wars and after. In 1800, ninety-five percent of the United States population was rural; by 1900 that number dropped to two-thirds and less than half over the next decade (Kimmel 62). As America became more urban, the dominant notion of masculinity was continuously reconstructed. Where in the previous centuries living off the land was the norm, industrialization made rugged outdoorsmanship a rarity in the 1900s and the ability to perform feats of masculinity became increasingly glamorized (89). As America entered the Great Depression of the 1930s and increasing numbers of unemployed men lost their ability to provide for their families, nostalgia for masculine physical displays became even more pronounced (140-141). The superhero and the cowboy attempt to recapture the American idealism of the late nineteenth for a twentieth century where
traditional masculinity was increasingly challenged. The provide a myth where being a masculine is analogous to being heroic.

In effect, superheroes and cowboys extend the same mythic proto-archetype: the American hero. The superhero’s overdeveloped sense of moral justice is the flipside of the cowboy’s stance against corrupt political and legal authorities. Whereas the cowboy’s aging and emotional development are stunted by childlike tendencies and behaviors, the superhero, stripped of parental safety at a young age, adopts a child’s vision of maturity to act. Finally, to navigate the trials of the corrupt world dispensing childlike justice alone, both the superhero and the cowboy adopt a hypermasculine veneer. However, the superhero monomyth differs from the western one in scope and versatility. The cowboy’s myth is closed. He is a transient human hero, rising from obscurity and disappearing into the sunset. He is specific to a historic cultural moment and seems increasingly anachronistic when transposed to other time periods. In contrast, the superhero, must be eternal. The perpetual publishing schedules of the Big Two require a never-ending narrative. In a mythic sense, a superhero must be immortal.

**Captain America vs. Lizzy Bennett: Multiple Histories and Mythic Gestalts**

“If I have to have a past, then I prefer it to be multiple choice.”

-Joker, *Batman: The Killing Joke*

In a 1962 essay, semiotician, cultural critic and philosopher Umberto Eco argued that Superman should be considered the most recent in a succession of mythic heroes “from Hercules
to Siegfried, from Roland to Pantagruel all the way to Peter Pan” (146). While Eco’s analysis begins with superhero genre tropes that mark Superman as an extraordinary champion of the community, he quickly moves to a new, and ultimately more significant aspect of mythic status: timelessness (151). Eco believes Superman comics are constructed in such a way that temporality is suspended within the narrative.

For Eco, the key to the expression of time in a traditional novel is consumption (149). Characters exist only within the bounds of the narrative, born as the book begins and ceasing on the final page. Every plot-advancing action the protagonist takes is “a step towards death, he has gotten older, if only by an hour; his storehouse of personal experiences has irreversibly enlarged. To act, then … means to ‘consume’ himself” (150, emphasis in original). However, Eco notes, “Superman cannot ‘consume’ himself, since a myth is ‘inconsumable’” (150). Where the novel protagonist is temporally bounded, the mythic hero can predate his text; the reader may be aware of him before the story begins. The myth is an act of interpretation; rather than move the character towards death, each iteration of the narrative is an act of rebirth. Within the text, the mythic hero achieves a similar escape from temporality. Since Superman’s adventures are continuously ongoing, and death cannot occur as it would break the open-ended narrative, Eco postulates that instead “it is the concept of time that breaks down” (153). Temporality can exist within a specific Superman story but must be suspended across the collection of all Superman

---

Eco’s list of mythic characters is varied and curious. While most are supernatural in ability to some extent or another, they derive from a diverse set of time periods and countries. Hercules, half-human son of the god Zeus is a well-known character in Roman and Greek (as Heracles) mythology. Siegfried is the Germanic name for the Norse epic hero Sigurd, a human champion capable of challenging gods and slaying dragons. Roland is believed to have been a real-life military leader who served under Charlemagne but later inspired tales of Arthurian legend. The giant Pantagruel is the protagonist in a series of sixteenth century French novels written by François Rabelais. Peter Pan is the eponymous magical boy who never grows up in a series of early twentieth century novels and plays by Scottish author J.M. Barrie. Eco later includes two additional mythic characters that do not extend into the realm of the supernatural, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot. This wide diversity of examples speaks to Eco’s belief that myth comes from every era.
stories, and to be timeless is to be immortal. I argue that mythic heroes are more than immortal; they are infinite. Temporality more than breaks; it turns in on itself at a quantum level. The mythic protagonist — the comic book superhero especially — subtly presents the reader with the notion of time as an abstract concept; Continuity and causality do not exist.

Marvel Comics’ Captain America may perhaps best illustrate this collapse in temporality. Captain America was created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby in Captain America Comics #1 (see Figure 8), first published on December 20, 1940, just shy of a year prior to the Pearl Harbor attack that drew the United States into World War II. Simon and Kirby, two young Jewish men, hoped to inspire the country to actively engage in the war and created a character that they envisioned as the pinnacle of American patriotism and exceptionalism. Captain America is secretly Steve Rogers, a meek and physically underdeveloped man determined to join the military and serve his country. He volunteers for an experimental drug treatment that modifies his genetics and instantly advances him to peak physical condition. He then serves as a secret weapon on missions behind enemy lines. The first issue of the comic boldly announces Simon and Kirby’s political leanings towards the war by depicting Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw. Captain America Comics quickly became quite popular as the United States drifted closer to and eventually entered the war. However, after the WWII ended in 1945, Cap’s

Figure 8: Captain America Comics vol. 1 #1, 1940

26 Cover dated March 1941.
popularity waned. Readers no longer desired the blatant nationalism he represented, and the title was cancelled in 1949.

In 1964, Marvel Comics head writer Stan Lee and original artist Kirby decided to revive Captain America in the fourth issue of *The Avengers* (see Figure 9). In this story, the titular superhero team finds Cap frozen in a block of ice while exploring the North Atlantic Ocean. Once they thaw him, he explains that some twenty years prior, before the end of the war, he fell from an exploding plane into the freezing ocean and became cryogenically frozen. When the Avengers revived him two decades later, he found himself in a world he did not recognize.

However, Marvel had not actually ceased publishing Captain America comics in 1945 when the war ended. The story in which Captain America nearly dies is a *retcon*.\(^\text{27}\) Not only had the original comic continued beyond the end of WWII and into 1949, but Marvel also previously attempted to revive the character in 1954 to fighting Soviet communist invaders. This short-lived revival was a commercial failure and lasted only three issues before being cancelled again. Lee envisioned his version of Captain America as a man out

---

\(^{27}\) Retcon, a portmanteau of “retroactive continuity” is the practice of changing the ongoing fictional history of a narrative by using a later story to override previously established events. Because the Big Two have so many stories, written by multiple authors, this is sometimes needed for narrative conflict resolution. While fandom reacts to different retcons in different ways, finding some more controversial than others, generally, comic fandom assumes the details most recently published take precedence over any previous accounts.
of time. His Captain America needed to be in culture shock. Because ten years did not seem like enough, Lee decided to use twenty.\(^{28}\)

Marvel Comics has kept the character in constant publication ever since. As of July 2022, he has appeared in over 11,000 separate comics over an eighty-two-year period, averaging more than ten adventures every month. Like most characters from the Big Two, Marvel keeps the Captain America frozen at roughly the same age so as to allow the adventures to go on ad infinitum. This is accomplished through what the publisher calls *Marvel Time*: the comics assume that every story published since the Silver Age launch of Fantastic Four #1 in 1961\(^ {29}\) has taken place in a thirteen to fourteen-year span. This is an attempt to reconcile Eco’s temporality breakdown while still allowing the characters to live on as inconsumable myths. Time passes within the Marvel Universe; earlier events affect later ones. Somehow, however, the characters appear to either not age or to age very slowly. Spider-man was introduced as a high school student in 1962\(^ {30}\) and entered college in 1965,\(^ {31}\) but was not depicted as graduating from college until 1978.\(^ {32}\) In 2020, he continues to appear as a man in his mid to late twenties.

\(^{28}\) To preserve continuity, Marvel has since retconned the appearances of Captain America between 1945 and 1964 to be other individuals wearing the Captain America costume. However, when *Avengers* #4 was first published, there was no explanation. Lee and Kirby simply chose to ignore the earlier stories that did not fit within their storyline.

\(^{29}\) While Marvel, under their earlier corporate names, Timely Comics and Atlas Comics, published superhero titles, like *Captain America* through the Golden Age of comics, like many other companies they shied away from superhero comics in the wake declining post WWII sales. In 1961, Marvel relaunched their superhero line with *The Fantastic Four*, and superhero comics have been their primary publishing line ever since. Most of these comics occur in a shared continuity between storylines that the publisher calls *the Marvel Universe*. DC Comics has a similar shared continuity, which they refer to as *the DC Universe*. Other shared universes may exist outside of the primary continuity. For instance, the superhero films that Marvel has produced since 2008 take place in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU). The MCU is separate from the primary Marvel Universe but shares continuity within itself.

\(^{30}\) *Amazing Fantasy* #15, by Stan Lee with art by Steve Ditko

\(^{31}\) *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 1 #31, by Stan Lee with art by Steve Ditko

\(^{32}\) *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 1 #185, by Marv Wolfman with art by Ross Andru
While the conceit of Marvel Time allows characters to remain youthful, the collapse of temporality causes continuity complications as well. Marvel Comics stories often attempt to appear topical by referencing real life current events and have been affected by particularly large scale historic real-world events ranging from the 1972 Watergate scandal to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. However, in 2022 Marvel Time dictated that all their adventures began, at the earliest in 2008. Despite Spider-man and Captain America teaming up with other Marvel characters to save victims from the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, official continuity now assumes that at that point Spider-man was a powerless middle school student and Captain America was frozen in ice and yet to be thawed. A 1967 Spider-man comic depicts the hero’s friend and classmate Flash Thompson enlisting in the Army to fight in the Vietnam War, but their age in modern stories implies that war concluded long before they were born. During the 1960s, The Fantastic Four’s Reed Richards and Ben Grimm were often acknowledged as having been WWII veterans, but later comics simply ignore this history. Furthermore, time appears to affect different characters to different degrees. When Spider-man met Daredevil in 1964, the former was still a high-school student while the latter was a lawyer in his late twenties or early thirties. In their 2020s interactions, they appear to be roughly the same age.

In Captain America’s case, Marvel Time becomes increasingly problematic as the years pass. When Lee first resurrected Captain America in 1964, he was only mildly confused by his new time period. For instance, he was fascinated by television and fashion changes. Later retellings of the character’s origins, like the 2011 film Captain America: The First Avenger, present him waking up in a world completely dissimilar to the one he grew up in and perplexed

33 *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 2 #36, by J. Michael Straczynski with art by John Romita Jr.
34 *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 1 #47, by Stan Lee with art by John Romita Sr.
35 *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 1 #16, by Stan Lee with art by Steve Ditko
by vast changes to technology and culture. In Lee’s early comics, Captain America was able to encounter friends and colleagues who had fought beside him during WWII and aged in the interim. In a 1966 retcon story printed in *Tales of Suspense* #77, Stan Lee introduces a WWII love interest for Captain America named Peggy Carter. In 1973, *Captain America* vol.1 #162 reveals that a now middle-aged Peggy is the older sister of Captain America’s Silver Age girlfriend Sharon Carter. However, the sliding timescale necessitated by Marvel’s need to keep Captain America and his supporting cast in the contemporary timeline, increasingly renders the temporal markers of his earlier adventures implausible if not impossible. Later stories were forced to retcon Peggy into being Sharon’s aunt and then great aunt in order to maintain Peggy’s status as a WWII character while keeping Sharon entrenched in the Marvel Time of the present. Such shifts should invalidate the prior stories where the Carters and their parents deal with ramifications of Captain America having been romantically linked with two sisters, so these stories are rarely referenced in twenty-first century comics. A 2011 comic features Peggy’s funeral after she dies of complications related to old age. In 2025, the dictates of Marvel Time will mean that Captain America will have thawed from suspended animation sometime after he was depicted attending Peggy’s funeral. Even moving the funeral to a later date is problematic. As the passage of real-life time increasingly makes WWII ancient history, the likelihood that

---

36 *Captain America* vol. 1 #162 by Steve Englehart with art by Sal Buscema. Technically this issue was published under the title *Captain America and the Falcon*. The Golden Age adventures of the character were published under the title *Captain America Comics* that began publication in 1940. Silver Age appearances however were under a separate title, *Captain America*. Volume 1 of the latter began publication in 1968 with issue #100, having been renamed from *Tales of Suspense*, a Silver Age comic that Captain America began co-starring in, as a backup feature to the main Iron-Man story, with issue #59 in 1964. From issue #134 (1971) until issue #222 (1978) the book was renamed *Captain America and the Falcon* to highlight the addition of his then partner, the Falcon, one of Marvel’s earliest African American superheroes, before returning to the title *Captain America* with issue #223, when the Falcon left the book as a regular character. By convention, however, the book is typically referenced by the title *Captain America* for all issues starting with #100, whether they feature the Falcon or not.

37 *Captain America* vol. 6 #1 by Ed Brubaker with art by Steve McNiven
Peggy would even have survived long enough to reconnect with Cap after he is revived becomes increasingly implausible. Peggy’s aging and death indicates that the mythic immortality of the superhero character is not universal throughout the superhero narrative. In Eco’s terms, Captain America and Sharon Carter remain inconsumable, while Peggy is not.

To facilitate shared universes, superhero comics utilize a convention known as *canon*. Each publisher presents their titles as though the events of any given story take place in a shared continuity with other stories featuring the same character unless the comic otherwise states that it is not considered a part of that canon. If a character from one series meets a character in another series, they are assumed to share a continuity and therefore be *in the same canon*. Captain America has a presumed master continuity that begins with his first appearance in *Captain American Comics* #1 and runs through the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Modern ages to his adventures today. In addition to this canon continuity, countless side continuities exist animated cartoons, live action television shows, theatrical release movies, video games and out of continuity comics like Marvel’s Ultimate Universe or 1602. In each continuity he is recognizable as Captain America, but a different Captain America. Most rely on the original Golden Age Captain America origin; some retell it. Some continuities bleed into others.

In quantum mechanics Erwin Schrödinger’s *many worlds interpretation* holds that any action has two possible outcomes: it either happens or does not. Each action thus causes a split in the spacetime continuum. If an action occurs, then there exists a parallel reality where it did not.

---

38 Other serialized genre media, particularly those based in multiple-creator, multiple media format, corporately owned intellectual property have also adapted the concept of canon. Thus, fans of popular culture may speak of Star Trek and Star Wars canons, two science fiction franchises which also contain multiple canons.

39 The Ultimate Universe was a companion shared universe that Marvel comics published from 2000 through 2015 with its own canon. It retold the stories of many of Marvel’s most popular characters in a new continuity separate from the original but consistently within itself. Similarly, 1602 is a shared universe that Marvel began in 2003 which reimagines their characters as existing in the Elizabethan era.
Since every action, on the subatomic level, creates two parallel dimensions, an infinite number of infinitely replicating dimensions must exist. Superhero comics and other speculative science fiction have long taken advantage of this principle as the basis for “alternate reality” stories. Marvel Comics, for instance, has used this theory to explain how stories occurring in side continuities such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the Ultimate Universe, and the 1602 Universe can coexist alongside the primary Marvel canon.

Richard Feynman’s somewhat lesser-known quantum mechanics *multiple histories theory* postulates that because an infinite number of universes exist, an infinite possibility of non-observable histories can lead to a single observable event. Since humans exist inside of the spacetime continuum, they can only measure the observable present. Metaphysically, when two individuals interact at any given point in spacetime they have no guarantee that their previous timelines are identical or even overlapping, nor that they will ever meet again. They can only be assured that they have each followed some possible timeline that leads to that moment.

What comic fans calls canon, is a single perceived path along an infinite combination of narratives that could lead to the current story. By privileging one path — traditionally, the monthly comics designated as “in universe” by the publisher — and considering offshoots to be non-canon sub-continuities, the comic reader implicates the canon as a sort of Platonic ideal. In his seminal work *Republic*, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, supposes the impossibility of accurately representing reality — the Platonic ideal — because the representation is mediated through the perceptions of the artist. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” expands on this notion. The storyteller is the readers’ only window to the fictional reality; that reality is colored by the storyteller’s perceptions and cannot be verified. Since readers lack any experience with the fictional world beyond what the author describes, the readers accept the author’s account as
comprehensive — a Platonic ideal that Plato himself said could never be achieved. Canon creates
the illusion that an ongoing superhero story is a single comprehensive and consistent narrative.
This illusion is as fictitious as the fantastic events of the stories being told.

The effects of the multiple histories theory and many worlds interpretation on mythic
literature can be seen by comparing it to the Platonic ideal of a popular non-mythic narrative.
Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* presents the tale of Elizabeth “Lizzy” Bennett, a young
woman navigating social customs, cultural expectations, family dynamics and her own desires as
she develops a relationship with a suitor, Fitzwilliam Darcy. The story has been adapted in
countless films, theatre and television productions, and even a Marvel comic book series, each
faithfully retelling Austen’s original. Numerous authors have penned sequels, including *Mr.*
*Darcy’s Daughters* by Elizabeth Aston and *An Unequal Marriage: Or Pride and Prejudice Twenty Years Later* by Emma Tennant. Both Aston and Tennant’s novels assume the events of
Austen’s original took place exactly as described by Austen, but their continuities after the
original novel are wholly distinct, each author imagines their own continuation of the narrative.
These sequel novels represent many world’s futures derived from a single canon history.

---

40 *Pride & Prejudice* by Nancy Butler with art by Hugo Petrus. Despite being published by Marvel Comics, this
story exists outside of the primary Marvel Universe canon that contains Captain America and Spider-man. In
effect, it is therefore not dissimilar from the Ultimate Universe or 1602 continuities discussed above.
In contrast, other adaptations entirely reimagine the original story, including Pamela Aiden’s *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy, *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld, and Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and the film of the same name (see Figure 10) which follows the original’s general plot, but adds fantastic elements of Lizzy’s career as a supernatural zombie-hunting adventurer and nudges the narrative towards, if not wholly into, the superhero genre. These alternate texts present multiple histories that, while differing from Austen’s original still offer readers background narratives that may inform their enjoyment of any later sequel or adaptation. A reader’s intertextual interpretation of Lizzie when reading Asthon’s sequel may be as informed by reading Grahame-Smith as it is by Austen. Indeed, if a reader is familiar with any adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, they can likely generally understand any sequel.

However, no matter how many adaptations are produced, fans are predisposed to privilege Austen’s urtext as dominant above the others. Austen’s version is considered the canon master continuity, or what I call a *truth copy*. The truth copy is the popularly accepted version of a fictional narrative through which common readers will likely be interpret, compare, and understand other versions. The truth copy is not a Platonic ideal, as readers are well aware that Austen’s tale is a fiction. However, readers accept it as “more true” than its derivatives. However, the truth copy need not be the urtext original narrative. William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is a truth copy despite being an adaptation of older versions of the tale, primarily *The
Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet by Arthur Brooke. Similarly, the 1939 film The Wizard of Oz has eclipsed the original 1900 L. Frank Baum novel on which it is based as the truth copy to the point that most envision Dorothy wearing the film’s ruby slippers rather than the novel’s silver shoes. In some cases, discerning a truth copy is impossible. Although the character of Dracula originated in the 1897 novel of the same name by Bram Stoker, I would argue that so many variations of the story exist of comparable or greater popularity that no specific instance can be considered a truth copy.

Intertextuality encourages readers to see adaptations in relation to truth copy. Even if the adaptation deviates to a ludicrous extreme, as is the case with Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. The text remains recognizable as Pride and Prejudice but always with the caveat that it is an imitation. In fact, much of the pleasure of Pride and Prejudice and Zombies is contemplating the absurdity of remixing Austen’s truth copy protagonist into a fantasy action genre. Grahame-Smith’s text is inherently intertextual and cannot be absorbed outside of the context of the Austen’s truth copy. His Elizabeth Bennet is always understood as a parody of the real Elizabeth Bennet. Captain America, and other monomythic superheroes are something different. Like Dracula, so many versions exist, that it is impossible to privilege one above over the others.

The originator of the mythic Hercules is unknown. Indeed, there are countless interpretations of the “idea” of Hercules. The Roman demigod Hercules and the Greek hero Heracles are ascribed to the same general myth replicated in countless media over several thousand years. When readers encounter a new Hercules story, their personal idea of Hercules, formed through every previous encounter with the character, affects their interpretation of the new story. Readers know that mythic Hercules participated in twelve labors as penance for the murder of his family, and that fictional history is taken for granted unless the current narrative
overrides it. As such, the mythic Greek Heracles, the Marvel Comics character, the Arnold Schwarzenegger film character, the Kevin Sorbo television character, and the Disney animated cartoon (see Figure 11) may equally embody the concept of Hercules in the mind of a reader even if they contradict one another. All versions that the reader has encountered are merged as a *mythic gestalt* of a pseudo-platonic ideal that is individual to each particular reader and only the relevant pieces of other narratives are recalled when reading a new adventure.

Semiotician Roland Barthes offers an explanation for interpreted narrative that he calls *la mort de l’auteur* or literally the death of the author. According to Barthes, the author becomes irrelevant to the narrative once the text is complete. The story lives inside of the mind of the reader and how it is interpreted is largely an individual exercise that occurs as the text is consumed. The author has some limited control to set the readers’ understanding of the diegetic world but cannot control what prior knowledge readers bring to the text. When adapting or extending a preexisting work with a well-established truth copy, the author can, with some confidence, rely on the reader to interpret the later work in conjunction with the earlier one. This

![Figure 11: Classic, Disney, and Marvel Comics incarnations of Hercules](image-url)
assumption cannot be made with a mythic gestalt. While Grahame-Smith may reasonably assume that his reader will interpret his text through the lens of Austen’s urtext and Baz Luhrmann may assume that viewers of his Romeo+Juliet film are at least somewhat familiar with Shakespeare’s truth copy, but the writer of any new Hercules story has no such assurance. Instead, all readers interpret the myth through an implicit understanding of the multiple histories theory. Any two individual readers may have differing mythic gestalts depending on the narratives they have consumed and will use their own understanding of Hercules as a conceptual character is to inform this new interpretation. But an author may assume the reader’s mythic gestalt views Hercules as an extraordinarily strong demigod. That is, a myth writer cannot rely on any specific mythic gestalt, only that some general mythic gestalt exists.

In the 1999 multi-comic storyline The Kingdom, DC Comics writer Mark Waid attempted to reconcile the inconsistencies across over sixty years of shared continuity with a concept he called hypertime. In story, hypertime was a fictionalized version of Feynman’s multiple histories theory so characters could explain deviations in their personal histories. Metatextually, hypertime functioned as Waid’s deconstruction of continuity and canon:

The standard model of parallel timelines is the branches of a river, right? The main timeline is the main stream while tributaries symbolize the alternate timelines? Well, imagine that sometimes those tributaries feedback IN to the main stream, sometimes for a while, sometimes forever. Other times, they cross OVER for only a MOMENT before going in an altogether NEW direction — and for the most part, no one notices these discrepancies but the fans. In short, the reality of the main DC Universe is a lot more malleable than we’ve ever given it credit for and allows for more wonder and more possibilities than we’d ever imagined. (qtd. in Yarbrough)

Waid argues that every interpretation of every character that writers and readers consume potentially influences every future interpretation. The publisher’s official canon for a superhero is ultimately irrelevant, as it is functionally impossible for any two readers or writers to have consumed the exact same subset of every Captain America story ever told. Furthermore, readers
may have different preferences for prioritizing the narratives they have consumed — a concept that fandom has come to call *head canon*: the personalized continuity for a given character within the reader’s own mythic gestalt, with no expectation that others share the reading. If Feynman’s multiple histories theory implies there are infinite permutations of a superhero’s mythic path, and Barthes’ death of the author premise means that it is impossible to know which path a reader privileges, then Waid’s insistence that every possible head canon is equally valid means no interpretation of a mythic superhero can take precedence over any other. The MCU film incarnation of Captain America is equally valid to the comic conceived by Joe Simon in 1941 and neither is more a truth copy than the one written by Stan Lee in 1964 or Ed Brubaker in 2011 because in myth, no Platonic ideal can exist — only head canon.

**Often Upon a Time: The Multiple Monomyths**

“The story being told in *Star Wars* is a classic one. Every few hundred years, the story is retold because we have a tendency to do the same things over and over again.”

-George Lucas\textsuperscript{41}

If the superhero narrative is an instantiation of myth, then it stands to reason that it shares commonalities with other types of myths. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell argues that the basic narrative of a myth is essentially the same no matter when or where the narrative originated. He calls this narrative the *monomyth* or hero’s journey. Campbell’s monomyth has a three-act structure, which representing the rites of passage the hero undergoes: separation, initiation, and return (28). Each act is further broken into multiple stages of possible

\textsuperscript{41}George Lucas is the creator, writer, and director of the Star Wars film series. He has frequently referenced using *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as his template for his films and considers Joseph Campbell to be one of his mentors.
mythemes that can construct any heroic narrative. Not all stages need be present, but Campbell believes that any myth can be constructed from the seventeen possible stages he delineates.

Campbell views the monomyth as structural and believes the essence of a mythic hero is his ability to traverse the stages of a monomyth narrative. He makes no attempt to specify a thematic paradigm that a myth must encompass. While Campbell recognizes that myths are used allegorically — and in fact views the purpose of myth through a Jungian psychoanalytic lens — he is not concerned with judging the specific lessons a myth might teach. Nor is he concerned with the genre, medium, originating country or time period in which a myth appears. Instead, he only offers a framework that can be used to dissect a mythic narrative — a map with which others can discuss and understand the actions a hero undertakes in mythic narratives.

I argue that Campbell’s monomyth, and by extension the dominant impression of the mythic hero in popular culture, is implicitly gendered. While Campbell recognizes the existence of epic heroines, most of his sample cases assume the hero to be a heteronormative male with female characters in the supporting roles. The Campbellian monomyth focuses on physicality. The hero must travel great distances, encounter and overcome dangerous threats, typically through combat and other masculine coded activity. As such, no matter what thematic paradigm the classic monomyth is applied to, the nature of the actions the hero engages in during his journey allows it to nearly always be read as a template for masculinity.

The classic monomyth’s first act, *the departure*, consists of five possible stages and details the hero’s origins. The act begins with a *call to adventure* (45), which introduces the hero as an ostensibly unremarkable member of the community that the myth is designed to serve. He is often an orphan, destitute, or otherwise impoverished. However, he soon learns of some greater destiny, perhaps supernatural in origin, either through happenstance, divine intervention
or some evil force upsetting the status quo and threatening the community. Though the hero may be unaware of it, the call to adventure represents the point at which readers are alerted to the hero’s predestination for something greater. In the second stage, refusal of the call (54), the hero often shows reluctance to accept this destiny because of his loyalty to the community from which he originates. Embarking on a life of adventure means not only foregoing his duties as a member of society but also prioritizing a greater mission above his personal happiness. However, upon recognizing that the evil threatens the very survival of his community, he decides that he has no choice. He must sacrifice his own needs and desires for the greater good.

At this point the hero may encounter his first ally, a supernatural aid (63) who will accompany him on his journey. The aid serves as a mentor figure to the hero who is now isolated from the normalcy to which he is accustomed. Because the hero has no experience beyond the mundane world, the aid can ease his transition into heroism. Next, the hero crosses the first threshold (71); that is, he is given one last chance to return to his mediocre existence or to accept his destiny and take his first step into the world of adventure. By accepting his fate, the hero can now serve as a champion for the community and his adventure begins in earnest. After crossing this point of no return, the hero encounters his first true test, the belly of the whale (83), which functions as a baptism of fire, cementing his new status as hero, and destroying his last vestiges of mediocrity. Surviving this stage proves the hero was extraordinary all along.

The hero’s second act, the initiation, is similarly separated into stages, six in total, all which may not be present in any given instance of the monomyth. The first stage of this act, the road of trials (89), is a succession of obstacles the hero must overcome in order to complete his quest. Like the belly of the whale, each trial is only met through demonstration of the hero’s exceptional abilities. The hero may fail some tasks though these failures teach valuable lessons
that will help him prevail over later trials. With each trial, he grows stronger both physically and morally to the point that the myth may begin to imply that the two are one and the same.

Throughout his trials, the hero may encounter an additional ally during *the meeting with the goddess* (100). Here the hero, encounters his female counterpart, often a princess or some other damsel-in-distress. She need not be a literal goddess, and often is not, thought she is almost always unparalleled in beauty. Where the hero has come to represent the power and fearlessness of masculinity, the goddess embodies the innocence, wisdom, and purity of the feminine ideal. Inevitably, the goddess often becomes an objective of one or more of the hero’s trials. Only by rescuing her from the clutches of evil — proving his worthiness through feats of strength and power — can the hero claim the goddess as his wife and cement their union, completing their heteronormative perfection as matched halves of a sexual ideal.

Contrasting the goddess, the hero may also encounter a *woman as temptress* (111). Where the goddess represents the positive aspects of femininity, the temptress embodies the stereotypically negative ones: deception, lustfulness, and transgression. The temptress attempts to use sexuality to seduce the hero away from his mission. He must stoically resist her sexual advances, cementing the power of his convictions and linking his moral righteousness to his masculine power. The hero’s initiation may also include *the atonement with the father* (116), where he encounters a being so powerful that he appears to have dominion over life and death itself. This being may be — but is not necessarily — the literal father of the hero and is connected with the greater evil that the hero is sworn to oppose. In many ways the father functions as the antithesis of the supernatural aid that the hero encountered in the first act. Opposing the father not only reinforces the hero’s opposition to antisocial ideologies, but also closes a Freudian Oedipal loop. Defeating the father underscores the hero’s status as the pinnacle
of manhood. After triumphing over the trials that oppose him, resisting the seductress, and defeating the father, hero may reach *apotheosis* (138), and become aware of his own greatness above normal men, including the society from which he rose, allowing him to claim the ultimate boon (159), the objective of his quest. In completing his quest in this final stage of his initiation, he has the ability to better the community to which he is devoted.

The final act of Campbell’s monomyth detailing the hero’s *return* to the civilization of his birth to distribute the boon is likewise constructed from six possible stages. After becoming accustomed to his life of adventure, the hero may begin this act in a stage Campbell calls the *refusal of the return* (179), paralleling the refusal of the call from the first act. Since he has accepted his extraordinary nature and the many rewards that it affords him, the mundane life of domesticity may seem unappealing. However, again his devotion to the community necessitates he put his own desires aside. The adventures that he encounters on his return are encapsulated by a stage Campbell calls *the magic flight* (182). Much like the road of trials, this may entail multiple encounters as the forces of evil reconvene to keep the hero from returning the boon to his community. Ultimately the hero uses superior skills cultivated throughout his journeys to overcome adversity and return home. Here the supernatural aid, goddess, and any other allies that he has acquired may assist him. Such assistance signals an additional stage which Campbell calls the *rescue from without* (192) and can reaffirm the hero’s commitment to society after his refusal of the return by demonstrating that even though the hero may have greater power than his fellow man, the power of the united community is greater still.

Once the hero vanquishes all of his enemies, he may *cross the return threshold* (201) and rejoin his community, distributing the boon, fulfilling his destiny, and increasing the net social good. The community may embrace or reject him, but in either case their lives are improved by
the boons that he has provided them. After his return, the hero may be forced to reconcile his status as *master of two worlds* (212). Though he may wish to rejoin his community, who even worship his supernatural power by this point, the hero still feels the draw of the extraordinary life to which he is now accustomed. This is particularly true of religious myths. Divine heroes may be drawn not only to the world of adventure but also their otherworldly birth realms. If the hero can somehow reconcile the forces pulling him in different directions, he may achieve the *freedom to live* (221). Only after achieving this final stage can the hero escape the demands of his community and the adventurer’s life.

Originally published in 1949, Campbell’s monomyth template became a favorite for many adventure genre writers. Director George Lucas cites it as the major inspiration for his original *Star Wars* trilogy (“The Hero’s Adventure”), with Luke Skywalker serving as monomythic hero, Obi-Wan Kenobi as the supernatural aid, Princess Leia in the role of the goddess, and Darth Vader, whose name loosely translates to “dark father”, as the otherworldly *Œdпial threat who must be destroyed. Similarly, Walt Disney Animation Studios’ executive producer Christopher Vogler consults Campbell’s model “to tighten up storylines, pinpoint problems and layout structures” in his films and recommends that other writers do the same (233). Part of Campbell’s popularity with genre writers derives from the thoroughness of the template. Genre fiction relies on an implicit contract between the author and readers. Both are aware of the genre formula and expect a certain amount of adherence within the narrative. With structure and narrative deprivileged, author and reader may focus on how the themes are played out in deviations from the formula. Thus, much study of genre monomyth focuses more on the thematic paradigm rather than the narrative structure.
Some scholars argue that the focus on theme within myth is inherent to an understanding of genre fiction. Philosopher John Shelton Lawrence and religious scholar Robert Jewett believe that both cowboys and superheroes,\(^42\) as well as many other American pop culture genres archetypes, are instantiations of what they call the *American monomyth*.*\(^43\)* Their work eschews narratology entirely and focuses on what they view as the essence of the American monomyth: American exceptionalism. Whether a story is set in the uncharted old west or a modern urban metropolis, the United States is a *monomythic Eden* (169–170), peaceful, harmonious, and full of opportunity for all (or at least what those generally homogenized white citizens that traditionally represent the populace in these narratives). Citizens are often hardworking, honest, good-natured, and determined to build an even stronger society. Inevitably harmonious life becomes threatened by evil forces, often represented by greedy and powerful capitalists or invading ethnic others who threaten the social order (174). The American hero then rises from the masses. He is often unremarkable in origin, at least as far as he knows, but stands out from the common man because of his unwavering devotion to the purest of American ideology. He believes that hard work and staunch morals must always prevail and typically works alone; the American hero must be independent because, as an analogue for American exceptionalism, he is unable to depend on others to push for the social goods he endeavors to achieve. This exceptionalism ultimately

---

\(^42\) Jewett and Lawrence have a very loose and inclusive definition for superhero. To them a superhero is essentially any protagonist of a dynamic or action drive pop culture narrative. Thus, they include both superhuman comic book characters and cowboys, as well as soldier and mercenary protagonists like Rambo, hard-boiled policemen like Dirty Harry, antihero vigilantes like Paul Kersey of *Death Wish*, space-faring starship captains like James Kirk of *Star Trek* and even the non-American ninja-fighting martial artists of the *Mortal Kombat* video games.

\(^43\) Much like their genre flexibility, Jewett and Lawrence’s terminology regarding the name of their version of the monomyth is flexible. They alternately refer to it as the superhero monomyth, the national monomyth, and the American monomyth. Hereafter, to avoid confusion between their version, James Campbell’s version (which I will call the “classic monomyth”), and my own (which I will call the “superhero monomyth”), I will refer to Jewett and Lawrence’s version exclusively as the “American monomyth”.
makes him unstoppable. By triumphing over whatever evil threatens his culture, he reinforces the
notion that American ideology can overcome any obstacle.

Lawrence and Jewett’s relatively open framework maps cleanly onto any number of
heroic characters that follow the tradition of American exceptionalism. In a sense, their approach
extends Reynold’s definitional framework or Ray’s thematic paradigm. However, Lawrence and
Jewett borrow from Campbell’s work the notion that the hero is wholly agnostic of both genre
and medium (xxi), pulling from a diverse collection of narratives including western cowboys
(84), Captain James T. Kirk of Star Trek (24), family film heroine Heidi (106), Captain America
(191), and even real-life Playboy magazine publisher Hugh Hefner (58). However, their
monomyth is far less prescriptive of the hero’s journey stages than Campbell’s, instead focusing
on personality characteristics. To accommodate such a diverse range of protagonists and story
types, Lawrence and Jewett structure their framework around recurrent elements they see in all
American adventure-based literature that combine themes with story tropes and plot devices.
They call these building blocks mythic patterns (11), of which they identify three.

The first mythic pattern is saga (12). The American monomyth is unbounded. Jewett and
Lawrence recognize that the American monomyth is unbounded, and the American hero is a
participant in an unending series of adventures rather than a single closed storyline. Whereas
Campbell’s classic monomyth details the rise and fall of the hero as he matures through the
hero’s journey stages, Jewett and Lawrence consider the American monomyth to be an ongoing
tale of the hero’s ability to continuously provide for the community.

Throughout each adventure in the saga the American monomythic hero undergoes a
mythic pattern of redemption (15). The classic monomyth is a tale of personal maturation for the
hero and each successive stage of Campbell’s template is a learning experience for the
protagonist. Because the American monomyth is focused on the hero’s effect on his community rather than his own personal growth, Lawrence and Jewett consider the redemptive element to be the hero’s ability to better the common good through any given adventure. In other words, the American hero is the tool by which society, undergoes redemption. The key to this phenomenon is what Jewett and Lawrence call the Werther Effect in reference a series of eighteenth-century suicides in imitation of the 1774 novel The Sorrows of Young Werther by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Jewett & Lawrence 34-35). The novel was partially inspired by the real-life suicide of K. W. Jerusalem, and so, the copycat suicides are an instance of life imitating art imitating life.

The myth, inspired by society, in turn influenced society. Jewett and Lawrence theorize that this effect can be seen in all aspects of culture:

In the Werther effect a member of an audience (a) experiences a work of fantasy within a secular context that (b) helps to shape the viewer’s sense of what is real and desirable, in such a way that (c) the viewer takes actions consistent with the vision inspired by the interaction between his own fantasy and popular entertainments. (36)

That is to say, in contrast to classic myths — which derived their powers from the myth’s religious connotations and the belief in the myth’s validity — American monomyth readers identify with the story so much that they consciously choose to be influenced and inspired by it.

Jewett and Lawrence’s final mythic pattern is sexual renunciation (12-13). They argue the American monomythic hero is so dedicated to his role that he foregoes distracting romantic ties. A better term might have been domestic or marital renunciation as Jewett and Lawrence take many liberties to justify the mythic pattern for heroes who are not sexually chaste. Their inclusion of Star Trek’s Kirk, a notorious womanizer and Hefner, best known as the force behind the Playboy magazine, as key examples, highlights the problem with insisting the three mythic patterns are inclusive of all American heroic storytelling. By mapping their monomyth onto characters not only known for sexual dalliances but arguably defined by them, Lawrence and
Jewett must awkwardly redefine “sexual renunciation” to not necessarily require sexual abstinence. While I agree that the American monomythic hero may prioritize duty above his own personal desires, I argue that the “renunciation” portion of the term is as misleading as the “sexual” half. As I will show in later chapters, the monomythic superhero does not renounce his sexuality, nor necessarily his domesticity. In fact, his sexuality is such an important part of his masculinity, that it becomes the basic currency within the superhero monomyth.

Still, the superhero inherits aspects from both the classic and the American monomyths. On a cursory reading, the superhero’s story progression of the character often follows Campbell’s template. This is unsurprising as Campbell’s base premise is that the hero’s journey is universal. Similarly, as an American cultural invention, the Werther Effect dictates that the superhero monomyth should express the American exceptionalism that Jewett and Lawrence identify. However, I argue that the comic book superhero cannot fully be encapsulated by either model. The long history of the superhero with its close association to monthly comic books, caused it to develop its own template, which has in turn been adopted by other media.

**Born Again… and again… and again: The Perpetual Publication Model**

“I used to believe in universal contraction. Entropy and the end of all things. Well, I changed my mind. I'm letting go. Because now I believe in expansion. I believe we endure. Don't you see? Everything lives!”

-Mr. Fantastic, *Secret Wars* (vol. 2 #9)
Mythologist Hougaard Winterbach argues that Campbell’s monomyth can be mapped directly onto the comic book superhero (114). Like me, Winterbach realizes the superhero’s mythic power lies not in the supernatural blessing of the gods but rather his usage of his extraordinary abilities to serve as a champion for society at large (115). Winterbach also agrees that a story need not encompass every stage to qualify as a monomythic instance (116). However, his argument requires an artificial separation of the superhero narrative into discrete story arcs representing Campbell’s stages. Winterbach illustrates this with a close reading of *Daredevil: Born Again* (see Figure 12). However, the classic monomyth provides the template for a hero’s entire epic journey, not an individual adventure; that is, the classical Hercules traverses the Campbellian monomyth only one time, not once for each labor. Thus, for Winterbach’s argument to hold, the entire collected works of *Daredevil* should fit within Campbell’s three act structure rather than just *Daredevil: Born Again*. Because of the perpetual publication model and the many worlds interpretation, this is impossible.

Like many scholars and fans, Winterbach colloquially refers to *Daredevil: Born Again* as a *graphic novel* rather than a *trade paperback*. This designation is misleading. Graphic novels are long form comics written as stand-alone stories and published in a single volume. In

---

44 By Frank Miller with art by David Mazzucchelli.  
45 While there is no official length requirement, the typical American comic book issue generally includes twenty-two pages of story, and an additional ten pages of ad copy, a tradition established by the Big Two in the mid-1960s (Cronin) with occasional “double-sized” special issues. Graphic novels, on the other hand can be any length, with some as short as fifty pages and others more than three hundred.
contrast, trade paperbacks are collections of several issues originally published in serialized form. While some trade paperbacks, for instance Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, were conceived of as stand-alone stories and might still count as graphic novels in the same way that traditional text novels are sometimes originally serialized as chapters in magazines, most trade paperbacks, including *Daredevil: Born Again* — originally published in *Daredevil* vol. 1, #226-233 — exist as part of longer ongoing narratives extending beyond a single volume. They are grouped into the format for purely financial rather than narrative reasons. Since most superhero comics are intended to be published indefinitely, plot elements introduced into the story may not pay off within the same trade paperback or storylines may come to fruition that began before the first issue of the volume. While the major plot of *Daredevil: Born Again* is largely discrete, it relies heavily on references to events occurring prior to *Daredevil* vol. 1 #226. Most notably, Karen Page, the protagonist’s primary love interest, appears in *Daredevil* vol. 1 #227 after a ten-year absence in the comic, having last been seen in issue #138.46 It is not uncommon for multiple storylines to be intertwined over several years, continued by different creative teams than originally began them.

46 By Marv Wolfman with art by John Byrne.
This is not to say that the superhero comics cannot utilize the classic monomyth template. Graphic novels and even some longer serials, particularly those that are created by a single creative team (generally outside of the Big Two), are capable of following the hero’s journey template to its conclusion. Dave Sim’s creator owned comic *Cerebus* (see Figure 13) — often excluded from the superhero genre as it fails the strict prescriptive frameworks but fitting well within the looser definitions offered by those like Gavaler and myself — is among the clearest representations of the Campbellian monomyth in comics. Published serially in three hundred installments from December 1977 through March 2004 and culminating with the death of the title character, Sim’s *Cerebus* is a fantasy mock-epic starring an anthropomorphic aardvark in a series of unlikely adventures, progressing from a sword-wielding barbarian to a feudal warlord king. Sim repeatedly promised over the years, that the character would die in issue 300, bringing the narrative to a close. This meant that the comic could escape perpetual publication. Cerebus could fully explore the Campbellian monomyth and eventually be consumed in his final chapter. Cerebus ages over the twenty-seven-year publication, marrying and divorcing multiple times, sires a son, and eventually dies in the final issue. The epic nature of the comic and its absurdist and surrealist narrative paradigm allow Sim to address any number of social themes including politics, religion, human nature, sexuality and metacommentary on the comics publishing industry. Sim’s closed format and focus on mythic style adventures to provide modern allegory often lends itself to direct analysis with the classic monomyth structure.

Figure 13: *Cerebus* #19, 1980
In an example of the classic monomyth more commonly recognized as a part of the superhero genre, Matt Wagner’s Mage follows Kevin Matchstick, a modern reincarnation of King Arthur who wields an enchanted baseball instead of the sword Excalibur, in his battle against a succession of otherworldly demons invading the Earth (see Figure 14). Mage draws both on the tropes of comic book superheroes as well as the mythic patterns of its Arthurian roots. While the term is rarely used in the text, Kevin’s codename, the Pendragon, supernatural powers, heroic mission, and iconic lightning bolt black T-shirt mark him as a superhero in even the most restrictive genre prescriptions. The series is comprised of three fifteen-issue volumes, each representative of one act of the Campbellian monomyth. In the first volume, Mage: The Hero Discovered, published from 1984 to 1986, Kevin encounters a supernatural aid, Mirth — himself a reincarnation of Arthur’s mentor Merlin — who charges the reluctant Kevin with his heroic mission. Wagner acknowledges that he was unaware of Campbell’s work at the time he began the series but that upon discovering it saw the influence the monomyth has on himself and other storytellers:

I realized that the hero’s journey is a tale as old as mankind itself. It has been told and retold by every generation and culture since the dawn of time, because this tale continually needs to be reinterpreted to meet the personal needs of each new generation.

---

47 Pendragon is a reference to King Arthur’s surname and the “title” that Kevin holds in the supernatural world. While he tends to refer to and introduce himself simply as Kevin Matchstick, supernatural beings in the series generally refer to him as “the Pendragon”.

48 Kevin, and many of the other characters throughout the book tend to wear consistent wardrobes. While not a superhero uniform in the truest sense, Kevin is never seen without a black T-shirt with a giant lightning bolt emblem. He wears this symbol even before he begins his hero’s journey in the first issue.
Campbell’s influence on Wagner’s later installments becomes even more prominent. The second volume, *Mage: The Hero Defined*, published from 1997 through 1999, follows Kevin’s later adventures in accordance with the classic monomyth’s initiation act. Kevin is now the leader of a band of supernatural companions drawn from other mythic tales: Kirby, a reincarnation of the Greco-Roman Hercules, and Joe, an avatar of the Native American Coyote. Here Wagner continues Kevin’s journey while also ruminating on the repetitive but timeless nature of the monomyth by explicitly comparing Kevin’s journey with those undertaken simultaneously by his partners. Kevin meets and falls in love with a goddess, Magda, who with her sisters is an analogue of the witches from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as well as the Fates and Norns of Greek and Norse mythology. When Kevin and Kirby’s respective missions place them at odds over who is destined to defeat a particular antagonist, Mirth explains that their heroes’ journeys, are in reality the same. Metatextually, Wagner implies that all mythic heroes are interchangeable. There need not be a single chosen hero, because it is only the concept of hero that cannot be consumed, not the individual protagonist. With this knowledge, the final volume, *Mage: The Hero Denied*, published between July 2017 and February 2019, follows an older Kevin, now married to Magda with two children, as he attempts to achieve domesticity by leaving the world of adventure behind. Here Wagner explores the final Campbellian act as the otherworldly forces now focus their efforts on denying Kevin his return to human society.

Sim and Wagner can follow the classic template tightly because of the nature of creator owned comics. Unlike most superheroes published by the Big Two, Cerebus and Kevin have authors crafting their entire narrative. In effect, Sim and Wagner control the truth copy of their work. In contrast, most mainstream comic superheroes are without singular creative vision. The business needs of the Big Two require publication in perpetuity. Any given character might have
hundreds or even thousands of work-for-hire creators with different visions of the character over time, thus making the multiple histories model a necessity. Since the most popular superheroes were created under this model, mythic gestalt rather than truth copy became the assumed norm. The superhero’s mythic gestalt nature is so ingrained in the genre that most readers are trained to ignore it and simply assume the responsibility of serving curator to their own head canon. The stories that are valid are the ones that the individual reader likes best. This is precisely what Waid had tried to accomplish with his concept of hypertime.

While the perpetual publication model forces multiple histories that make the superhero appear mythic, it also severs the superhero monomyth from the classic one. The Campbellian monomyth is bounded. No matter which version of a classic myth is accepted as head canon, readers assume the story has an ending. While the classic monomythic hero is, as Eco states, inconsumable and exists beyond the bounds of the individual narrative, that narrative still moves towards a conclusion. Wagner and Sim’s texts follow a similar path. The three acts represent a beginning, a middle, and an end to the hero’s journey. In contrast, the superhero monomyth remains open-ended. Big Two Superhero comics are typically presented as happening in a continuously expanding present with both multiple histories and an infinite possibility of multiple futures. Thus, while *Cerebus* and *Mage* may be superhero narratives, in the superhero genre using a Campbellian monomyths structure to explore a superhero thematic paradigm, they are arguably not superhero monomyths. The superhero monomyth must deviate from the classic version in one important manner: it may never reach the third act.

Instead, the perpetual publication model forces the narrative to continuously reset, renewing the superhero’s status quo and granting him a kind of narrative immortality. Like the classic hero of myth, the superhero’s true immortality resides not in his supernatural powers, but
in the continuous retelling of his adventures to successive generations. Unlike the classic hero, capitalist forces controlling the comic book industry also require that the superhero have at least the appearance of continuous new adventures. This is the reasoning behind both Marvel Comics’ Marvel time and DC Comics’ hypertime. To remain culturally relevant and continue generating revenue for Marvel, Captain America must continuously be updated; his Werther effect must address the current cultural moment. To remain timeless and mythic, the character must simultaneously both reference and build upon his mythic gestalt, never allowing the narrative to conclude. By trapping the hero in the second act of the hero’s journey, or even temporarily returning to the first act for an origin update, the superhero monomyth avoids ever reaching denouement.

One character that clearly illustrates the superheroic resistance to narrative progression is the golden age superhero Captain Marvel.\textsuperscript{49} Like Kevin Matchstick — with whom he shares his lightning bolt sigil — Captain Marvel’s powers are mystic in origin, and he has a direct connection with classic mythology. Created in 1939 by writer Bill Parker and artist C. C. Beck for Fawcett Comics,\textsuperscript{50} Captain Marvel was to serve as the publisher’s entry into the emerging superhero genre and an answer to DC Comics Superman. Unlike Superman, Captain Marvel is not an alien. Instead, he is a precocious twelve-year-old street urchin named Billy Batson. One night a mysterious man in a trench coat leads Billy into the subway. The train magically

\textsuperscript{49} The name “Captain Marvel” has a complicated history and can refer to several characters. Here I am referencing the original Fawcett Comics character published by Fawcett Comics. When Fawcett Comics eventually filed for bankruptcy, DC Comics claimed the Captain Marvel intellectual property. Meanwhile, Marvel Comics created its own character named Captain Marvel to establish the trademark associated with the title. DC Comics was thus forced to publish adventures for the original Captain Marvel character under the alternate title \textit{Shazam} thus causing readers to mistakenly believe this was the name of main character as opposed to his wizard mentor. Eventually, in 2011, DC officially renamed the character Shazam to reduce confusion, though this decision has arguably caused even more as the wizard maintains the name as well. Here, I will refer to the character by his most common name, Captain Marvel.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Whiz Comics} vol. 1 #2 by Bill Parker with art by C. C. Beck.
transports them to an ancient cave where Billy meets a three-thousand-year-old wizard who claims to have watched over the course of the boy’s entire life. The wizard who has devoted his life to “battling the forces of evil which everyday threaten to extinguish man from the face of the Earth” (4) is impressed with Billy’s righteousness and offers him the powers of the gods. The wizard explains that his name, “Shazam,” is an anagram and, by speaking it as a magic word, Billy will be imbued with the wisdom of Solomon, strength of Hercules, stamina of Atlas, power of Zeus, courage of Achilles, and speed of Mercury.\(^5\) Upon speaking the word, Billy is struck by a mystic bolt of lightning and temporarily transformed into the super powered adult, Captain Marvel (see Figure 15), whom the wizard charges with the “sacred duty to defend the poor and helpless, right wrongs and crush evil everywhere” (5).

The character quickly became one of the few superheroes that could match Superman’s circulation (Wright 18-19, 57).\(^5\) One reason for Captain Marvel’s popularity was that he represented the ultimate in boyhood wish fulfillment fantasy merged with the superhero thematic paradigm to a presumed pubescent male reader. As Billy Batson, he is fiercely independent. Like many early superheroes, Billy is an orphan. The death of the protagonist’s parents creates

\(^5\) While most of Captain Marvel’s patron gods are deities or demigods from Greco-Roman mythology, the first is Solomon, the mortal king from Judeo-Christian mythos. This seeming incongruity is never explained.

\(^5\) By World War II comics featuring Captain Marvel surpassed sales of the Superman titles. This prompted DC Comics to file a copyright infringement suit against Fawcett. The lawsuit would drag on until 1953 when the post-WWII decline of the superhero comic market and falling sales caused Fawcett to settle the case out of court and cease publication Captain Marvel altogether. DC would eventually license the character from Fawcett for new stories in the Silver Age before buying the character outright in 1994.
sympathy by evoking one of the most common fears of childhood. The orphan is isolated from the only individuals from whom he can expect unconditional love. However, unlike Superman or Batman who began their adventures as adults with sensibilities formulated by their early loss of family, Billy remains a child. Even before he receives his powers, he was self-sufficient despite his familial isolation. He makes his own money by selling newspapers and sleeps in the subway station. Despite his hardships, he remains cheerful and optimistic. He is altruistic and has a selfless desire to help those in need. He naturally possesses two-thirds of the superhero thematic paradigm: social justice and independent autonomy.

The wizard’s gift of superpowers grants Billy the final thematic paradigm element, performative masculinity. Captain Marvel is tall and handsome — Beck patterned his appearance on Hollywood actor Fred MacMurray — and possesses the abilities of flight and super strength that mark him as more powerful than typical adults. However, when transforming into the adult Captain Marvel, Billy retains the personality, desires and life experiences of a twelve-year old boy. Like most Golden Age superheroes, he settles his problems with physical altercations. In his first adventure, as Billy, he encounters a pair of henchmen and overhears them discussing their employer, mad scientist Dr. Sivana, who is using his “radio silence” technology to blackmail the United States radio industry for $50,000,000 in ransom. Billy follows the thugs back to their headquarters, transforms into Captain Marvel, crashes through the apartment window, destroys the anti-radio machine, and beats the villains into submission, all before bothering to introduce himself. Despite possessing the “wisdom of Solomon” he makes no attempt to negotiate surrender or reach any intellectual solution. Captain Marvel utilizes only his physical abilities to neutralize the threat. While the narrative does not imply that power equates to justice, it does imply that the just are inherently powerful and thus right makes might. Captain Marvel, also
known by the sobriquet “Earth’s Mightiest Mortal,” was only granted that might because of his ideological purity righteousness. As such, the narrative implies that any violent actions Billy takes are intrinsically justified. Thus, he becomes a child with the power and agency to compete in the worlds of adults. He epitomizes American exceptionalism — or at least a child’s view of it.

Billy’s 1939 incarnation is heavily steeped in pre-WWII sensibilities and comic book storytelling style. His life as a trusting street urchin, receiving powers from a stranger, and being granted a full-time radio reporter job despite his lack of education or legal guardian seems inappropriate when targeted at late 20th century youth. Furthermore, the entire story unfolds in thirteen simplistic pages. The 1994 graphic novel *The Power of Shazam!* by Jerry Ordway (see Figure 16) reboots the dated origin over the course of ninety-six pages, developing far more realistic characters, and taking contemporary concerns into account. Ordway’s Billy is still a homeless orphan; however, he is far more streetwise, displaying mistrust of both the mysterious

![Figure 16: Captain Marvel artwork. 1939 Beck (left) vs 1994 Ordway (center and right)](image)
stranger who leads him into the magical subway train and the wizard Shazam. The new story attempts to pay homage to the original by replicating many of the same visual layouts (see Figure 17) and having the stranger and the wizard speak nearly identical dialogue to the 1939 originals, but the modern Billy, aware of the danger of strangers, continuously questions their motives. This newer Billy, and therefore his superheroic alter ego, is somewhat temperamental and often acts far more brashly, in accordance with young boys of his age.

Neither Parker nor Ordway’s version of the character can presume the status of truth copy, nor can any version by other creators of the comics or television and film adaptations. Yet each, presumes the same Captain Marvel mythic gestalt. Enough of the origin, personality, and powers remain common to give the reader the sense that each story references the same idea of Billy Batson. If a reader were to skip Ordway’s origin reboot and proceed to the stories that followed it, a passing knowledge of Parker version of the character would allow the reader to follow the narrative with little incident. However, the necessity to keep Billy, who is perpetually twelve, relatable to both the 1939 and the 1994 teen readers, necessitates that the story be updated, which grants the character the inconsumable immortality that Eco demands.

The seemingly incongruous goal of being at once current and timeless distinguishes the superhero monomyth from the classic one. Campbell’s first act remains relevant for the superhero. Both versions of Captain Marvel’s myth begin in accordance with Campbell’s template. Billy is an ordinary boy who receives a call to adventure from a mysterious stranger.
Initially, he hesitantly refuses the call, but upon meeting the supernatural aid of the wizard Shazam, crosses the first threshold by accepting the mantle of Captain Marvel and is promptly sent into the belly of the whale with his first encounter with Dr. Sivana. From here, the bulk of the adventures that Billy and most other superheroes encounter fit into Campbell’s second act. An ongoing comic series is effectively a never-ending road of trials stage. The hero may encounter the goddess, the temptress, or the father along the way but may never achieve the ultimate boon, as the third act is a path to resolution and would cause the hero to be consumed. Instead, he constantly encounters new trials, effectively locking him into an infinite timeline, frozen in the second act with periodic returns to the first to retell the origin, easing in new readers and updating the mythic gestalt with contemporary norms and tropes.

Refreshing the mythic gestalt is the challenge of the perpetual publication model. The superhero must be paradoxically dynamic and stagnant. During his long tenure as editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee instructed his writers to strive for what he called the illusion of change (Howe 101). Normal character growth and development is impossible because to do so would be, as Eco says, a step towards death. Furthermore, since each reader’s head canon is slightly different, progressing a superhero too far beyond the mythic gestalt might render him unrecognizable to some portion of the fandom. Instead, the perpetual resets force the superhero to relearn the same lessons over and over, with only minor character progression each time. At the same time, the superhero narrative must maintain the illusion that the continuity has preceded both to keep the story culturally relevant and to justify perpetual publication.

Lee’s illusion of change becomes quite evident when considering Winterbach’s analysis of Daredevil: Born Again within the greater Daredevil series. While Winterbach is correct in seeing the conclusion of the story arc with Daredevil reuniting with Karen and beginning a life of
domesticity as reaffirming American values of monogamous heteronormativity (Winterbach 130), he fails to acknowledge the greater narrative of the ongoing Daredevil comic. Less than two years later, Daredevil’s relationship with Karen would end when he begins a sexual affair with the villainess Typhoid Mary,\(^{53}\) falling prey to the woman as temptress, and resetting him to the second act of the classic monomyth. While a minor instantiation of the classic monomyth may occur in a given superhero story arc, the greater narrative shows that the journey continues.

The superhero story can thus inherit from multiple monomyths and cross multiple genres. The classic monomyth’s stages often provide the superhero monomyth’s underlying structure but the American monomyth’s mythic patterns and Werther effect shape the superhero thematic paradigm. However, the timeless inconsumability derived from the perpetual publication and multiple histories necessitate the reliance on the mythic gestalt and the illusion of change. It is certainly possible for a story to exist within the superhero genre while avoiding the superhero monomyth as Mage does, and it is likewise possible for stories that fall outside of the superhero genre to rely on the superhero monomyth as a template. The monomyth may also cross outside of the comic into other media forms. Indeed, the James Bond novel and film series and the long-running Doctor Who television show both feature protagonists that appear to fail most prescriptive superhero genre definitions yet rely heavily on the superhero thematic paradigm and utilize the mythic gestalt to keep their heroes timeless while maintaining an illusion of change. However, as the following chapters will detail, the specific history of the superhero within its comic origins has directly contributed to the heavily gendered nature of the monomyth’s thematic paradigm.

\(^{53}\) Daredevil vol. 1 #255 by Ann Nocenti with art by John Romita Jr.
Chapter II: Wisdom of Solomon... Strength of Hercules...: Supermasculinity

It is no coincidence that many of the most popular superheroes — Superman, Batman and Spider-man — have the suffix “-man” in their codenames. The thematic paradigm of superhero monomyth prescribes a distinct form of hypermasculinity. Moreover, Superman, the genre defining case, announces his maleness as superior in his name. Superman’s early popularity caused the rest of the superhero genre to form around him. Furthermore, mid-twentieth-century industry forces intentionally refined the superhero genre to promote very specific notions of gender that became further codified the thematic paradigm. Ultimately, the superhero monomyth suggests an evolution of humanity that while, refined by the comic book industry for more than eighty years, has always promoted a masculine ideal that has never and can never actually exist.

In *The Myth of the Superhero*, Marco Arnaudo makes a case for celebrating superhero mythology as ethical allegory. He defines three characteristics of superheroic morality: *optimism* that positive social change can occur, *pragmatism* that all necessary steps must be taken to achieve change and *understanding* that the superhero has a personal duty to bring about these changes (64). While Arnaudo notes that the morality offered by most superhero narratives has a strong basis in American exceptionalism, he draws exception with Jewett and Lawrence’s construction of the American monomyth,\(^{54}\) rejecting their conflation of violence with heroism (74), noting that superheroes sometimes perform acts of heroism not involving violence at all.

I contend that the disconnect between Arnaudo and Jewett and Lawrence stems from the manner in which Arnaudo frames his definition. I agree that the superhero monomyth’s thematic

---

\(^{54}\) Jewett and Lawrence’s American monomyth and the differences in construction from Joseph Campbell’s classic monomyth are discussed in Chapter 1.
paradigm requires individualism and devotion to social change; Arnaudo’s elements here are roughly analogous to my own. However, his claim of pragmatism seems at best imprecise. Superheroes are certainly often willing to make sacrifices in the name of the social good, but few superhero narratives focus on protagonists using their powers non-violently and even non-violent solutions typically involve grand displays of physical power. Rarely does superheroic pragmatism involve a calm and rational conversation with the antagonist or a detailed look at the legal jurisprudence. Typically, conflict is resolved through spectacle involving extraordinary abilities. In fact, quite often misunderstandings will occur between superheroes that cause combat to erupt between equally heroic characters purely because the assumption that violence must occur is often not the most pragmatic solution. Hence, I argue that an inherent — and perhaps the most essential — element of the superhero thematic paradigm is a performative display of masculinity — usually through hyperviolence.

The superhero monomyth relies so heavily on its thematic paradigm that it insinuates the three elements are interchangeable with each other. A strong moral code formulated around serving the social good appears to grant both independence and masculine power. Similarly, the most independent superheroes are often the most just and strong. Therefore, the superhero monomyth implies, sometimes problematically, that the strongest and most individually capable superheroes must in some way also be the most moral. This notion is somewhat counterintuitive. A common theme of superhero stories, particularly those targeted at children, is a didactic edict that “might does not make right” while often simultaneously implying that “right makes might” and power resides in morality. I argue that the superhero thematic paradigm is constructed in such a way that distinguishing might from right is almost impossible. The superhero monomyth

55 See Chapter 1.
is possible only if each element of the thematic paradigm implies the capacity for the others. Because performative masculinity is one of these elements, the superhero requires masculine power to survival in his world. In fact, the masculine power to perform violence becomes the most important currency the superhero has access to. The presentation of the performance is variable, but the capacity is more essential than any superpower, costume or mask.

**Mensch and Übermensch: Subjective Ideology and Social Justice**

“For men are not equal: so, speaks justice. And what I will, they may not will! Thus, spoke Zarathustra.”

-Zarathustra, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (102)

It is impossible to credit any single individual with locking the superhero monomyth into the gendered construction it became over time. However, even in the beginning of the genre the tropes defining the thematic paradigm seem specifically chosen to direct the reader to consider a specific vision of idealistic masculinity. The world’s most popular superhero is not only a man; he is the Superman. Not only is Superman the mold for the genre, but he was also created to explore the ultimate possibilities of posthumanity. In effect, he, and the superheroes after him, are a direct call to action for young men to emulate.

The similarity in name between Siegel and Shuster’s creation and the common English translation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s Übermensch is intentional. While Übermensch is commonly anglicized as “Superman” that interpretation loses much of the nuance implied by Nietzsche’s original term. While *über* can be translated as “super” but typically carries a connotation of transcendence or progression beyond. Similarly, *mensch* denotes a member of the

---

56 Nietzsche’s Übermensch concept originates from his late-nineteenth century novel *Also Sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, translated into English as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, wherein the titular character travels the countryside giving philosophical speeches on the nature of morality and mankind’s confusion of morality with religion, which he sees as an obstruction to humanity’s further development.
human species rather than a male specifically. Therefore, the Übermensch is not merely a “great man” or “perfect man” as the “superman” translation implies but rather points to a being that is “beyond humanity.” Nietzsche believed that through self-actualization and natural selection, humanity could approach an evolved state of consciousness and morality. Once this higher level of being was achieved, the Übermensch would see modern man in the same way that modern man views his common ancestry with the ape, as “a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment” (Nietzsche 13). Modern man thus naturally resists the rise of the Übermensch, since this transcendence would render modern life and humanity obsolete. The trappings of modernity — “the petty virtues, the petty policy, the sand-grain considerateness, the ant-hill trumpery, the pitiable comfortableness, the ‘happiness of the greatest number’” (223) — thus impede the Übermensch’s ascension. Through his protagonist, Zarathustra, Nietzsche beckons readers to overcome their petty nature and welcome the Übermensch, ascending with him through self-actualization. Superman’s co-creator Jerry Siegel, a fan of Nietzsche’s work, was fascinated by this next evolutionary state of humanity.

The comic book superhero Superman is the last of several attempts by Siegel and Shuster to explore the Übermensch concept. The first, appeared in 1933 in a nine-page prose short story titled “Reign of the Superman”, in the third issue of Shuster’s self-published pulp zine *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*, written by Siegel under the pen name Herbert S. Fine (with a few illustrations by Shuster). In this version, Siegel imagines the titular

---

57 The idea of a more evolved race of beings replacing the current human race, and humanity’s violent resistance to it, becomes a frequent theme in Marvel’s *X-men* comics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This is explored in depth in Joseph J. Darowski’s *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*.

58 See Chapter 1.

59 To create the illusion that his publication was more popular than it was, Siegel wrote under a collection of different pseudonyms. Herbert S. Fine was created by combining his cousin’s first name with his mother’s last name.
character as a villain bearing little resemblance to his more famous namesake. This “Superman” is Bill Dunn, a vagrant who unwittingly becomes the test subject of a dangerous chemical experiment by mad scientist Ernest Smalley in exchange for a “real meal and a new suit” (2). Smalley’s treatments give Dunn heightened intelligence, the ability to hear thoughts and the power to control minds. Dunn discovers that Smalley had intended to use the treatment on himself and then kill Dunn to become the sole superior human, so Dunn kills Smalley first. Dunn then attempts to take over the world, only to discover that the power potion was temporary and will wear off before he has time to replicate more. Without his extra abilities, he returns to being a homeless vagrant. The story ends with the moral that if only Dunn and Smalley had worked for the betterment of all humanity rather than selfish personal gain, they might have been able to maintain their advanced evolution.

Siegel’s view of superhumaness in this first iteration of Superman is bleak. In this story, absolute power corrupts absolutely. When reporter Forrest Ackerman, considers the possibility that Dunn is behind recent rising tensions in the International Conciliatory Council, a thinly veiled pastiche of the League of Nations, Ackerman wonders “what might the Superman’s motives be? Was it simply that his nature demanded he bring evilness and death upon humanity, or more likely, did he hope to gain control of it by first breaking down its strength by pitting it against itself?” (7). This was Siegel’s initial interpretation of the Übermensch’s relationship to humanity as Nietzsche envisioned it. Dunn has not achieved Übermensch status; he is transitioning towards it. In Also Sprach Zarathustra, Nietzsche posits that if a superior human were to come into being, he would initially conflict with a jealous humanity as it currently exists. However, Nietzsche’s view of the future is optimistic. He believes humanity should and will eventually aspire towards this evolution. However, Nietzsche also argues that humanity is
currently resisting Übermensch evolution by clinging to traditional values of modernity such as money, power, culture and religion. Despite achieving the superior mental acumen of being the Superman, Dunn’s motivations in Siegel’s text are still entirely human and become the impetus of his downfall. Thus, Siegel’s text argues that as a species humanity is not yet ready, and perhaps will never be capable, of achieving Nietzsche’s dream.

Siegel and Shuster spent the next five years after publishing “Reign of the Superman” trying to break into the newspaper comic strip business. Siegel’s deep investment in the Superman/Übermensch concept led him to propose adapting the character into a daily science fiction strip. After several publishers worried that readers would be unable to relate to a strip focused on a villain, rather than a virtuous and more marketable adventure hero in the vein of the then popular Flash Gordon and The Phantom, Shuster and Siegel began retooling the character to be a more benevolent representation of Nietzsche’s more evolved latter state of posthumanity. Eventually, they created an otherworldly (though inexplicably Caucasian appearing) alien with incredible powers, who devotes himself to protecting innocents. After several more failed attempts to acquire a newspaper syndication contract even with this updated Superman, Siegel and Shuster collected several of their sample strips into a single story and sold the rights to publisher DC Comics who premiered the character in Action Comics #1 in 1938.

The original “Reign of the Superman” was published in 1933, coincidentally the same year that another Nietzsche devotee, Adolf Hitler, came to power in Germany. Hitler used his own misinterpretation of the Übermensch to justify his belief in the superiority of the Aryan race, so much so that the “master race” ideology Hitler espoused is often incorrectly conflated with Nietzsche’s original philosophy (Weinstein loc. 153-156). Under Nazi ideology, the Übermensch believed in Aryan ethnic superiority and pledged allegiance to the state. Under Nietzsche’s
vision, the Übermensch eschews ethnicity and nationality in favor of his own internalized morality. Where Nietzsche disavowed religion entirely as a superstitious human invention, Hitler envisioned the Übermensch as Christian, seeing other religions as inferior in the same way as non-white races. Whereas Nietzsche believed the Übermensch to be a spiritual state-of-being that all humans could evolve towards in the era of modernity, Hitler saw it as an exclusionary classification that separated Germany from the lesser humans that he termed the üntermensch.60 Thus, Hitler seemed preoccupied with the power that is emblematic of being superior to the common man, without acknowledging the moral altruism that Nietzsche theorized was necessary to reaching that evolved state.

Perhaps because Hitler’s rise to power coincided with Siegel and Shuster’s quest to secure publication, the two creators—both children of Jewish immigrants—chose to infuse their heroic Übermensch with qualities directly opposing Hitler’s vision. Rabbi Simcha Weinstein notes that, in addition to Hebrew words and Jewish allusions sprinkled throughout Superman’s origin story, the character’s early adventures often saw him engaged in conflict with the Nazi leader, or thinly veiled substitutes such as Adolphus Runyan in Superman #2 or Karl Wolf in Superman #10 (Weinstein loc. 158-163). However, I argue that while Superman might be inspired by Jewish morality, he remains inherently secular. Nietzsche’s Übermensch specifically disavows religion; “God is dead” is an oft repeated refrain of Zarathustra’s in line with Nietzsche’s belief that humankind’s reliance on an unseen supernatural force to provide morality prevents ascension to Übermensch status. Superman exists definitionally outside of the

60 The term üntermensch, literally under man or inferior man, does not appear in Nietzsche’s writings. It was first coined by American Lothrop Stoddard of the Ku Klux Klan, again in reference to a distinctly racially motivated interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy and later adopted by the Nazi regime. Nietzsche’s work requires no such concept as he is not concerned with inferior classes of humanity but rather only with inspiring all humanity to rise to Übermensch status.
bounds of Abrahamic religions; as an alien he cannot be descended from the biblical Adam and Eve — thus effectively rendering the entire Superman mythos agnostic. So, while his creators’ Jewishness was well established, the actual text of the early stories remained mostly secular outside of the mild intertextual allusions to Jewish messiah legends that would be lost on most readers. Nonetheless, even without explicitly naming his religion, Superman’s Jewish creators, frequent parodies of Nazi Germany, and ethnic undertones were enough to cause the Nazi party to officially denounce the character in 1940 with minister of propaganda Josef Gobbel’s writing the following in the Nazi SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps*:

> “Jerry Siegel, an intellectually and physically circumcised chap who has his headquarters in New York . . . The inventive Israelite named this pleasant guy with an overdeveloped body and underdeveloped mind ’Superman’ . . . As you can see, there is nothing the Sadducees won’t do for money! . . . Jerry Siegellack (sic) stinks. Woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don’t even notice the poison they swallow daily.” (qtd. in Weinstein loc. 165-168).

While many of Superman’s heroic deeds performed could be read as mitzvahs by devout Jewish readers, to most they were simply evidence of Superman’s strict moral compass agnostic of any religion. In this way Siegel establishes his version of the Übermensch, a being of ultimate power who places morality above religion and separates social justice from social norms.

The apparent disregard for social norms is evident in many of Siegel’s early stories that establish Superman as a righteous outlaw who often displays outright disdain for government authority. Unlike later incarnations which depict Superman as a patriotic, conservative American hero and sometimes agent of the state, the early Superman is decidedly Marxist and

---

61 While the comics publishing industry of the era was filled with Jewish creators, many took on more Anglicized names to downplay their Jewish heritage. This was not the case with Siegel and Shuster but was with other prominent creators including Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg) and Stan Lee (born Stanley Lieber).

62 While the Siegel family did anglicize their last name upon immigration to the United States from Lithuania, their original spelling was Segalovich.
antiestablishment. Both Siegel and Shuster grew up in working class families\textsuperscript{63} during the Great Depression, and that upbringing influenced early Superman’s attitudes towards capitalist authorities and systems. In \textit{Action Comics} #8 Clark Kent witnesses the trial of Frankie, a teen boy arrested for theft. Frankie’s mother pleads with the judge “of course he talks tough – what’s more he \textit{is} tough, your honor – but he’s only like all the other boys in our neighborhood… hard, resentful, underprivileged. He’s my only son, he might have been a good boy except for his environment” (1). The judge is unmoved and sentences the boy to two years in juvenile detention and Clark vows to find a way to intervene in the apparent cycle of poverty and crime.

Superman soon learns that Frankie’s gang is connected to a fence named Gimpy who sends them to burglarize wealthy homes but only pays the boys a small share of the crime profits. When the boys demand too much money, Frankie calls in anonymous tips to the police and has the boys arrested during their break-ins, thus protecting his own interests. When Superman confronts the youth, his admonishment is grounded in Marxist pragmatism rather than moral ideology as he tells the young men “You’ve gotten it into your heads, somehow, that it’s smart to steal – – that stolen money is ‘easy dough.’ But that’s not true. No doubt you’ve already learned that no matter how much you bring in, Gimpy keeps the lion’s share” (8). This Superman is firmly connected to the struggles of the proletariat. He shows little if any concern for the wealthy robbery victims’ loss of property. The real crime, at least in this story, is that Gimpy, the capitalist criminal, unfairly exploits his working-class criminal underlings.

Superman’s privileging of social justice over social norms is underscored by his ultimate solution to the problem of inner-city crime. Superman dispatches Gimpy by throwing him

\textsuperscript{63} Both Siegel and Shuster were the children of immigrant Jewish tailors living in Cleveland, Ohio. The two met and in high school, Siegel’s self-published zine, \textit{Science-Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization}, on which the two collaborated beginning at age eighteen, was produced as an attempt to escape poverty (Daniels 13).
several blocks through the air and into a river (9) This treatment would have caused physical trauma if not death. Early Superman, like many other Golden Age superheroes and the pulp heroes that predated them, was not averse to taking human life in the service of the greater good. The comic leaves Gimpy’s fate unclear, as the narrative has no further use for him once he is literally expelled from the boy’s lives. As a criminal — and a dishonorable one at that — Gimpy’s possible death is presumed to be just. Many early Superman villains share similar fates. However, Superman has sympathy for the boys and worries that their life of crime is inevitable. Echoing Frankie’s mother, he announces “it’s not your fault that you’re delinquent — it’s these slums — your poor living conditions — if there was only some way I could remedy it” (11).

Ultimately, Superman decides on a form of anarchism and becomes a radical agent of New Deal socialism. Inspired by a newspaper report on government rebuilt cities after a Florida cyclone, Superman warns Frankie and his neighbors to remove their valuables and leave their homes. He then singlehandedly demolishes several city blocks while law-enforcement and military forces — agents of the capitalist state — attempt in vain to stop him, all the while proclaiming that the government will be forced to rebuild “modern cheap-rental apartments” and that after he is finished “this town will be rid of its filthy crime-festering slums!” (12). Like Gimpy, the fates of soldiers and policeman attempting to stop the rampage are left unclear. Anyone opposing Superman’s morally just destruction appears to be acceptable collateral damage. Superman’s gambit proves correct. When he is done, “emergency squads commence erecting huge apartment-projects… and in time the slums are replaced by splendid housing conditions” (13). While sparing the working-class residents, he has no concern for the costs incurred on the bourgeois tenement owners or taxpayers. His only goal is forcing the
reconstruction because doing so promotes the greater good, in the way that he alone has decided to define it.

Although he visually appears as a Caucasian male, Superman’s alien origins mark him naturally Übermensch without ascension. He does not have to evolve beyond humanity because he had a head start; his moral code is simply innate. However, the stories invite readers to emulate Superman and evolve towards Übermensch ascension themselves. Members of Frankie’s gang announce their admiration of him. One boy says, “any guy who can do what you do, mister, is O.K. with us!” followed by a second saying “yer swell! And we’d give anything to be like you!” and a third offering that “if bein’ clean an’ honest is yer code then it’s gonna be ours, too” (11) to which Superman offers his approval. Like many early Superman stories, the comic concludes with tips for “acquiring super-strength” that encourage readers to engage in certain exercises to build muscle, flexibility, and eyesight, under the theory that Superman’s abilities are achievable through training, even though the narrative clearly states that he possesses them naturally. Other stories end with an invitation to join the character’s fan club, The Supermen of America, which offers its members a badge, certificate, and membership card with a

Figure 18: Supermen of America membership card and certificate.
secret decoder cipher in exchange for swearing an oath of dedication to strength, courage and justice – and of course continuing to read Superman comics (see Figure 18). The implication is that Superman’s adventures are to be seen as edifying and increased physical ability is granted to those who voluntarily submit to the Werther effect. Most importantly, the superhero monomyth again links power to morality. Superior masculine performance implies superiorly morally just and vice versa.

The superhero thematic paradigm came about through repeated attempts to replicate the immense popularity of the Superman Übermensch character but without necessarily adopting Siegel and Shuster’s ideology. One of the first was DC Comics’ Batman. Created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, another pair of first-generation Jewish Americans, Batman first appeared in Detective Comics #27. Like Superman, early Batman stories feature the character using his abilities to serve the public good outside of the bounds of social convention. Unlike early Superman, Golden Age Batman is a defender of capitalism. Where Superman’s initial foes were typically corrupt authorities preying on the working class, Batman defended businessmen and industrialists from organized crime seeking to steal their wealth. In his first adventure Batman investigates the murder of Mr. Lambert, owner of The Apex Chemical Corporation. He begins by staking out the home of one of Lambert’s business associates, Steven Crane, and waiting for him to be attacked (2). Batman fails to prevent Crane’s murder — he simply never intervenes — and instead dispatches the assailants afterwards by throwing them from a roof to their apparent

64 See Chapter 1.  
65 Like Action Comics and Superman, Detective Comics began as an anthology series, focusing, as the name would suggest, on unrelated detective and crime investigation stories. With Batman’s first appearance in issue #27, he quickly became the most popular ongoing storyline as Superman had before him in Action Comics. As such, Batman was, like Superman, spun off into an eponymous solo title and would eventually take over Detective Comics as the sole storyline as well. Superman would also add a second solo title while eventually taking over as the sole character depicted in Action Comics.
deaths (3). Finally, Batman is able to save Lambert’s third business partner, Paul Rogers, from being murdered by the fourth, Alfred Stryker (4). However, saving Rogers’ life seems to be a secondary goal to stopping Stryker from usurping control of the company’s assets. Batman unconcerned by his failure to save Lambert and Crane, or his apparent murder of Stryker’s henchmen. In fact, this Batman has little regard for human life at all, particularly when the life is responsible for a threat to capitalism. When Batman confronts Stryker at the Apex Chemical laboratory, Stryker attempts to escape by drawing a gun. Batman punches Stryker, who falls over a railing into a vat of acid, to which Batman’s only response is that this is “a fitting end for his kind” (6). With the company assets safe from falling unjustly into unworthy hands, Batman leaves the scene before the police can arrive. He ends several of his early adventures in this same manner. To Batman, at least in this initial incarnation, protection of the capital investment far outweighs the importance of any individual or the legal authority.

In 1941, a third pair of young Jewish men, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, created a patriotic Übermensch in direct opposition to Hitler’s vision of the concept. Captain America first debuted on the cover of Captain America Comics #1 by punching Hitler in the jaw (see Figure 8) on December 20, 1940, nearly a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor forced United States involvement in WWII. As first-generation Americans, both creators had close familial ties to Jews in Europe. At a point when the United States was actively avoiding the war, Kirby’s artwork — featuring a hero adorned in the American flag boldly striking the German chancellor in the face, with no fear of the Nazi guns trained upon him — could only be seen as a direct entreaty to the United States to join the fight.

---

66 For the early creators, comic books were an attempt to use their innate talents to rise into the middle class. Like Siegel and Shuster, Kirby and Simon were the sons of poor immigrant Jewish tailors, as was Bill Finger, one of Batman’s two creators. Bob Kane, Batman’s other creator, was the son of a Jewish engraver.
Captain America’s origin story establishes Simon and Kirby’s vision of American ideology and masculinity. Captain America was born Steve Rogers, a frail but patriotic young man who attempted to enlist in the United States Army but was “refused because of his unfit condition” (5). In a secret procedure, government scientist Dr. Reinstein injects Steve with chemicals stating, “the serum coursing through his blood is rapidly building his body and brain tissues, until his stature and intelligence increase to an amazing degree” (5). In mere moments, Rogers grows several inches and gains peak human fitness. Reinstein exclaims “Behold! The crowning achievement of all my years of hard work! The first of a corps of super-agents whose mental and physical ability will make them a terror to spies and saboteurs! We shall call you Captain America, son! Because, like you — America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!” (5, emphasis in original). In short, Reinstein uses science to transform Rogers into the Übermensch. However, unlike the similar experiment in Siegel and Shuster’s first Superman pulp, Simon and Kirby show that ascension to this next stage of human evolution is possible with superior moral character. Moments after Steve’s transformation, a Nazi spy murders Reinstein. Captain America quickly retaliates and kills the interloper by knocking him into a nearby machine that promptly explodes. Like Batman, Cap has little value for the life of evildoers, gloating “nothing left of him but charred ashes… a fate he well deserved!” (7).

Simon’s early Captain America stories position the hero as strongly opposed to the Nazi regime. In the second of the four stories presented in the premiere issue, Captain America and his teen sidekick, Bucky, investigate a pair of German fortune tellers who predict disasters

---

67 Like the Action Comics and Detective Comics before it, Captain America Comics was also an anthology collection of several stories. However, unlike his predecessors, all four stories presented in the issue featured a different adventure featuring Captain America from the beginning. While the stories were episodic and not serialized, they still all shared the same creative team of Simon and Kirby.
befalling United States government and military installations just before the disasters actually occur. Cap and Bucky force the mystics to admit they are the terrorists behind the attack. Simon’s story makes no attempt to explain why the mystics feel the need to announce their attacks ahead of time; it simply announces them as affiliated with the Nazi regime. Another story in the same issue finds the heroes quashing a ring of Nazi spies who are assassinating American military leaders. Rather than attempting to explain Nazi ideology or the Third Reich’s motivation, Captain America Comics offers a simple message: the Nazi regime is a direct threat to American democracy and destroying it is imperative. In fact, rather than warning about the potential for Nazis to strike against United States, Simon makes the case that the attack is already underway, opening the first issue with the ominous warning that “as the ruthless war-mongers of Europe coup their eyes on a peace-loving America… the youth of our country heed the call to arm for defense… but great as the danger of foreign attack… is the threat of invasion from within… the dreaded fifth column” (1).

Cap’s visual design announces him as both an American symbol and Übermensch. He is wrapped in the red, white and blue stars and stripes of the American flag and carries a similarly decorated shield that announces his primary goal of defending the ideology he represents. Furthermore, Kirby depicts Captain America as tall, muscular and blond – the very vision of Aryan eugenic superiority Hitler favored. Nevertheless, despite his apparent Christian European ancestry, Cap opposes Hitler’s regime. In this way rather than creating a hero explicitly for the Jewish people, Kirby and Simon imply that all Americans must stand against the Nazi threat regardless of their ethnic or religious origins. Furthermore, he explicitly establishes himself as a bastion of American ideology saying, “since this is America’s problem – let’s see what Captain America can do!” (10). Cap views stopping Nazi progress as his patriotic duty and by extension
the responsibility of the nation. Like Superman comics, *Captain America Comics* readers were invited to become members of the Sentinels of Liberty fan club, receiving a membership card and badge (see Figure 19) for swearing the oath, “I solemnly pledge to uphold the principles of the Sentinels of Liberty and assist Captain America in his war against spies in the U.S.A.” (8). In effect, Captain America deputized his young readers to share in his brand of patriotism.

Viewed together, these Golden Age superheroes — Superman, Batman and Captain America — begin to establish the malleability of the social justice element of the superhero thematic paradigm. The specific ideologies that the Golden Age superhero espouses are immaterial to his superheroic status. Rather, Superman’s anarchistic socialism, Batman’s radical capitalism and Captain America’s jingoistic nationalism all qualify as social justice missions within their own narratives. Thus, while superhero narratives typically present a battle between good and evil, the details of what qualifies as good or evil on the monomythic level are never explicitly defined. In fact, any social ideology can qualify for this element of the thematic paradigm, so long as the superhero is presented as a champion of that ideology. Because the multiple histories theory renders superhero canon illusory, the superhero can even adjust his ideology to evolve with a changing society without necessarily affecting his Übermensch status or his mythic gestalt. Batman, Superman, and Captain America profess far different ideologies and sensibilities in their Modern Age comic incarnations than their Golden Age origins. The

---

68 See Chapter 1.
many worlds theory renders consistency meaningless. It is only necessary that the superhero’s moral code reflect the community that he serves and that he takes personal responsibility for defending that morality with performative masculine violence. So long as the mythic gestalt is maintained, the superhero may change his representation of methods of engagement in that mission over time — are typically in response changing societal values of the readership, or in the values that creators wish to impress on their presumed readership.

**Deconstruction of the Innocent: The Invention of Adolescence and Juvenile Delinquency**

“You wanted to kill your father in order to be your father yourself. Now you are your father, but a dead father.”

-Sigmund Freud

While the superhero ideologies vary greatly, their methods are relatively standardized. The superhero defends his community from the invading Others that threaten it, typically using his masculine power to engage in violence. In other words, he fights for what he believes is right, serving as a champion in the same way as the heroes of classic myth that Campbell describes. Arnaudo believes that the superhero sees this as a pragmatic responsibility to do whatever necessary to promote the social good (64). That is, to say that under Arnaudo’s argument, the superhero fights for justice because he is the individual best qualified to do so, or as Spiderman’s mantra continuously reminds his readers “with great power comes great responsibility”. I counter that this decision is not truly pragmatic but performative. The superhero typically engages in hypermasculine violence even when the most pragmatic decision might be to avoid conflict altogether. Seldom do superhero narratives climax with characters saving the day through diplomacy or conflict de-escalation. The standard format of a superhero narrative expects a physical conflict. To be a superhero is to constantly endanger oneself in service of the
social mission. To be a superhero is to fight — even if that means fighting to the death. At least this was the case in the Golden Age; superheroes of the Silver Age were far less inclined to murder and became homogenized towards an altruistic and unstated but understood heroic code of conduct. Superman matured into the more idealistic mold of what became one of his nicknames, the Big Blue Boy Scout. Batman, in turn began focusing more on crime that affected the common man rather than the bourgeois elite. When the warmongering Captain America returned from his publication hiatus in the 1960s, he was a national hero driven by impeccable morality. The move towards heroic idealism occurred partly through natural storyline progression but also because of a dedicated hegemonic effort to turn the comic book medium — the primary home of the superhero — into a didactic tool to shape the ideology of an emerging youth culture towards the principles of the older generation. Superhero comics evolved to teach young readers to focus their power on moral righteousness out of fear that it might otherwise be focused on their parents.

In 1954, American comics experienced perhaps the most significant development in their history related to outside forces. Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he argued that comics were the leading cause of juvenile delinquency among minors. Throughout his text, Wertham uses anecdotal evidence to argue that comics encourage young readers to engage in aberrant and anti-social behavior resulting in widespread crime and sexual deviance — specifically theft, murder, rape, and homosexuality. Wertham believed in a subconscious rather than voluntary version of the Werther effect. In comics he saw “primers for crime” for the juvenile delinquent (163), arguing that the majority of children in juvenile

---

69 The phenomena wherein an individual consciously chooses to emulate a narrative that they know to be fictional. See Chapter 1.
detention centers were inspired by the blueprints of the comics because, “in comic books, usually these crimes remain unpunished until the criminal has committed many more of them” (155). The bulk of Wertham’s text is composed of tenuous connections between acts of violence committed in crime comics and similar acts committed in real life. He argues that giving intricate details of how crime is committed inspires young readers to replicate them.

Wertham considered comics a genre unto themselves rather than a media type encompassing several genres. Superhero comics were on the decline in the years after WWII and consequently many of his examples are drawn from crime comics — police procedurals that focusing on dangerous criminals, often drawn from real life accounts, and the attempts of law-enforcement to apprehend them — and horror comics designed to frighten adult readers. In practice much of Wertham’s criticism was against these crime and horror comics. However, he freely floated between criticism of those stories and superhero, romance, and science fiction genres. In fact, Wertham seldom differentiated between the story genres at all, nor did he acknowledge comics might be aimed at different age demographics. Instead, he believed all comics to be explicitly targeted towards impressionable children and directly responsible for a rise in violent and criminal behavior.

Additionally, Wertham blamed comics for what he perceived as a rise in non-normative sexual behavior. He claimed increases in both juvenile homosexuality and heterosexual hypersexuality were caused by messages encoded in comic storylines and artwork, arguing they led to excessive masturbation and sadomasochistic fantasies. Some of Wertham’s conclusions are understandable. Not only does he note the obvious sexualized bodies in skintight costumes, but he also calls attention to the exaggerated female physiques with emphasis on the breasts and legs and the sexual positioning as they stand or even as murdered corpses. He expresses concern
over bondage and lesbian themes, particularly in Wonder Woman comics. In many ways, he anticipates some of the critiques of the hypersexual male gaze focused artwork indicative of late twentieth century comics. Comics scholar Amy Kiste Nyberg reluctantly acknowledges that Wertham’s usage of audience analysis, ethnography and anthropology should be considered innovative for his time (95).

However, much of Wertham’s criticism appears to be overreaching. As Nyberg also notes, “by the time Wertham wrote Seduction of the Innocent, his agenda was clearly defined and the book was meant to serve that agenda” (96). To Wertham, sex in comics was everywhere and indelibly linked to violence. Using Werther effect logic, he argued that the hypersexualized images of the female victims in bondage — a trope common of crime comics and some superhero comics such as Wonder Woman — would inevitably lead male readers to rape fantasies. He believed that subliminal pornographic images were inserted into even the most innocuous of shadows drawn into the artwork. To Wertham, a stray line could be interpreted as a hidden picture of genitalia. While, somewhat progressively for his time, he believed that “masturbation is harmless enough,” he worried that “when accompanied by unhealthy — especially sado-masochistic — fantasies it may become a serious factor in the maladjustment of children” (Wertham 177). His concern was that, for the developing adolescent mind, exposure to improper media would manifest itself as a lifetime of deviant sexual behavior.

Furthermore, Wertham believed that a covert homosexual agenda permeated the media. Most notably, he pointed to Batman and his sidekick Robin, arguing they represented a homoerotic fantasy of a teenaged boy living alone with an adult man (189). While Wertham

---

70 See Chapter 3.
71 See Chapter 4.
72 See Chapter 3.
recognized Batman as Robin’s adoptive father, he rejected the notion of a man voluntarily becoming a single parent. Instead, Wertham assumes that Bruce Wayne, Batman’s alter ego, could only have adopted Dick Grayson, aka Robin, for the purpose of having an in-home outlet for his secret pedophilic desires (191). The ready acceptance of Wertham’s stance by his readers speaks to views of masculinity at the time. Bruce adopting Dick was deemed inappropriate not only because of a possible sexual relationship but also because a man accepting domestic responsibility outside of marriage violated gender norms that Bruce’s proper place was as a father providing for a family with a wife raising his children. For Wertham such a confusion of gender norms being presented to young readers was a dire threat.

Though Wertham’s findings led to widespread panic among parents and government officials at the time, his work has been largely discredited today. Wertham fails to provide sources for most of his case studies throughout Seduction of the Innocent and instead typically simply refers to “one troubled youth” in his care or “a certain report” he has seen and follows with sensationalistic and anecdotal claims that often end in horrific murder. His work shows clear bias. Pop culture scholar David Hadju notes that “Wertham was a nest of contradictions—intelligent and contemplative, yet susceptible to illogic, conjecture, and peculiar leaps of reasoning; temperate in appearance and manner, yet inclined to extravagant, attention-grabbing pontification” (99). Carol L. Tilley has found evidence that many of Wertham’s findings may have been intentionally falsified (Tilley 397). Even ignoring the possible invention of data, Wertham misrepresents context of his demographics by neglecting to acknowledge that while most of the juvenile delinquents he interviewed during his research were comic books readers, so were eighty percent of all other non-troubled teens in the United States during the 1950s (Tilley 387).
Adolescence was a relatively new cultural construction in Wertham’s time. Before the twentieth century, Americans conceptualized the teen years as fundamentally identical to either childhood or adulthood. John and Virginia Demos argue that in the nineteenth century parenting guides focused on instilling respect for elders in young children (633). As early as the mid-1820s, Americans feared that “willfulness” among young children was on the rise and perceived a growing trend of waning respect for parents among prepubescent children as a threat to the traditional family structure. Once children reached what is now called adolescence, the few texts that addressed them as distinct from adults typically focused on giving advice for socially navigating adulthood — primarily properly dealing with sexual urges or “passions” (634) lest they fall prey to the decadent temptations that older and wiser adults were presumably more practiced at resisting. Such texts became more common and more explicitly linked to improper sexual behavior as the nineteenth century came to a close. In rural societies, when children came of working and marrying age, the teenage years, they were able to progress to adult life without the need for an intermediate stage. However, the migration of the majority of the American population to urban areas, coincident with the study of the physiological differences between the teenage and adult bodies and brains pioneered by psychologist G. Stanley Hall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, led to the recognition of a formal adolescent stage between childhood and adulthood (Demos and Demos 635). Furthermore, the city environment

73 While the term adolescence existed at the time, it was used infrequently, primarily because the stage of development was not seen as functionally different from adulthood. Typically, those of teen years were referred to as “young adults” or sometimes shorted to simply “youth” (Demos and Demos 634). While it was understood that young adults were at a lower social stratum than those who had been adults longer, they were still functionally regarded as adults rather than children and granted a greater degree of both independence and responsibility than would become common in the 20th century.

74 Hall is a controversial figure in the psychology world. He was a driving force behind the study of racial eugenics, the belief that differences in the brain physiology led to the natural superiority of Caucasians over other races. While his eugenics work is largely discredited today, as are some of his theories on adolescence, he is nonetheless responsible for popularizing the concept of adolescence.
was seen as more enticing towards “the passions” than the rural one (634). With higher population density and the introduction of the automobile granting greater mobility, teens were increasingly socializing with peers rather than congregating within the diverse age groups including elders that were common in less densely populated areas. As adolescents began to develop their own youth subculture during the early twentieth century, fears of juvenile delinquency began to spread amongst the older populace (637). As the United States reached modernity, teens who previously would have been acknowledged as young adults were now seen as in a state of extended childhood.

This new view of adolescence became entrenched in American society during the advent of comics’ Golden Age. Comic publishers saw adolescents as an untapped market demographic. Teens who could work outside the home had both access to disposable income separate from their parents and less financial obligation to support themselves or their families. As such, storylines in many comics were tailored towards what the creators assumed would attract the teen audience. Because parents had feared the threat of juvenile delinquency longer than the term teenagers existed, Wertham’s book struck a chord. He called for banning the medium, saying that “up to the beginning of the comic-book era there were hardly any serious crimes such as murder by children under twelve.... So, we adults who permit comic books are accessories” (Wertham 155). Wertham’s goal was to stop the threat that he feared unchecked youth culture, fueled by comics, represented.

The threat of juvenile delinquency was an instance of ephebiphobia, the natural fear of being replaced by a younger generation. During the same period that Hall was popularizing the

---

75 The term teenager first entered usage in the 1920s and became commonplace as a designation for adolescents around the 1940s.
idea of adolescence as a discreet stage in human development, psychologist Sigmund Freud introduced the idea of the Œdipus Complex into public consciousness. Freud believed that a natural stage in the sexual development of a young boy was to fall in love with his mother and seek to murder (at least metaphorically) his father. This idea was extended by Freud’s student Carl Jung with a similarly defined Electra Complex, wherein a young girl falls in love with her father and seeks her mother’s elimination. Though much criticism has been levied at the psychological validity of both theories in the years since, they were quite popular at the time and the response by parents was to protect themselves at all costs by maintaining control over their progeny. Ephebiphobia has long been a popular theme in myth. Zeus — who rose to power by overthrowing his father Cronus, who had previously usurped his own father Uranus — sought to kill his own children by swallowing them whole rather than suffer a similar fate. In some versions of Arthurian legend, the king slaughters all newborn boys because he fears a prophecy that one will eventually kill him, a prediction that eventually comes to pass when he is slain by his own son, Mordred. Similar preemptive massacres of children are undertaken by the Pharaoh of Egypt and King Herod the Great in the biblical books of Exodus and Matthew respectively. The Oedipus Complex itself is named for a mythical Greek king who rose to power by slaying his own father, Laius, who like the others had attempted to kill his son to avoid the prophecy of his own demise. In each case, the older generation itself feels threatened by a younger and stronger generation. The rise of mid-twentieth-century youth culture created the general anxiety that this was beginning to occur as parents were unable to control adolescent children in the way they could their prepubescent ones. Freud, Hall, Jung and Wertham lent scientific authority to parents’ preexisting ephebiphobic fears. In order to avoid their own decimation, the older generation feared they needed to act.
Wertham was widely considered an authority on juvenile delinquency. Much of his psychiatric practice served underprivileged black youth in Harlem, many of whom he became connected to through the New York court system, which required a psychiatric evaluation of all convicted felons. His popularity as an authority on the subject resulted in him testifying before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency where he argued that comics as a medium were driving the nation’s youth towards further delinquency and warned that their popularity over “real books” would inevitably lead to functional illiteracy. His testimony was compelling, and the Senate made clear that something needed to be done to curb the risks that comic books posed to America’s youth.

In 1954, to escape the threat of congressional oversight and censorship, the American comics industry chose to self-regulate and created a governing body known as the Comics Code Authority (hereafter known as the CCA) to enforce a set of content guidelines (hereafter referred to as “the Code”) initially modeled on the Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s. While Wertham is often portrayed as a sort of boogeyman by modern comics fans, because of the way in which the CCA shaped the industry over the next five decades, it should be noted that he opposed the industry being allowed to self-regulate in any way. He believed all comic books to be naturally inappropriate for minors by their very nature and preferred they be marketed exclusively towards adults or not at all. However, the comics industry believed that the youth market to be far more profitable than the adult market and accepted the designation of comics as juvenile media, vowing to create only child appropriate content.

The CCA was responsible for enforcing that all comics promote socially acceptable norms. A board was installed to review all comics from the major publishers before distribution, which required the CCA seal of approval. As a result, comics entered what has come to be called
the Silver Age wherein violence, sexuality, affronts of religion, and criticism of government authority were greatly toned down and all but eliminated (Nyberg 166-169). The CCA moved comics towards a unified altruistic and moral ideology that became emblematic of the superhero monomyth thematic paradigm. Every superhero began to abide by an assumed code of honor, using their powers to defend innocents and establish law and order at all costs. Violence was permissible — and in fact encouraged — to defend morality, so long as it never resulted in death. As such, Superman, Batman, and Captain America ceased being Übermensch champions of their own individual subcultures and instead towards the defense of a normalized and artificially constructed American ideology focused on rearing morally responsible adolescent readers on a moral code deemed appropriate by parents who feared they were losing control of their children.

**Might Makes Right: Hypermasculinity and Subjective Morality**

“And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come – great responsibility!”

- Stan Lee (narrator), *Amazing Fantasy* (vol. 1, #15)

The creation of the CCA precipitated a massive restructuring of the comic book industry that effectively ended the Golden Age and reshaped it into what is now called the Silver Age. The bulk of the tropes commonly associated with the superhero monomyth developed during this period. Furthermore, while the medium allows for any genre of story to be told, CCAs edicts essentially forced the comic book market to structure itself around narratives promoting normative moral values. The Code effectively made horror and crime comics unpublishable. While the CCA did not require that criminals have clear motivations, it did mandate that evil never seem enticing or sympathetic to the reader (Nyberg 166). This discouraged having any rational motivation for comic book supervillains at all; they were evil for evil’s sake and had to be clearly and unequivocally defeated by good. In the visual medium of comics this occurred
through depictions of combat. With the Silver Age shift towards exclusively child-appropriate content, complex narratives surrounding the exploration of morality, ideology, philosophy and tensions between them were abandoned in favor of more accessible and didactic binary parables. Violence had only one purpose: defending good against evil.

*Captain America Comics* was an early precursor of this shift in direction. Kirby and Simon originally envisioned the character as an allegory for the morally righteous stance they believed the United States should take towards the Nazi regime. As previously noted, the early comics were a call to action for America to enter World War II. Beyond patriotism, Cap was decidedly nationalistic, bordering on jingoistic. During the War, many other superhero comics followed suit, engaging in storylines that saw them in direct conflict with the Axis powers. These comics were favorite reading material for enlisted servicemen, many of whom were teenagers and, but for the war, would likely have been included in the group juvenile delinquents that older adults feared. Indeed, the need for soldiers during the war temporarily reduced the fear of juvenile delinquency by positioning young men as adults with military responsibilities. An underlying theme of early *Captain America Comics* is that the war effort is every American’s responsibility and encouraging able-bodied youth to enlist. However, as the war ended, readership of *Captain America Comics* and superhero comics as a whole began to decline. After V-E Day, Marvel Comics initially attempted to make Captain America into a conventional crime fighting superhero akin to what Batman and Superman had been before World War II. Where the pre-war Captain America spent his time routing secret Nazi sympathizers and spies, the post-War version fought traditional criminals such as bank robbers and gangsters. Without a direct counter-American threat to respond to, the character lost much of his original appeal; he was now simply another masked crimefighter, albeit one inexplicably wrapped in an American flag.
He was no longer relatable. Where once he represented an everyman, who enlisted out of devout patriotism, he now implied that absent war, a soldier had no other purpose beyond policing the homeland for whatever threat he could find. Furthermore, soldiers returning from the actual war — and even those readers who had never enlisted — were now living in a world that had just witnessed the horrors of Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They were less interested in the activities of fictional superheroes. One dimensional tommy-gun toting gangsters and gun molls seemed less threatening than concentration camps or nuclear annihilation. Readers no longer craved an Übermensch that could inspire them to overcome adversity. Instead, creators wanted to explore the atrocities of the postmodern world more closely. This gave rise to the crime and horror comics that Wertham feared.

Using gothic horror as a template, EC Comics\textsuperscript{76} explored the complexities of midcentury America. Rather than a hero automatically triumphing and assuring readers that everything would be alright, publisher William Gaines allowed his stories to end with uncertainty or even tragedy. Inspired by early pulp magazines, \textit{Crime SuspenStories} showed criminals getting away with their crimes. \textit{The Vault of Horror} similarly allowed macabre supernatural creatures to kill protagonists. Many of EC’s comics focused on the racism and sexism that minorities and women faced in white male society. Others focused on fears of atomic discovery left unchecked. Gaines saw his comics as akin to Shuster and Siegel’s original “Reign of the Superman” and other speculative science fiction — an opportunity to explore the dangers of modern society and

\textsuperscript{76}Entertaining Comics, commonly called EC Comics was the premier publisher of crime and horror comics during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Publisher William Gaines was the sole representative of the comics industry who agreed to testify in defense of the medium against Wertham at the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (Nyberg 59-60). Gaines and EC became a scapegoat for the industry with the CCA regulations being written specifically in a way that prohibited the stories that were the hallmark of EC’s brand. The company was forced to cease operations in 1956.
anticipating those that would arise in the future. EC’s success led other publishers to copy their formula and crime and horror comics became bestsellers in the days following WWII as superhero sales declined. In the late 1940s, Captain America Comics featured the character investigating monsters and backup stories without Captain America at all focused purely on the horror stories, eventually rechristening itself Captain America’s Weird Tales with issue #74 in October of 1949. Issue #75 emulated the visual format of EC’s titles (see Figure 20) and dispensed with the title character entirely. The title was then cancelled in February of 1950.

For all the edicts the CCA imposed, very little regulation of violence existed in and of itself. The 1954 Code did caution that “scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony and gruesome crime shall be eliminated” (Nyberg 166, emphasis mine). However, the precise definitions of excessive, brutal, et al are left to the discretion of the reviewers. Furthermore, the Code explicitly allowed for depictions of combat outside of those boundaries so long as no blood was shown (167). In practice, the CCA only prohibited the gory and bloody violence epitomized by EC. Thus, while horror and crime comics were banned, superheroic fantasy violence was allowed to continue and even encouraged. The only requirement was that the hero must strike in the name

Figure 20: Tales from the Crypt and Captain America’s Weird Tales
of justice and righteousness and that “in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the
criminal punished for his misdeeds” (Nyberg 166). Thus, the superhero of the Silver Age became
defined far more by how his fights looked than any other aspect of his character.

Batman and Superman fared somewhat better than Captain America (and most other
superheroes) in the final days of the Golden Age. While DC Comics cancelled most of their
superhero comics to focus on other genres, their keystone titles featuring their best-selling three
superheroes (the third being Wonder Woman who will be discussed in Chapter 3) continued.\footnote{With declining sales most of the major superhero superheroes of the Golden Age were cancelled in favor of horror and crime comics by early 1950s. Fawcett Comics, creators of the at one point massively popular Captain Marvel, ceased publication of comics entirely in 1953. Marvel Comics predecessor, Timely Comics cancelled Captain America Comics and most of its other superhero titles by 1950 and by 1951 had rebranded itself as Atlas Comics to focus on crime and horror stories. Similarly, National Comics, began rebranded itself as DC Comics in this same period, cancelling most of its superhero titles to focus on westerns, romance, humor, science fiction, crime and horror genres.} However, as the Silver Age began, both were restructured to fit within the more child-friendly
regulations of the Comics Code. With the CCA limiting the activities in which supervillains
could engage and neutering how threatening they could become, the superhero adventures
became increasingly silly. Batman fought a string of ridiculous villains intent on causing
mischief for mischief’s sake. His greatest antagonist, the Joker, who in the Golden Age had been
a homicidal, psychopathic gangster, mysteriously scarred with a perpetual grin, became a
mischievous nuisance who created grandiose practical jokes to plague Batman’s hometown of
Gotham City. More often than not, the Joker’s dedication to making sure the joke succeeded
rather than any specific criminal goal led to his own downfall as the complexity of the jokes gave
Batman ample opportunity to outsmart and defeat him. Similarly, the Riddler was addicted to
leaving clues to his own defeat in a misguided attempt to prove himself Batman’s intellectual
superior. Other Silver Age Batman villains had similar irrational obsessions linked to their
themes. Mr. Freeze’s sole goal was committing crimes involving sub-zero temperatures and Kite-man had a fascination with kites. Little narrative motivation existed for any of these villains beyond committing crimes themed by their name. They were evil for evil’s sake, and that evil was generally incompetent. Batman was easily able to meet each challenge, underscoring the premise that good’s natural superiority over evil.

Silver Age Superman comics were even more simplified. During the War years, Superman had already begun solidifying his mythic gestalt while progressing away from his Marxist roots and transforming into an All-American hero, a trend that continued into the Silver Age. Superman’s premise was always predicated on him being the most powerful being on Earth. He was so popular during the Golden Age that he was quickly spun off into other media, including a newspaper strip (1939), radio teleplays (1940), animated cartoons (1941), novels (1942), movie serials (1948), and a television series (1952). As multiple writers began expanding his multiple history canon and adopting aspects from each other, the character’s powers and abilities were increased even further. Where initially the character could “leap tall buildings in a single bound,” by the 1940s the animated cartoons had given him the ability to fly.\(^78\) Where originally, he was “faster than a locomotive,” he eventually could travel beyond the speed of light. His first appearance claims that his skin can be penetrated with “no less than a bursting shell” but by the Silver Age, he was durable enough to survive atomic bombs. Over time he gained a litany of other powers, including x-ray vision, super-hearing, and hypnotism. By the

\(^{78}\) The original Action Comics featuring Superman gave him with the ability to jump an eighth of a mile or “leap tall buildings in a single bound,” a phrase still often associated with the character to this day. This became his primary method of travel. However, when the character was adapted into an animated cartoon serial by Fleischer Studios, producers felt as though the animations of Superman leaping seemed silly in action and so modified the character so that he could fly instead. Flying, like many of Superman’s other abilities, was retroactively added back into the comics.
Silver Age, Siegel and Shuster’s anti-capitalist outlaw Übermensch had become a politically moderate being with godlike power. With their Golden Age motivations replaced by Silver Age simplicity, Superman and Batman lacked any specific ideology. Both were understood to be innately good and therefore naturally powerful, but both also became one-dimensional. The superheroes now stood for simplistic, but ambiguous CCA endorsed goodness that could best be described by the circular reasoning of *not evil*, which was also ambiguously defined. Superman was good because he always triumphed over villains and good is stronger than evil. As such, any foe opposing Superman was assumed to be evil and, by CCA rule, clearly inferior.

Like *Batman, Superman* comics reinforced his superiority by making his foes inept and removing any possibility that the forces of evil might defeat him. As such his adventures were often without risk became increasingly silly and comical. To combat this and add personal stakes, the Silver Age comics increasingly focused on Superman rescuing his supporting cast: human friends Jimmy Olson and Lois Lane. As Superman’s best friend and girlfriend, Jimmy and Lois served as stand-ins for the reader, offering a glimpse of what it would be like to actually live in the superhero world. They were popular enough to eventually gain their own on-going comics, auspiciously featuring Jimmy and Lois as protagonists, but in reality, highlighting their dependence on Superman.\(^79\) In effect, Jimmy and Lois were denied their own agency as even their self-titled comics only referenced them only by their relationship with the Man of Steel.

\(^{79}\) *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen* premiered in September of 1954. *Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane* followed in March of 1958. Both titles ran until they were finally cancelled in 1974.
In many ways the Silver Age Superman’s character is defined more by these relationships with his supporting cast than his own personality. A common sales ploy of the era stories emerged where the magazine cover featured Superman doing something shocking and deplorable to Jimmy or Lois (see Figure 21). Once the comic was purchased, readers would discover that the cover was misleading; Superman was actually saving his friends, tricking them to protect his secret identity, or playing a practical joke, usually because they were stepping outside of social norms, and he felt he needed to teach them a lesson. This formula became so commonplace in 1960s comics that twenty-first century readers now consider it one of the defining tropes of the era. Since 2005, Mike Miksch has amassed an archive of these images on his website Superdickery which he describes as “a website that was created to support the central thesis that the character of Superman is, in fact, a dick,” to humorously expose the hypocrisy of the Silver Age Superman. No matter how horrible Superman’s actions on the cover appeared, the narrative inside almost always presented the motivations for his behavior as altruistic and moral. He is

---

80 Miksch’s website has expanded in scope over the years to include other characters besides Superman as well as comics from other eras of comics. However, the Superman comics of the Silver Age remain a favorite subject on the site.

81 On the few occasions where Superman was not mistreating his friends “for their own good” the narrative would eventually reveal that either he was being temporarily mind controlled or otherwise manipulated by a villain or the events happened because of some misunderstanding that ultimately Superman would set right by the end of the story. His own morality always appeared beyond reproach.
auspiciously protecting his non-powered friends from their own poor judgement. Closer inspection of the narratives, however, reveals that Superman is often using his Übermensch status to place his agency above his friends. Their desires, morality, and feelings are irrelevant to Superman because he believes he always knows best. However, as with the villains, the narratives do not justify Superman’s moral superiority to his friends. His judgement only preempts Lois and Jimmy’s because they lack the ability to stop him from imposing his will on them. In truth, often Jimmy and Lois’s desires are simply to be recognized as Superman’s equals. When looking back on Silver Age Superman through a twenty-first century lens, his pseudo parental oversight of Lois and Jimmy seems like little more than hegemonic enforcement of their lower-class status and the superdickery protection Superman offers seems both questionable and morally objectionable.

Furthermore, Superman serving as the deus ex machina for any problem Jimmy or Lois had meant that with each successive adventure, Jimmy and Lois seemed even more inept. Typical Silver Age Jimmy Olsen stories saw him giving himself superpowers with a succession of magical potions or radiation treatments, sometimes accidentally and sometimes intentionally, only to have things go awry and needing Superman to save him and reverse the process — often stripping Jimmy of the memory of the experience. Lois Lane comics followed a similar trend, generally portraying her as a damsel-in-distress that Superman needed to rescue (often because her job as a reporter took her into a dangerous situation that she was not actually equipped to handle), attempting to discover Superman’s secret identity (something he could not allow), trapping him into marriage (despite not knowing his secret identity), or otherwise trying to move beyond the station that 1950s gender norms allowed her. While these stories established

82 More on this in Chapter 3.
Superman’s importance, they also designated his non-powered supporting cast as inferior, even in their self-titled publications. While their incompetence was typically played for humor value, their comics still implied that neither Jimmy nor Lois could survive without Superman’s constant intervention to save them from dangers they created themselves simply by being human. With their constant reliance on Superman’s protection, Lois and Jimmy became more akin to his pets than his friends. Because Superman was always happy to save them, he transitively seemed to almost delight in their pain. Unlike the Golden Age which invited the human reader to endeavor to emulate Superman, the Silver Age, through reader analogues like Jimmy and Lois, seemed to imply that ascension to the Übermensch status was impossible for mere mortals and the best that the non-super could hope for would be to accept second place status and hope to gain the Übermensch’s favor.

While Superman and Batman set the template for Code era superheroes, they were not alone. To many fans, the definitive start of the Silver Age was the creation of the second Flash\(^3\) in DC’s *Showcase Comics* #4 in 1956 (see Figure 22).\(^4\) The Flash was Barry Allen, an awkward and clumsy crime scene investigator with the Central City Police Department. Whenever Barry donned his Flash costume, he used his superhuman speed to protect the citizens of Central City from his unending *Rogues*

---

\(^3\) When DC Comics returned to publishing superhero stories in the Silver Age, some such as Batman and Superman remained the same characters they had always been. Others were replaced with newer similar characters. Barry Allen was the second DC characters to use the name The Flash. While he is similar in appearance and abilities to the Golden Age Flash, Jay Garrick, he is a separate and distinct character with his own canon.

\(^4\) *Showcase* vol. 1, #4 by Robert Kanigher with art by Carmine Infantino and Joe Kubert.
Gallery\textsuperscript{85} of silly supervillains with descriptive names including Captain Cold, Weather Wizard and Mirror Master. As with Batman and Superman’s Silver Age foes, many of Flash’s villains had little personal motivation beyond defeating him, underscoring the idea that good and evil were simple character traits, devoid of any human complexity. The villain’s role was to do evil, and the hero’s job was to fight to defeat it.

The Flash epitomized another common trope of the superhero monomyth: the emasculated civilian identity. To better protect his secret identity, the hypermasculine superhero adopts the least masculine persona he possibly can as his civilian identity. To contrast himself from his superhuman identity as the Flash, Barry Allen constantly allowed others to see him as ineffectual. His colleagues believe that he is notoriously undependable and slow — an ongoing joke in the series depicts Barry as perpetually late for appointments despite being the fastest man on Earth. Similarly, Batman’s civilian identity of Bruce Wayne positions him as a selfish and aloof billionaire playboy to distance him from his heroic devotion to justice. Spider-man is strong, agile and athletic, as well as charismatic and wise-cracking, but out of costume as Peter Parker he is a bookish and quiet high school nerd who is unpopular with girls and harassed by

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.3	extwidth]{superman-clark-kent.jpg}
\caption{Superman and Clark Kent, from Superman vol. 1 #209, 1968}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{85} Rogues Gallery was a term originally popularized by the Pinkerton Detective Agency in the mid-19th century. It described the collection of mugshots of suspects for a particular crime. The term was later adopted by police departments across the United States to describe the set of “usual suspects” that were known criminals in a given area. Perhaps because of the Flash’s roots as a crime scene investigator, comics featuring him began using the term to refer to his collection of villains, so much so that in stories where multiple supervillains joined forces, they officially used the moniker as a team name. While the term is still most commonly associated with the Flash, other superhero fandoms today use it to refer to the collections of villains closely associated with a given hero in the same way.
bullies. Whereas Superman is strong, fearless and brave, Clark Kent is a clumsy, bespectacled, unassuming coward who flees at the first sign of danger (see Figure 23).

Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon argue that Superman is the genuine identity and Clark Kent is a costumed performance that the character puts on. Clark Kent’s classic blue suit “is a deliberate act of construction” that “imitates the wardrobe of an ordinary civilian, but it masks a body that is far from ordinary. It is another masquerade…. concealing the superhero identity while constructing an artificially ordinary alternative” (70). They call it performing ordinariness (71). In the context of the narrative, the secret identity acts to hide the superhero’s loved ones from his enemies who might threaten them. Extradiegetically the secret identity showcases how far beyond the mortal norm the superhero has ascended. Since the readers are aware that the secret identity is a performance of ordinariness, they understand that to the Übermensch, the performance of ordinariness is an impression of humanity by a superhuman being. It is a parody of imperfection. Clark Kent, like many secret identities of the Silver Age, was so substandard that he satirized the emasculated man. As failures of masculinity, Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Bruce Wayne and Barry Allen represent what the superhero, who excels at masculinity, thinks of those who do not. As the titular character in Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill Vol. 2 (2004) muses when considering Superman, “what Kent wears - the glasses, the business suit - that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent. He's weak... he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race.” To not be super-masculine is in effect to be sub-masculine and forfeit the power of the male gender. The emasculated secret identity thus reinforces the importance of the hypermasculine performance of the superheroic identity.
The net effect is that, rather than standing in for a social ideology as does the classic monomythic hero does, the superhero monomyth implies that being super — powerful and hypermasculine — is the sole ideology of importance. Being a superhero grants agency; being not super removes it. Superman’s supporting cast of mortals is incapable of functioning without his protection, even in titles where they ostensibly serve as protagonists. His performance of ordinariness further highlights the value of masculinity. Rather than championing the values of community that birthed him, the superhero provides a behavioral template to which the community must aspire in order to profess his values. Whereas the Golden Age superheroes used their power to defend their moral stance, the Silver Age shows power creates morality.

One of the best-known idioms of the superhero genre is Spider-man’s oft-repeated personal motto, “with great power, comes great responsibility.” The maxim is prescriptive, intended to instruct readers, through the Werther effect, to emulate Spider-man in understanding that the privileges granted to an individual are most meaningful when used in the service of others. Amazing Fantasy #15 introduces teenager Peter Parker, Spider-man’s civilian identity. Like Clark Kent and Barry Allen, Peter is an outcast, a bookish nerd chastised and bullied for his lack of conventional masculinity (1). When a freak accident during a science experiment grants

---

86 The motto appears with such frequency in Spider-man comics and other media, that it is senseless to cite any single occurrence. The first instance, a slight variation on its most common wording, appears in the closing panel of the first ever Spider-man story in Amazing Fantasy #15 by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, reading “and a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come—great responsibility!” (13).
him superhuman powers, Peter initially opts to use his abilities to amass personal fame and fortune as a masked entertainer (4-6). One day, he witnesses a thief evading police capture and refuses to get involved, exclaiming that “I’m thru being pushed around — by anyone! From now on I just look out for number one — that means — me!” (8 emphasis in original) (see Figure 24). Later, Peter returns home to find that his uncle and parental guardian, Ben, has been murdered while trying to stop a robbery attempt (9). Because Peter now has a personal motivation to become involved, he chases down and confronts the criminal, beating him into unconsciousness. In a twist of O. Henry-style irony, he discovers that the assailant was the same man he had seen escaping police earlier (11) (see Figure 25). Wracked by guilt, he vows to use his powers to avoid such tragedy ever occurring again. The moral lesson indicates that power grants agency but requires integrity exercised in the service of the greater good. The Werther effect has resulted in Spider-man’s maxim being explicitly referenced by no
less than Justice Elena Kagan to explain the role and responsibility of the United States Supreme Court (*Kimble v. Marvel* 18). 87

Spider-man’s prosocial mission, born in guilt has always been part of his mythic gestalt. As a Silver Age creation, he had no earlier incarnation from which to evolve. Instead from the very beginning he represented the ideal that, while might does not make right, the powerful have a moral imperative to seek to do right. However, unlike the explicit directives of the Golden Age Übermensch, the specifics of what designates “right” and how to best utilize the responsibility remain unstated. Spider-man’s moral stance is simply to take action, typically in the form of physical violence against designated villains. Inaction is positioned as amoral and linked to emasculation. However, villains are also capable of action. Since the Silver Age villain’s specific ideology, like the hero’s, is largely unstated, the only differentiating factor is that the hero emerges victorious by edict of the CCA. The Silver Age monomythic superhero is thus granted moral authority by his ability to exercise his power. Readers understand that, if the hero were in the wrong, he would lose. Kagan can associate herself and the Supreme Court with Spider-man not because of any specific match with the character’s presumed ideology, morality, or politics, — nothing in the Spider-man mythology implies how he would decide a federal legal dispute — but because of the power granted her by the court. She can proclaim her actions superheroic simply through exercising them.

87 Kagan was likely adding a tinge of dramatic irony by referencing the quote. The case, *Kimble v. Marvel*, concerned the legality of contract law requiring continuous royalty payments for the use of intellectual property that has fallen into the public domain after the signing of the contract. Marvel Comics was the defendant in the case. However, in using the quote, Kagan was not referring to the specifics of that dispute but rather to the solemn duty of the Supreme Court of the United States to serve the public good with the awesome power to decide legal precedent that the U.S. Constitution grants the court (*Kimble v. Marvel* 18).
No matter what actions the superhero takes, so long as he stays within the superhero thematic paradigm, his actions become excusable where they might otherwise be considered objectionable or even deplorable. No matter how much superdickery Superman engages in, the text positions him as heroic and moral. His superhero status justifies him solving nearly any conflict with physical violence even though social decorum and laws prohibit ordinary people from behaving similarly. In fact, superheroness not only allows for the use of violence in conflict resolution, the performative masculinity portion of the thematic paradigm requires it.

**Two-Fisted Justice: The Spectacle of Conflict Resolution**

“When in doubt -- punch it out! That's my new motto!”

-Captain Marvel, *The Power of Shazam!* (vol. 1, #32)

Because superheroes were born out of the pulp magazine tradition, their adventures have always featured a fair amount of violence. Superhero stories aim, first and foremost, to engage and thrill readers, and as such many tropes were borrowed from the cowboy gunslingers, hardboiled detectives, and other pugilistic pulp adventurers like Tarzan, The Shadow and Doc Savage. Furthermore, because the bulk of the superhero monomyth was established through the distinctly visual medium of comic books, narratives privilege conflict resolution through visual spectacle. The repeated use of combat as the primary means of conflict resolution in the superhero monomyth transformed performative hypermasculinity into a kind of visual currency.

---

88 Tarzan, The Shadow, and Doc Savage were three of the most influential and long-standing of the pulp magazine heroes. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ novel *Tarzan of the Apes* was first serialized in the pulp magazine *The All-Story* in 1912. The Shadow first appeared as the narrator of the radio program, *Detective Story Hour*, a companion to the pulp *Detective Story Magazine* in 1930 before appearing in his own adventure in the dime novel *The Living Shadow* in 1931. Doc Savage first appeared in *The Man of Bronze* published in the first issue of *Doc Savage Magazine* in 1933. All three characters appeared in numerous adventures across multiple media forms including novels, radio, television, film and comics. Though they predate the creation of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 and lack some of the defining tropes that some like Coogan and Busiek find essential to the genre, the characters share enough of the superhero thematic paradigm that they can safely be considered early representatives of the monomyth as discussed in Chapter 1.
While the early pulps featured action-oriented stories, actual descriptions of the physical conflicts, while colorful, were comparatively brief. In Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes*, the protagonist’s appeal is his hypermasculinity. He is a perfect physical specimen with muscles that “leap into corded knots beneath the silver moonlight” (118). However, most of the Tarzan’s many battles conclude in a few lines of relatively non-descriptive text as he outwits his opponents’ attempts to overcome him with brute strength by stabbing them with his knife, shooting them from afar with his bow, or lassoing and hanging them with a noose from the trees above. While Burroughs makes it clear that Tarzan is the superior physical specimen, it is intelligence that marks him as dominant to other men and beasts:

> Nothing could have suited the fierce beast better, and with a roar of triumph he leaped upon the little Lord Greystoke. But his fangs never closed in that nut brown flesh.

> A muscular hand shot out and grasped the hairy throat, and another plunged a keen hunting knife a dozen times into the broad breast. Like lightning the blows fell, and only ceased when Tarzan felt the limp form crumple beneath him. (56)

Similarly, other pulp heroes dispensed with violence relatively quickly throughout their texts. While the Shadow has superpowers such as invisibility and the “power to cloud men’s minds” and is a skilled marksman and martial artist, his early pulp adventures focused more on the intrigue of his aura of mystery than any prowess in physical combat. In his first appearance in Walter B. Gibson’s *The Living Shadow,* the title character does not even serve as the

---

89 *The Living Shadow* was initially published under the pseudonym “Maxwell Grant.” During the pulp magazine era, it was customary for authors to use pseudonyms for their low culture pulp work to separate the publications from their more critically and academically respectable writing. This also allowed publishers, like Street & Smith, to utilize multiple authors to write different installments of the pulp hero series under the pretense that a single author was penning all the stories. While Gibson wrote the first — and most — of the Shadow novels, Grant was officially listed as the “creator” of the Shadow on Street & Smith publications of the character, despite four other authors providing various stories under the name. Similarly, Street & Smith published stories featuring Doc Savage under the pseudonym Kenneth Robeson. Interestingly, enough, Lester Dent, who wrote most of the Doc Savage books, also wrote for the Shadow as Maxwell Grant. Earlier in his career, Burroughs had used the pseudonym “Norman Bean” to create his first pulp hero John Carter of Mars but had reverted to using his legal name by the time he began Tarzan.
protagonist, but rather is an unknown figure who enlists others in his war on crime. Likewise, Doc Savage typically relies on intelligence and detective skill rather than combat. In the first Doc Savage novel, *The Man of Bronze*, author Lester Dent spends more time describing Doc’s forensic analysis of the bullets fired at him during an assassination attempt than on the details of the attack itself. While pulp heroes frequently engaged in combat, and their hypermasculine physicality was celebrated, the actual descriptions of its use in combat were quite sparse.

Conversely, detailed depictions of battle became an essential trope of the comics. Here comics borrow more from theatre than their pulp novel roots. Dramatist and fight choreographer Meron Langsner argues that “staged violence is perhaps the most immediate expression of dramatic conflict” (14), because it is “first and foremost a method of communication meant to express character conflict in a drama by physical means” (23). Langsner believes that visual conflict between a hero and a villain is read as a literal instantiation of ideological conflict between the two combatants. The actor’s body becomes “a tool to solve the conflict at hand and should always be in service to the story” (64) and the resulting spectacle of the simulated combat adds weight to the ideological conflict that the combatants represent. When actors perform violence beyond the realistic capabilities of mortals, Langsner terms them *impossible bodies*.

Impossible bodies more often than not succeed in their missions with minimal complications, or only with complications that make for better storylines. They fly. They throw fireballs. They never miss. And, unlike their counterparts in reality, their actions form a clear and easy-to-follow narrative when they engage in physical conflict.

90 The primary operative in this first novel is Harry Vincent, a man who the Shadow saves from a suicide attempt in the first chapter. Readers follow Harry through the rest of the plot with the Shadow only intervening periodically, typically to exchange information about the case.

91 Dr. Clark Savage Jr. was a renaissance man. He excelled at being a physician, inventor, detective, scientist and explorer. Like Tarzan or Batman, he lacked actual superpowers, but had trained from a young age to be in peak physical condition. Furthermore, he is a skilled martial artist and possessed a photographic memory which — when combined with his inventions and mastery of the science, and a never-ending array of gadgets he invented — allowed him to perform miraculous and unexpected feats of heroism. In effect, as per Nietzsche’s’ prescription, Doc had achieved Übermensch status through training and dedication, rather than birthright.
Roland Barthes makes a similar claim about violence as spectacle in professional wrestling. For Barthes, the appeal of wrestling lies not in the athletic competition but rather in the narrative elements the spectacle represents. When Barthes penned his semiotic analysis, “The World of Wrestling” in his book *Mythologies* in 1957, wrestlers operated under a strict code of secrecy known as *kayfabe*. While many spectators suspected wrestling was “fake,” the mandates of *kayfabe* forbid wrestlers from publicly acknowledging their matches had predetermined outcomes; instead, they insisted on the legitimacy of the competition. In his essay, Barthes correctly surmises that the sport must be “fixed” (3) and that “the wrestler’s function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures that are expected of him” (4), likening wrestling to theatre (3, 5) — a comparison the modern post-*kayfabe* incarnation of professional wrestling readily accepts — and analyzing its value as narrative spectacle. Barthes separates professional wrestlers into two classifications, based on the combination of ideology and morality in their stage personas, that he calls the *hero* and the *bastard* (5). He likens the simplistic in-ring personas of wrestlers to stock characters of classic Greek theatre and attributes the appeal of wrestling to archetypes that are simply and clearly ideologically tied to good and evil:

What is given to the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, of Defeat, of Justice. Wrestling presents human suffering with all the amplification of the tragic masks: the wrestler suffering under the effect of a hold reputedly cruel (an armlock, a twisted leg)

---

Kayfabe is a term that borrowed from professional wrestling origins in traveling carnivals. It refers to the secrecy surrounding the techniques used to convince spectators that staged performances and sideshow acts were authentic.

WWE, the United States’ largest wrestling promotion, has coined the phrase “sports entertainment” to acknowledge the scripted nature of their product while still highlighting athleticism of their performers.

When Barthes wrote his essay the code of *kayfabe* prevented individuals within the community who were familiar with the inner workings of the business from working with him. Thus, without access to the terminology that professional wrestlers use, he was forced to invent his own. Today, with professional wrestling acknowledging its status as “sports entertainment” rather than legitimate competition, modern scholars tend to use the now known industry jargon to discuss the spectacle. As such, heroic characters are referred to by the term babyface or its abbreviated form face while villainous characters are referred to as heels.
presents the excessive countenance of Suffering; like a primitive Pietà, he allows us to see his face exaggeratedly distorted by an intolerable affliction. Understandably, all reserve would be out of place in a wrestling match, since it is contrary to the deliberate ostentation of the spectacle, to the Exhibition of Suffering which is the very finality of the fight. Hence all the actions generating suffering are particularly spectacular…. For everyone not only must observe that a man is suffering but also above all why he is suffering…. The spectator does not desire the actual suffering of the losing combatant, he enjoys only the perfection of an iconography. It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle: it is merely an intelligible spectacle. (7-9)

Barthes asserts that the audience delights in the purity of the conflict. Greater suffering and more fantastic violence in the fictional presentation equates to greater enjoyment specifically because the audience is able to divorce the spectacle of violence from the message it represents. While portraying violence realistically can result in the audience feeling uncomfortable and pull them out of the performance, the impossible body takes suspension of disbelief out of the equation. In real life, social norms deem violence a last resort; societies tend not to condone solving every conflict through pugilistic and possibly deadly physical confrontation. Langsner equates fight choreography to magical realism, arguing that by replacing the gruesomeness of realistic violence with visually appealing spectacle, the viewer is counterintuitively more willing to forgive what would otherwise be morally questionable behavior and focus on the ways in which the violence advances the narrative.

Comics follow this same pattern. Pulp novels authors use longer prose narration to present the nuances of character motivation and plot development through essentially unlimited exposition. In contrast, page space in a comic exists at a premium. Comic author and theorist Scott McCloud argues that because words and images compete for visual real estate on the comic page, the existence of words essentially forces the perception of time progressing within the
That is, because words are comingled with images, using more words, requires more space which readers perceive as the passage of time. As such, exposition in comics is generally kept to a minimum with most of the text limited to dialogue while other narrative elements are carried by the visuals. While novelists like Burroughs, Gibson, and Dent are able to present internal conflict through narration, comics must rely on spectacle in the same manner in which Barthes suggests pro-wrestling does. By exaggerating the spectacle with impossible bodies, comics allow readers to focus on the allegorical conflict of the hero and villain’s ideologies. As Barthes notes, the sadistic spectacle becomes an intelligible spectacle. Simon and Shuster’s depiction of Captain America punching Hitler on the cover of his first comic (see Figure 8) can only be read as the United States opposing the Nazi regime.

In *Action Comics* #1, Superman engages in acts of physical violence on eleven of the thirteen pages of the story. Additionally, he constantly showcases his extraordinary powers for readers: he leaps over buildings, outruns a train, smashes through doorways, deflects knives and bullets from his skin, and lifts a car over his head. From this first appearance, Superman becomes an impossible body. Stories in the following issues similarly highlight his miraculous abilities. The visual medium of comics meant that the spectacle of Superman was as important, if not more so, than the narrative.

The narrative reliance on Superman’s impossible body became more pronounced as his powers grew throughout the Golden and Silver Ages. He developed the powers of flight, X-ray vision, heat vision, freezing breath, and a litany of other extraordinary abilities. As the Silver Age forced the simplification of his ideology and the CCA required that he always emerge

---------

95 McCloud’s argument on the nature of time and its commingling with space becomes far more complex than this and is detailed in chapter four of his seminal work, *Understanding Comics.*
victorious over his enemies, authors resorted to focusing on novel ways for Superman to use his powers in order to keep the story interesting. Sometimes this meant using an old power in a visually appealing way such as creating ice sculptures from his freeze breath. Sometimes he suddenly discovered heretofore unmentioned powers simply to have something new happen in the story. In many cases, the new powers were overly convenient, such as when he developed super-ventriloquism, to make his voice appear to come from other rooms to confuse criminals, or completely ludicrous, such as when he gained the ability to split off a miniature autonomous “super-duplicates” of himself to attend to multiple incidents at once. These powers were often discarded by writers as suddenly as they were introduced. Where once, Superman stood as the pinnacle of Übermensch morality, he had now evolved become a showcase for the ways in which superpowers could be performed.

Other heroes followed suit. While described as “the World’s Greatest Detective,” Batman initially spent little time on surveillance or investigation. His primary function in the Golden Age was as a vigilante defending business owners against organized crime, primarily through pummeling, and sometimes killing, the enemies he faced. Typically, any investigation Batman did during that period was limited to tracking down the criminals so he could fight them. During the Silver Age, Batman lost much of his violent tendencies and complex motivations. Like Superman, he became generically good and noble with little explanation of what it meant to be so. Since the Joker and other members of Batman’s rogues gallery were restricted from being truly threatening by CCA guidelines, plots instead became increasingly grandiose. Unlike

96 Over the years, Batman has amassed several nicknames that are used both diegetically and out of narrative to refer to the character. In addition to “the World’s Greatest Detective” he is also often referred to as “the Caped Crusader” and “the Dark Knight.” The names have become so commonplace that all have been trademarked by DC Comics as official identifiers for the character.
Superman, Batman lacked true superpowers, so technology augmented his impossible body. He fought criminals with a growing array of gadgets of his own design including vehicles like the Batmobile, Batplane, and Batcopter; weapons like the Batarang (a bat shaped boomerang) and Batpoon (a harpoon launched from a small handheld pistol); a collection of special purpose costumes; a Batcomputer; and on one occasion even shark repellant Batspray. Batman became increasingly campy throughout the Silver Age, with plots loosely thrown together with the sole purpose of getting Batman into a situation where he could physically defeat his comical foes.

Even though the purpose of the CCA was to force comics to be all-ages appropriate, the net effect was to increase the perceived violence within superhero comics. Though perpetual publication allows the superhero’s mythic gestalt to be updated, since the Code effectively prohibited deeper associations with the social climate by Silver Age comics, the superhero monomyth could not take advantage of the Werther effect during its most fundamental building period. Instead, the characters were left representing only the most simplistic moral themes the CCA explicitly approved of and doing so only in the manner the Code allowed. Consequently, physical violence in the pursuit of justice and the visual spectacle this involved became a fundamental trope of the superhero genre.

The repetitive nature of the perpetual publication model led to a story formula wherein the Silver Age villain would enact some unlikely and contrived plot, with the sole narrative purpose of getting the heroes and villains in the same location so that a battle could take place that would ultimately demonstrate the power of good over evil. This formula evolved beyond the

---

97 Oceanic Shark Repellant Batspray appeared in the 1966 *Batman* film, staring Adam West in the title role. The 60s television series and movie adaptation famously depicted Batman having as having a vast array of highly specific gadgets. No matter what situation Batman and Robin encountered, they would miraculously have the correct gadget available to combat it.
comic book medium and is clearly evidenced in the 1966 *Batman* television series adaptation and spin-off film starring Adam West in the title role and Burt Ward as Robin. The show’s creator William Dozier saw comics as an immature and childish medium and felt that, to succeed on television, his show could not take itself too seriously. In a 1966 promotional interview, West argued that this was the only way for adults to accept superhero content as “kids take it straight, but for adults, we have to project it further … When Batman was a comic it wasn't camp, but the show is” (Reice and West). Given the childlike nature of CCA approved comics of the Silver Age, Dozier and West had good reason for their assessment. As such, Dozier presented his Dynamic Duo as a self-aware parody of the comic book medium with bright, vibrant and colors. The dialogue was intentionally stilted and over-the-top with Batman’s array of Silver Age villains played by a who’s who of celebrity guest stars like Caesar Romero (the Joker), Otto Preminger (Mr. Freeze), and Frank Gorshin (the Riddler) intentionally overacting for comedic effect. Dutch tilted camera angles, and artificial looking props created a cartoonish effect and Dozier himself provided voice over narration spoofing early twentieth-century radio dramas. Dozier did everything he could to make the series appear as much like its Silver Age comic book counterpart in both visuals and tone.

---

98 As with Batman’s personal nicknames, DC often refers to his partnership with Robin with the trademark “the Dynamic Duo”, a phrase first coined by Batman co-creator Bill Finger in 1940 in *Batman* #4. Beyond Batman’s personal nicknames, the collective identifier with Robin is particularly pertinent here as it highlights the company’s specific privileging of the visual spectacle that is important to the character. First and foremost, Batman and Robin are intended to evoke a sense of energy and power through their visual presentation.

99 The *Dutch tilt* camera angle is a photographic technique where the camera is positioned diagonally such that the resulting shot appears at an angle, rather than landscaped or portrait oriented when it is displayed. The result is a more dynamic and disorienting scene than would standardly be used in most cinematography. Dozier used it during the filming of *Batman* as a visual shorthand to denote that something dangerous or sinister was about to happen on screen or the character in the shot was “crooked” and villainous.
Perhaps most memorable is the series’ manner of presenting fight scenes. To capture the spirit of the comics, if only to parody it, episodes of the television series followed a similar formula to the stories printed during the Silver Age. Gotham City is threatened by one of Batman’s many foes. In response, Batman and Robin quickly trace a trail of convenient and painfully obvious clues — often left intentionally by the villain as a function of their psychosis — to the foe’s secret hideout. There, Batman and Robin engage in a slugfest with the villain and his hired henchmen, complete with onomatopoetic sound effects superimposed over the screen whenever a punch lands (see Figure 26). The fight choreography presents the contests as something closer to a dance performance than physical combat. While by no means realistic, the elegance of the fight performance served to draw viewers into what was in every way an intentionally ridiculous presentation. The colorful sound effect animations, unused in any other part of the show, highlighted the importance of the performance of violence to the overall narrative of the show and to the thematic paradigm of the superhero monomyth in general.

Overall, the spectacle of the impossible body permeates the superhero thematic paradigm. Almost all superhero comics and other media devote at least some portion of their narrative to showing impossible bodies engaged in combat to satisfy the demands for visual spectacle from the fandom. As the Silver Age progressed, comics moved from anthologies of several short stories in each issue, to having a single longer story span the entire issue or even several months’ worth of publications. With the assumption that teen readers had disposable income to spend on
comic media, the simplest way to guarantee continuous revenue was for publishers to ensure that the stories never ended. Before the hero resolves one conflict, another inevitably replaced it locking readers into a never-ending story. As such, the perpetual publication model aids against mythic consumption. Since the stories are infinitely long, there is more space to devote to the visual spectacle of fighting and so the fighting became more spectacular. This feedback loop continued through the Silver Age. Where Golden Age superheroes would often fell their foes with a single blow, in the Silver Age and beyond, fights were drawn to allow the superhero to demonstrate as many of his exceptional abilities as possible. Since Silver Age comics avoided specificity in superheroic morality and ideology, readers were able to apply whatever moral belief system they wished. Superheroes effectively became blank slates champions of whatever ideology the reader already espoused — champions willing to fight for those beliefs.

Even after the Silver Age gave way to the Bronze and narratives with more varied social ideologies reemerged,\textsuperscript{100} the reliance on visual violent spectacle remained as indicative of the genre as the tropes of the MPI framework.\textsuperscript{101} While powers might serve to make the character \textit{superhuman} in the eyes of readers, and social missions might qualify the character as a \textit{hero}, to be a \textit{superhero}, requires the use of those powers to serve the social good \textbf{through combat}. Certainly, Superman can —and in fact does— use his powers to rescue victims of earthquakes, fires and other disasters not associated with a villain. However, the superhero monomyth demands that the majority of his superheroic actions be devoted to combat and deprivileges other methods of conflict resolution.

\textsuperscript{100} See Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{101} See Chapter 1.
In fact, the need to prove superheroic masculinity through physical combat so eclipses other genre tropes that plots are often structured around a fight and little more. The 1964 story “The Feud Between Batman and Superman” matches Batman’s superheroic value against Superman’s despite their vast difference in physical power (see Figure 27). In the story, Batman and Robin team up with Superman to stop a robbery. When one of the criminals shoots Superman, the bullet ricochets off of Superman’s chest and wounds Batman. Batman then develops an inferiority complex and contemplates retiring from crimefighting: “I’m not in your league, [Superman]. You’re super and I’m not! I’ll always be a handicap to you because I’m just an ordinary human. You’ll be better off on your own, not having to worry about rescuing Robin and me!” (1.3 emphasis in original). Superman then conspires to improve Batman’s self-confidence by manipulating him, telling Batman that he needs his help on a mission. Batman doubts his own usefulness but agrees. The two heroes, along with their sidekicks, Robin and Jimmy Olsen, travel to Kandor, a city from Superman’s home planet that was saved from the Krypton’s destruction by being shrunken on a molecular level and stored inside of a large glass bottle which Superman keeps on a shelf — a plot line so ludicrous that it can only make sense in the Silver Age comics. Superman uses a shrink ray to miniaturize himself and his companions. Notably, whenever Superman is in the city of Kandor he loses his superpowers, making him effectively human. This effectively puts him on equal physical footing with Batman for the remainder of the story.

---

102 World’s Finest Comics vol. 1 #143, by Edmond Hamilton with art by Curt Swan, et al.
Once the heroes are in Kandor surface, they team up to defeat the Metalloids, superpowered criminals with metallic bodies who are on a crime spree in Kandor. However, when Batman overhears Jimmy and Superman discussing how Superman has concocted the entire threat to build Batman’s confidence, Batman becomes even more despondent. The heroes argue until a Kandorian government official suggests they settle their differences with a duel in accordance with local custom. Batman defeats Superman in a sword fight and vows to leave the city and dissolve his partnership with Superman.

However, Superman soon discovers that the Metalloids he believed to be a hoax are actual super villains terrorizing the city. Confronting them without his superpowers, he is knocked unconscious and imprisoned. Batman and Robin steal the wrist bracers that give two of the Metalloids their powers, thus transforming them back into ordinary Kandorians and allowing the Dynamic Duo to become Metalloids themselves, literally transforming their human bodies into impossible ones (see Figure 28). They use their newfound powers to fight and defeat the remaining Metalloids in combat and rescue Superman. A reassured Batman renews his partnership with Superman having overcome his inferiority complex.

The story is crafted to establish Batman and Superman as heroic equals despite their disparate power levels. However, Batman spends much of the narrative opining his relative uselessness next to the nigh omnipotent Superman. Additionally, the narrative requires Superman to use superdickery to manipulate Batman into proving his usefulness. Eventually,
Batman and Robin only manage to rescue a powerless Superman by temporarily gaining superpowers themselves. As such, while the story attempts to argue that Batman and Robin’s heroism is innate, it also reinforces Superman’s superiority since it is ultimately the power of an impossible body that grants superheroism. The story even ends with Superman announcing it is time to leave Kandor because he is anxious for the return of his own superpowers. When he asks Batman if he is now convinced of his own heroic status, Batman replies “yes, Superman… and you saved me, from the complex that was getting me down! I’ll never forget it!” (2.9 emphasis in original). Batman, even as a hero in his own right, must subjugate his heroism to his superior; he is only allowed to be a superhero with the more powerful hero’s approval and only because he has proven himself worthy through displays of masculine power in multiple combats.

Pound for Pound: The Currency of Violence

“When you have shot and killed a man, you have in some measure clarified your attitude toward him. You have given a definite answer to a definite problem. For better or for worse, you have acted decisively. In a way the next move is up to him. And it can be a satisfying experience…”

-R.A. Lafferty (narrator), “Golden Gate” (11)

“The Feud Between Batman and Superman” was not the Superman’s first conflict with Batman, and perpetual publication insured that it would not be the. During the Silver Age the two came to blows quite frequently, often advertised by a superdickery cover. Generally, the confrontation had no clear winner, and when a decisive victor did emerge, it was only because of
extenuating circumstances. This implied that under normal circumstances both characters were equally powerful and transitively equally heroic. The repetition outlasted the Silver Age and continues to this day across media types. Frank Miller’s 1986 prestige limited series,103 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (see Figure 29) sees the two at odds over their opposing stances on Reagan era American Cold War politics. Zack Snyder’s 2016 film *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* attempts to reimagine their conflict as an allegory for xenophobia and religiosity in the twenty-first century. As Barthes and Langsner indicate, presenting such conflicts through warring impossible bodies allows an examination of the differences as visual spectacle. Moreover, making hypermasculine physical violence the primary way superheroes interact and measure their relative power yields a kind of economic hierarchy based on the capacity of the character to perform violence.

The repeated conflict between Batman and Superman, each the protagonist of his own monomyth, functions as a continuous revisiting of the Campbellian *atonement with the father*104 where each can serve as a champion of a separate philosophy, political stance or other ideology.

---

103 A *limited series* is a comic intended to run for a predetermined number of months that completes a single narrative rather than following the perpetual publication model. *The Dark Knight Returns* was originally presented as four issue series, though today is more commonly collected in a single trade paperback and sold as a graphic novel.

104 In Campbell’s monomyth the father need not be literal for this stage. It is merely enough that he be a powerful being representing an opposing ideology. See chapter 1.
Particularly once the Silver Age progressed into the Bronze, and ideological nuances began to reappear in comics, ending their battles indecisively became very important. This allowed different writers to have different takes on some characters ideologies in response to different cultural influences. For instance, in contrast to their Golden Age origins, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller reimagines Superman as a patriotic agent of a corrupt but conservative Ronald Reagan led government. Conversely, Miller’s Batman has abandoned his relentless Golden Age defense of bankers and factory owners to become a vigilante protector of the inner city. He wagers a two-front war, using his immeasurable personal fortune and military grade technology to battle street gangs threatening Gotham City’s working class — many of whom he presumably employs as the city’s largest employer — while at the same time resisting the state-run authoritarian influence represented by Superman. By contrast, Zack Snyder’s 2016 film presents Superman as a reluctant Christlike figure with evangelical devoted followers who while claiming to be a defender of peace is frequently drawn into heavily destructive conflicts. The film opens with an allusion to 9/11, where Bruce Wayne witnesses the destruction of one of his skyscrapers during a Superman battle with another Kryptonian. Haunted by the death and destruction, Batman becomes an unyielding xenophobic alt-right surrogate who amasses a personal weapons stockpile in hopes of being able to kill Superman as he is now mistrustful of all aliens. When his paranoia is questioned by Alfred, Bruce retorts that Superman “has the power to wipe out the entire human race, and if we believe there’s even a one percent chance that he is our enemy we have to take it as an absolute certainty, and we have to destroy him” (*Batman v. Superman*).
Superman and Batman have served as paragons of countless other ideologies over the decades. Their mythic gestalts allow for this social value malleability.

The non-resolution allows both characters to realize Campbellian *apotheosis* — each validating his superheroism by the mutual display of performative masculinity — without privileging the other’s power or ideology. Batman and Superman’s 1964 battle in “The Feud Between Batman and Superman” can conclude in a few short pages because the story’s only purpose is to promote the idea that to be superheroic is to be powerful. While Batman defeats Superman without powers, it is irrelevant because the story concludes by reaffirming that having superpowers is preferable to not. In contrast, their 1986 conflict in *The Dark Knight Returns* wages for several issues, ultimately choosing no decisive victor, because the narrative cannot reconcile Batman’s neoliberalism with Superman’s Reaganomic conservativism in the 1980s American cultural climate. While Miller positions Batman as the protagonist to an antagonistic Superman, he does not allow Batman to be seen as totally sympathetic. Both heroes, and by association both ideologies, seem equally powerful, and in fact as they clash the distinctions between the heroes and their ideologies become less clear.

Placing the two superheroes in constant opposition with each other, without determining a victor, allows them to share the top of the superhero hierarchy. Though Snyder’s take on both Superman and Batman is cynical and dark, he carefully never privileges one above the other. Instead, his film shows both heroes as well-meaning, but ultimately problematic, dangerous and arguably fascist. Once Snyder finally places the characters in a supposed fight to the death, neither decisively wins. Both are given near victories, but the battle is ultimately abandoned when Batman recognizes Superman’s humanity, and they team together to vanquish a mutual foe. Batman comes to this realization only after learning that Superman’s adoptive mother,
Martha Kent, shares a first name with his own mother, Martha Wayne. This controversial scene was defended by some fans as deep and introspective and mocked as comical and ludicrous by others. However, it bears mentioning that despite Snyder’s unique takes on both heroes, their pivotal truce occurs not because of morality or ideology, but because of a coincidental detail in their mythic gestalts. Snyder’s films imply that every aspect of superheroic personality is mutable, but their mothers’ names are somehow sacred. Across the DC canon, their mythic gestalts mark them as equals in countless incarnations of the characters. Since both seem undefeatable in their own stories their battles with each other establish that they are each other’s only true peer. That is, Superman’s ever-increasing powerset and Batman’s proliferation of gadgets makes them not only more powerful than their villainous opponents but also more powerful and therefore more superheroic than their colleagues. Their superhero value is greater.

The value of power level as material worth is recognized by superhero fandom. Frequent arguments about the relative abilities of the superheroes occur at comic conventions, on internet forums, and even in comics’ letters pages with questions like “who is stronger between Superman and Captain Marvel” or “could Batman beat the Flash in a fight?” Publishers answer these questions by having heroes face off against each other, typically because of superdickery misunderstandings or villainous manipulation. Silver and Bronze Age readers were often more invested in the stakes of their favorite characters fighting other regularly appearing superheroes than with supervillains who appeared only sporadically and would certainly lose the fight in accordance with the demands of the Code. Thus, pitting heroes against each other became a
common to boost sales. Covers would show the heroes facing off with hyperbolic headlines like “When Titans Clash,” “In a Fight to the Finish,” or “a Battle to the Death” (see Figure 30). As with Batman and Superman’s conflicts, these covers were often misleading; the altercations rarely if ever ended in a death and often had no resolution at all. The purpose was to build mutual value for all the heroes through their displays of power.

Mark Gruenwald’s 1982 limited series Marvel Super Hero Contest of Champions, hyperbolically promising “every single superhero on Earth — in the greatest battle of all,” is perhaps the most blatant example of these hero versus hero battles for the sole purpose of comparing power levels, The three issues story details two cosmic entities, the Grandmaster and Mistress Death, abducting every superhero on Earth to an orbiting spaceship while paralyzing the rest of the human populace. The entities each select twelve heroes from the crowd to engage in a scavenger hunt for the four pieces of a hazily defined MacGuffin known as the Golden Globe of Life. The twenty-four chosen superheroes comply for reasons that are never fully explained and are transported back to Earth to search for and fight over the four pieces of the MacGuffin. The narrative is so carelessly constructed that it contains a massive continuity error not discovered by the editors before publication. The story clearly depicts each team recovering two pieces of the MacGuffin, so that the Grandmaster and Mistress Death’s contest should have ended in a tie.

---

106 The term MacGuffin was coined by filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock to refer to any physical symbolic plot device inserted into a film simply to be sought after by the characters. The function of the MacGuffin is ultimately immaterial, as it only exists to have a goal that must be achieved by the characters.
However, a narration caption claims that the score is three to one in the Grandmaster’s favor, and he is pronounced the winner. As the series serves no purpose beyond showcasing superhero battles, the story quickly ends. While the story is underwhelming, it reinforces the notion that the most important aspect of superheroism is combat prowess. There is little plot. There is no character development. The arithmetic mistake in scorekeeping is irrelevant. The story was mostly ignored in the ongoing narratives of the superheroes’ various ongoing publications after the fact. The series only value is as evidence of fan favorite characters relative comparative power levels and therefore material worth.

In her book *Gender and Power*, sociologist R. W. Connell\(^\text{107}\) argues that a strict dichotomy exists in Western heteronormative constructions of gender. She argues that violence is almost always read as masculine performance signified by competitiveness and strength. The individual most capable of physically besting others becomes the masculine ideal. In contrast, the feminine ideal is measured by its ability to induce sexual lust in heterosexual men and its capacity to serve domestic duties (*Gender and Power* 84-86). The feminine is then seen as a supportive role to the masculine, rather than having value in and of itself. Furthermore, Connell contends that equating hegemonic masculinity with violence reinforces patriarchal power structures (107-108). Not only does the gendering of power serve to subjugate women, but it is also used for “the denial of authority to some groups of men, or more generally the construction of hierarchies of authority and centrality within the major gender categories” (109). That is to

---

\(^{107}\) Connell is a transgender woman who transitioned late in life and has published throughout her career under the names Robert, R.W., and Raewyn. Her work focuses extensively on the role of power in gender dynamics, sometimes using her own transition experience as an example. In some cases, her books have used different first names on different editions. For consistency, here I use her preferred female pronouns as well as the name she has published under most frequently, R.W. Connell.
say, in a patriarchal system, men lose power by not demonstrating their masculinity through conventional masculine performance.

Connell expands this theory in her book *Masculinities*, explaining that the common binary misconception of gender is based on a three-part structure (Masculinities 73-75). The first component, *power relations*, functions as the “main axis” socially privileging males above females. The second component, *production relations*, allocates labor as suited to either male or female workers, with women assigned domestic tasks and men assigned tasks outside of the home. Finally, *cathexis*, captures the level of emotional attachment presumed to be natural to the genders with women positioned as more emotional and men as more rational. Since, power relations privilege maleness over femaleness, a male may therefore increase his value in the gendered social structure by actively performing greater masculinity in the other two axes of Connell’s gender structure.

Connell uses Marxist theory to describe gender in terms of a capitalist economy. She begins with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to argue that Western *social structures* assume men hold the position of power and maintain their authority through the systemic subjugation of women as an exchange commodity within the structure rather than as autonomous actors in their own right (*Gender and Power* 92). Building on the writings of Juliet Mitchell, who in turn was building on the work of Louis Althusser, Connell contends that a patriarchal capitalist social structure undervalues traditionally feminine work thus relegating women to a permanent lower class (92-96). Furthermore, she suggests a hierarchy of masculinity exists within this gendered social structure:

If authority is defined as legitimate power, then we can say that the main axis of the

---

108 Some instances of this can be seen in the relationship between Superman and Lois Lane, which has been hinted at above and will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 3.
power structure is the general connection of authority with masculinity. But this is immediately complicated, and partly contradicted, by a second axis: the denial of authority to some groups of men, or more generally the construction of hierarchies of authority and centrality within the major gender categories. (109)

Connell believes that an individual’s place in the social hierarchy is thus defined by that individual’s capacity to demonstrate masculinity. She notes that gendered institutions that require the regular use of human physical power or violence — such as the military, prison system, or manual labor — especially value the performance of masculinity and become socially recognized as more masculine and therefore of greater social value than professions that are gendered feminine — such as childcare, nursing, and housework. Consequently, Connell argues, those male-dominated industries that do not necessarily require the physical power associated with masculinity — increasingly more industries in the age of industrialization — systemically emulate the structure nonetheless, privileging masculine performance as a means of generating gendered capital.

I argue that the superhero monomyth was constructed in a way that adheres to the rigid binary gender structure that Connell describes. Because the CCA was largely a direct response to Wertham’s ephebiphobic fears of improper sexual and gender norms in the 1950s, the Code was constructed to force characters to behave in strict accordance with what the CCA deemed acceptable gendered behavior. Gendered power relations, production relations, and cathexis were all encouraged. Male superheroes — most superheroes — behaved in accordance with masculine cultural norms specifically to reinforce acceptable notions of heteronormative masculinity and assuage homophobic and ephebiphobic fears. Thus, under the CCA, the superhero became an exaggerated vision of masculinity akin to how Connell describes the military. Because the Code maintained dominance throughout the Silver and Bronze Ages through perpetual publication, its vision of performative masculinity became entrenched in the thematic paradigm.
As such, superheroes became synonymous with the performative demonstration of their powers in combat to prove their value. With each successive battle in his never-ending saga, the superhero moves up or down a virtual hierarchy of power based on the result. Readers determine which hero is the most powerful by judging their performance in battle with other superheroes or with mutual supervillains. The aptitude that the superhero shows in battle establishes his value. Violence is the superhero’s job — a job that production relations and cathexis force to be coded as male. Violence, or the capacity to perform violence, thus functions as the basic currency of value in a gendered superhero economy.

The economic value of violence within the superhero monomyth is so great that it eclipses any other currency of note. Superman is firmly entrenched at the top of the superhero hierarchy, both in fandom and in his diegetic world. However, his value is not measured by his material wealth or social class; as a newspaper reporter Clark Kent certainly is not a member of the financial elite. Similarly, his value cannot be measured in terms of the virtue of his character or moral code; with no truth copy for the character, both have varied too widely throughout his long multiple histories. However, the mythic gestalt for Superman recognizes him as a nigh unbeatable force. He is the definition of power, and that power is most fundamentally demonstrated by his masculine invincibility. Similarly, despite being established as a billionaire, Batman’s value is defined not by his financial wealth or even his stated intelligence as “world’s greatest detective.” Rather, his worth is established by decades of being depicted as one of the few characters who can hold his own against — and on occasion even defeat — Superman in physical combat. Batman’s mythic gestalt establishes him as an affluent genius. In a more grounded genre, if Bruce Wayne were truly dedicated to fighting crime and bettering the world, his financial and technological resources certainly would provide him the means to do so without
ever physically venturing into the streets of Gotham. He could provide law-enforcement with the superior crime fighting equipment he has developed. He could prevent far more crime from ever occurring through the funding of social programs. This would match Arnaudo’s pragmatism. However, in the superhero monomyth, Batman’s money and assets function only as secondary capital to purchase his true wealth: the power to directly engage the enemy in physical combat. This is perhaps best illustrated by the character’s appearance in the 2017 superhero film Justice League. When asked by the superhumanly fast Flash what his superpowers are, Batman simply replies “I’m rich.” At no point in the film, however, does Batman use his financial wealth to purchase anything to assist him or the other heroes in their mission. Instead, he physically fights alongside the other heroes because the superhero monomyth’s thematic paradigm requires his physical labor through his masculine violence to maintain his status in the social structure.

Batman is valuable because violence is his capital. His greatest asset is his impossible body.

**Underwear on the Outside: Dressing the Impossible Body**

“Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So, my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible… a… a bat!”

-Batman, *Detective Comics* (vol. 1, #33)

Since hypermasculine violence functions as the superhero monomyth’s currency and the superhero monomyth is most prominently featured in visual narratives that require the depiction of spectacle to represent conflict, it stands to reason that the impossible body should be visually constructed to best highlight those feats. Rarely is a superhero depicted as out of shape or of even average physique. The superhero’s musculature is generally sculpted to perfection, cementing his
Übermensch status.¹⁰⁹ Superheroes with superhuman strength like Superman and the Hulk are blessed with naturally muscular bodies. Those who do not have such bodies naturally, like Batman and Captain America, have trained their bodies to the peak human conditioning or beyond. They are conventionally handsome with chiseled masculine features. Even on occasions when the superhero has a scar or deformity, it is typically aesthetically pleasing and serves only to underscore his masculinity rather than detract from it. These impossible bodies are then adorned in skintight spandex costumes that highlight every muscle as though painted on.

The costume is a visual signifier of the superhero’s impossible body and the violence power it grants. Batman’s origin story in Detective Comics #33,¹¹⁰ directly addresses the importance of costume. After the murder of his parents, Bruce Wayne trains to perfect his body as a weapon. However, he worries that physical reconstruction is not enough to transform him from man into Übermensch. Seeing a bat fly in his window, he decides that the bat will be the perfect symbol to terrorize his enemies. Lacking true superpowers, he vows to use the power of fear to his advantage against the villains. Brownie and Graydon explain Batman’s adoption of an animal totem as a merger of physiognomy and anthrozoomorphism (84). They believe that part of Batman’s power derives from the preexisting connotations and symbolism of the creature on which he has patterned his costume. The Batman costume grants Bruce the power associated with the danger of bats, both as actual predators and supernatural ones.

¹⁰⁹ Supervillains are less restricted in body type. Unappealing features and even deformities are common. Batman’s archenemy the Joker is unnaturally skinny with exaggerated clownlike features. Similarly, the penguin is short and overweight with a comically protruding nose. On the rare occasions when a superhero is overweight, this weight is usually a part of his powers and generally used for comic relief as is the case for the DC Comics’ superhero Bouncing Boy, whose large and rubbery frame can allow him to bounce like a ball or Marvel Comics’ Volstagg the Voluminous who uses his excessive girth in combat. Still obesity is far more common in super villains such as the Blob, the Kingpin, the Slug, and the aforementioned Penguin, and even then, it is rare.

¹¹⁰ Detective Comics vol. 1 #33, by Bob Kane and Bill Finger.
While I reject prescriptive classification of tropes to define the superhero genre,\textsuperscript{111} I acknowledge the trope of the costumed identity is so common within the superhero narrative that it must be examined. It seems needlessly reductive to imply that costumed identity is mandatory; far too many popular counterexamples exist. While edge cases like Doc Savage, Tarzan, or Spring Heeled Jack can be dismissed, few if any fans or scholars would argue that the 2017 Academy Award nominated *Logan* is not a “superhero film,” despite the title character never wearing a costume and spending the majority of the film rejecting his superhero identity of Wolverine. In fact, many of the most popular superhero films and television shows produced since the 1990s — such as *X-men, Blade, Smallville, Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* — specifically feature characters who do not wear traditional superhero costumes. That said, costumes nevertheless remain indicative of the superhero genre as far more examples of costumed superheroes exist than costumeless ones.

However, because the superhero monomyth is defined thematic paradigm rather than genre conventions costumes — much like powers, secret identities and codenames — can be read as indicators of an element of that thematic paradigm: performative masculinity. Combat, while functioning as a production relation that is implicitly performatively masculine, is nevertheless temporary. Readers may marvel at the impossible body’s spectacle while the combat is in progress, but once it ceases, the body performing the impossible spectacle appears ordinary and indistinguishable from any other human. The costume seeks to overcome this and maintain the superhero’s status as Übermensch even while at rest.

Therefore, the visual appearance of the monomythic superhero becomes tantamount to establish his identity. Because comic books may have a variety of illustrators with distinct styles

\textsuperscript{111} See Chapter 1.
operating within the same shared universe, it becomes even more necessary for characters to have distinctive signifiers from one comic to the next. Regardless of who draws the character of Superman, the fidelity of the printing press in the era in which a comic was published, or the actor portraying the character on screen, the basic appearance of the character is announced through his red and blue spandex uniform, the “S” chevron on his chest, and the majestic cape that flows behind him (see Figure 31). Changes in artistic styling do not affect the readers’ overall recognition of him. The costume thus becomes a part of the mythic gestalt. No specific rendering of it can be a truth copy. Shuster’s original Platonic ideal renderings (see Figure 1) seem no more official than any other artists, and in fact, because of changes in contemporary art styles over time, for some younger readers, the Shuster’s work may seem like a further deviation from their head canon of Superman. But each version implies the basic idea of Superman to individual readers, strengthening and informing the mythic gestalt over time.

Superman’s costume is thus one of the most indicative elements of his character. The basic motif of costume is so encoded with the mythic gestalt of Superman that attempts to change the look are typically met with resistance by the fandom. For a brief period beginning in 1997, DC Comics experimented with updating the character. He was giving a new powerset based on electricity and a streamlined and modernized blue costume with lightning inspired
white accents (see Figure 32). The event generated an initial sales boost, but overwhelmingly negative fan reaction and distribution quickly dropped to the level proceeding the change. Superman regained his traditional status quo and appearance within a year, a testament to the illusion of change. In the time since, artists have made other attempts to update the Superman costume to varying levels of success. Subtle modifications such as modifications to the cape or neckline of the suit or changes to the length of his hair are generally acceptable to the readers. In contrast, adopting motifs that veer too far away from the mythic gestalt often causes mass rejection.

The desire to update Superman’s costume is understandable. Artists both wish to add their own personal interpretation to the character’s mythic gestalt, and to connect the character more closely to the temporal moments in which the artists are working rather than to the dated artistic sensibilities of Joe Shuster in 1938. While Superman’s traditional costume has become the functional template for the design of other superheroes, the origins of the design are lost on many modern readers. For instance, many fans question the purpose of the red “underwear” Superman and other superheroes traditionally wears over their tights. Many superhero scholars theorize that Superman’s outfit was probably inspired by the costumes of bodybuilders and circus strongmen that were popular in Siegel and Shuster’s youth like Eugen Sandow and

—

112 Major changes in character continuity are often marketed as “special events” in comics to boost sales. These changes offer feature “sales gimmicks” such as special covers or “giveaways” such as posters or trading cards included with the issue. Special events are often successful at boosting sales but frequently do not result in long time performance gains for the title.
Siegmund Breitbart (Brownie and Graydon 12-13). Longtime DC Comics editor Julie Schwartz\textsuperscript{113} notes that because early superheroes were known for their miraculous feats of strength, it made sense for the artists to copy the aesthetic from the closest real-life equivalents (Hiskey). Bodybuilders like Sandow and Breitbart typically wore singlets or tights not only to facilitate movement during their athletic performances but also to expose as much of their carefully crafted physiques as possible (see Figure 33). Like professional wrestlers, they were showmen whose trade was marketing the spectacle of their bodies. Their clothing not only exposed much of their musculature but also accentuated the portions of the body that were covered. The “underwear” that the strongmen wore outside of their tights were in actuality trunks used to add modesty to the groin area while also artificially enhancing the impression of the phallus with padding. Sandow, in particular, took this even further. As the preeminent bodybuilder of his day, he was known for performing and being photographed nearly nude, save for a specially constructed G-string with a large fig leaf covering his genitalia while also drawing attention to it. Sandow often used a gratuitously large fig leaf, implying that his penis required extra covering and that the hypermasculine man was also hypersexual. Over time, the era of sideshow strongmen passed but, the masculine strength that their outfits signify

\textsuperscript{113} Born in 1915, Julius “Julie” Schwartz, like Siegel and Shuster, self-published independent science fiction magazines as a young man before being hired by DC Comics to serve as an editor in 1944. He remained with the company until he retired forty-two years later. Over that time, he served as editor on several titles. Most notably, he was the managing editor on all Superman comics from 1971 until his retirement in 1986.
remains encoded in the classic Superman uniform and those of the many superheroes derived from him.

In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes argues that the semiotic power of clothing and its ability to encode messages on the models wearing it transcends the bounds of language in fashion magazines because “clothing ‘in print’ provides the analyst what human language denies the linguist: a pure synchrony” (8). He recognizes that artistic expression and communication of ideas preempt the practical value of clothing and notes that “‘real’ clothing is burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment); these finalities disappear from ‘represented’ clothing, which no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn, but at most to signify protection, modesty, or adornment” (8). Barthes argues his analysis of high fashion provides a framework to show how semantic meaning is embedded in all visual signifiers. Fashion, he argues, is a *metalanguage* that provides a relationship between the symbol, clothing, and a conceptual expression of the beauty rather than the specific model, designer, or garment. Fashion communicates an abstract idea.

In the same way, metalanguage allows the costume to represent the idea of the superhero. When a superhero dons a special uniform for battle, it becomes associated with the heroic feats that he performs. The costume functions as a signifier of the superhero’s masculine identity regardless of the activity he is currently engaged in. In much the same way as a firefighter or police officer’s uniform grants institutional authority to the wearer, the superhero costume announces the wearer’s superheroness. It encodes his value as a producer of violence power. Where Sandow’s singlet and fig leaf became associated with the hypermasculinity that he represented, Superman’s cape and S sigil likewise announce his hypermasculine Übermensch status; the costume *is* Superman’s identity.
In fact, Brownie and Graydon believe the costume is so representative of superheroic identity that portions of that identity may be transferred to others who adopt the same costume. They note that psychological studies show children dressing in superhero t-shirts tend to be less risk averse while wearing them (22-24). These children seem to intuitively believe that some aspect of their superhero’s invulnerability has been transferred to them. In this way, the superhero costume makes the Werther effect physically manifest. Even for adults, the iconography of superheroes grants some aspect of their power through metalanguage. Brownie and Graydon point to a painting of Barack Obama by comics artist Alex Ross as proof (see Figure 34). Ross depicts the forty-fourth U.S. president opening his shirt and jacket to reveal a spandex shirt with a large O logo, indicative of the way Superman sheds his Clark Kent alter-ego to go into battle. Though Obama is unquestionably human, the image appears to grant him a transitive Übermensch status. Brownie and Graydon note that “this perception was dependent on the near-universal familiarity with Superman’s brand values in the American populace, in combination with a willingness to accept Obama as a hero figure” (21). The costume assumes enough metalanguage from Superman’s mythic gestalt to associate Obama with the superheroic idea of “good” without any specific explanation of what “goodness” entails, much like the Silver Age incarnation of Superman lacks specific ideology between simply being a superhero.
Obama’s superheroness is not literal. No viewer of the painting would ever seriously assume he had superpowers. However, the thematic paradigm of the superhero monomyth is patterned to appeal to those seeking power and justice they feel unable to attain on their own. The superhero is a lone champion, clearly identifiable to any reader feels like an outcast and picks up a comic book in search of escapism. The superhero is a powerful being who promises to use his power for the social good of the community he serves, and by extension the reader. The superhero is a dynamic figure who promises to make a spectacle of his masculine power so that it can be celebrated. The superhero is adored. As such his iconography then becomes a hopeful symbol of his power. With the vague but inspirational message “hope” being both one of Obama’s campaign slogans as well as the meaning of Superman iconic sigil, Ross lends a level of superheroic legitimacy to Obama for his supporters simply by depicting him as such.

---

114 Though Superman has used some version of his S-chevron symbol since his first appearance in 1938, originally the logo simply stood for his name. However, a late addition to the Superman mythic gestalt occurred in 2003 with Mark Waid’s 12-issue limited series Superman: Birthright revealing that the chevron is actually the symbol for “hope” in Superman’s native Kryptonian language. This retcon has been folded into most incarnations of Superman ever since.
Much of the power of the superhero monomyth lies in this circular reasoning. The metalanguage of superhero iconography enables the Werther effect and relies on it. Comics have always encouraged emulation by readers. Fan clubs like the Supermen of America and Captain America’s Sentinels of Liberty eventually expanded from simple mail-in campaigns to full-fledged merchandising initiatives. Today, toys and action figures are available for child readers to act out their superhero adventures. Video games allow fans to take control of their favorite superheroes. Throughout the Silver Age, comic strip advertisements from muscular strongman Charles Atlas, clad only in leopard skin briefs, appeared alongside superhero adventures in the comics, promising to teach the secrets of developing the body to peak physical perfection — turning a “weakling” into a “he-man” — to anyone willing to purchase his training program, the Dynamic Tension System (see Figure 35).\textsuperscript{115} A typical Atlas ad featured a skinny male protagonist on a beach date with a female companion when they are accosted by a much larger bully. The female character then mocks and dismisses the protagonist for his lack of masculinity. Later, the young man sees a Charles Atlas advertisement — metatextually like the very one in which he is appearing — and mail orders the fitness training manual. He quickly adds bulk and muscle to his physique and, on their next encounter, is able to knock the bully unconscious with a single punch. The female

\textsuperscript{115} Atlas’s training methods were rather successful with many celebrity athletes — including Joe DiMaggio, Rocky Marciano, and Joe Louis — claiming to be devotees.
companion returns and pronounces her love and admiration for the protagonist, and he becomes popular amongst his peers and is proclaimed “Hero of the Beach.” Not only does increased masculinity allow the protagonist safety and security, but he is also rewarded with the boon of popularity and the love of a monomythic goddess. In effect he engages in a single-page Campbellian monomyth hero’s journey, the superhero thematic paradigm draws him into that monomyth as well. The Charles Atlas advertisements continued to run well into the 1980s, both playing off and underscoring the early twentieth-century notions of masculinity the superhero monomyth promoted.

While no amount of investment will ever allow readers to actually achieve the impossible bodies of the superheroes, the power of superhero iconography is transferrable. Even the youngest child who wears a Superman t-shirt knows that it will not grant the actual power of flight. However, just as the portrait of Obama in Superman-inspired garb connotates superhero power, so too do the children Brownie and Graydon describe receive an undefinable aspect of superheroness imbued upon them. In much the same way as a Christian wears a crucifix, a Jew wears a Star of David, or an ancient Norseman wears a hammer of Thor pendant, superhero devotees announce their devotion to mythic superheroes through their clothing. But, unlike with traditional religions, because of the vagueness of the subjective ideology of the superhero thematic paradigm beyond “serving the social good,” these symbols, and the power that comes with them, may be adopted by any reader regardless of religion, creed, race, class, or — as I will show in the next chapter — even gender.
Chapter III: Grace of Selena… Beauty of Aurora…: Superfemininity

While no version of the monomyth requires a specific gender, the examples given by both Campbell and Jewett and Lawrence are overwhelmingly male. While perhaps unsurprising given the traditional patriarchal imbalance of gender diversity among protagonists in narrative fiction in general, it still implies on some level that heroism is inherently male. Given that the thematic paradigm requires the performance of masculinity, the continued implication that the superhero was definitionally male seems natural. Because the perpetual publication model traps the superhero in the second act of Campbell’s monomyth, the ad nauseum repetition of masculine narrative tropes reinforces this stereotype.

Notably, Campbell genders only two monomythic roles as female, both of which occur in the second act: the meeting with the goddess (91) and the woman as temptress (101). The goddess symbolizes the pro-social mission that must be accomplished in the name justice or goodness. She establishes a personal stake for the hero, connecting the completion of his mission to her inherent purity and goodness. By contrast, the temptress attempts to corrupt the hero’s moral fiber, leading him away from justice towards personal gain. Whereas the goddess calls for the hero to be selfless and serve as her protector and defender, the temptress encourages him to selfishly seek to fulfill his own desires.

While Campbell never requires either female monomythic archetype to be literal — their purpose being more to establish the tension of alternative forces of good and evil pulling at the hero — the visual nature of comics results in the goddess and temptress to most often being

---

116 See chapter 1.
117 Ibid.
embodied by physical women in the superhero’s life. The goddess is typically his love interest, frequently falling into the hands of an evil villain and needing to be rescued in much the same way as a knight in shining armor must save a damsel-in-distress in chivalric romances. The hero risks his personal safety in the name of love, a task to which he alone is suited. As such he gains an opportunity to use performative masculinity to achieve social justice and underscores his independent autonomy. Thus, a goddess helps the masculine superhero codify all aspects of the superhero thematic paradigm. The temptress offers a simpler and more seductive path. She is most often depicted as a villainess who attempts to woo the superhero to the side of evil with the promise of sexual favors. She offers not only carnal pleasure, but also power and riches if he abandons his pro-social mission and joins her in life of conquest and immorality. The good of the community is never a factor for the temptress, and so the hero would be able focus on personal enrichment. While he would be capable of using his performative masculinity to achieve these goals, by pairing with the temptress, he would sacrifice his independent autonomy, becoming at best her equal partner in evil, but more likely her emasculated inferior. As such, falling to the charms of the temptress represents a complete rejection of the superhero thematic paradigm and must be resisted.

Campbell’s monomyth argues that all heroic protagonists, no matter the subtle variations in their independent narratives, ultimately derive from a single heroic archetype. For the superhero monomyth, I will argue that much the same is true for masculine coded characters; there is a single male archetype, the superhero, who behaves in accordance with its thematic paradigm. However, the superhero monomyth has evolved to offer six variations on femininity in contrast to the two established by Campbell’s classic monomyth. The implicit gendering of the

\[118\] See Chapter 2.
goddess and temptress — or in more Freudian terms, *Madonna* and *whore* — establish the basic building blocks for all female characters within the superhero monomyth. The classic goddess becomes the superhero’s *sweetheart*, focused more on her position as a love interest than a protagonist. The temptress becomes a *seductress*, whose sexual nature underscores the male superhero’s heteronormative masculinity while at the same time demonizing sexual agency for women. The seductress and sweetheart work to extend the superhero economy with a feminine currency, sex, which may be exchanged for the primary masculine currency, violence, thus further gendering the superhero monomyth as a whole. Moreover, the superhero monomyth allows for four additional female archetypes not present in the classic monomyth: the *girl sidekick*, the *kid sister*, the *superheroine*, and finally a derivative gestalt, the *sexpot*, which combines aspects of the others to break the gendered conventions of the genre. However, all six feminine archetypes, including the sexpot, are ultimately defined by their placement within the superhero thematic paradigm, their relationship to the male superhero archetype, and their ability to trade within the superhero sex/violence exchange.

**Designated Hostage: Damsels in Distress and the Sweetheart Archetype**

“Do you know what it is that you do to me? I don’t know who you are. Just a friend from another star. Here I am, like a kid out of school. Holding hands with a god. I’m a fool. Will you look at me? Quivering. Like a little girl, shivering. You can see right through me. Can you read my mind? Can you picture the things I’m thinking of? Wondering why you are... all the wonderful things you are. You can fly. You belong in the sky. You and I... could belong to each other. If you need a friend... I’m the one to fly to. If you need to be loved... here I am.”


---

119 Ibid.
Just as Superman set the template for the masculine superhero, the template for the superhero’s female counterpart is defined by Lois Lane. Like Superman, Lois first appeared in *Action Comics* #1 (see Figure 36). Although she lacks superpowers of her own, from her first Golden Age appearance she has been an integral part of defining gender within the superhero thematic paradigm. Because the paradigm required a component of performative masculinity, the presence of a female foil allowed for a constant reminder of how “super” Clark’s manliness actually was. Furthermore, she strengthened the other two elements of the superhero thematic paradigm; her constant need to be rescued from dangers only Superman could defeat connoted that protecting and defending women was a heroic responsibility to the communal good, thus implying that social justice, independent autonomy and performative masculinity are intrinsically linked.

Like Superman, Lois’s character evolved over time. In her earliest appearances she was responsible for writing a “sob sister” advice column for the *Daily Star* newspaper where Clark Kent worked. However, she aspired to be taken seriously as an investigative reporter and often chased dangerous stories much to the dismay of her editor. By 1943, the comics dropped the sob sister pretense and promoted her to the role of “girl reporter” which she would hold for decades

---

120 See Chapter 2.
121 At least usually, several stories have depicted Lois gaining superpowers temporarily, particularly in the Silver Age. Though, this does not happen as often for Lois as it does for Superman’s other primary sidekick, Jimmy Olsen, see Chapter 2.
122 See Chapter 1.
123 Later renamed to the *Daily Planet*. 
Tim Hanley traces the cultural history of the character alongside changes in real world social norms in his book *Investigating Lois Lane: The Turbulent History of the Daily Planet’s Ace Reporter*. Hanley positions Lois as an early feminist icon, noting that even her occupation was chosen because it was for the 1930s:

Siegel and Shuster gave Lois the potential to achieve her dream, putting her in a situation that was atypical for women in the workplace in 1938. Working women were still a rarity, making up less than a quarter of the workforce. Most of these women were in jobs that had little room for advancement, such as clerical and secretarial work. Lois may have started out in the lovelorn column, but she was writing for a major newspaper and had access to the editor to pitch other stories. From her very first appearance, Lois seized every chance to move up the ladder.

However, Hanley also recognizes that despite Lois’s status as a financially independent, single working woman, her primary purpose was to serve as a designated hostage for Superman to rescue. Similarly, throughout her book *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* Jennifer K. Stuller argues that Lois Lane is not only the second most recognizable female character in superhero mythology after Wonder Woman, but the epitome of the “tough as nails but with a romantic streak” stock Hollywood heroine. At the same time, Stuller acknowledges Lois’s predominant role as damsel-in-distress.

Ultimately, Stuller concludes that characters like Lois, “whether they are good, bad, feminist, or intriguing but problematic, they represent some of the more interesting representations of female heroes in modern mythology” and spends much of her text looking past the surface helplessness to see what readers can glean from the damsel-in-distress. That said, both Stuller and Hanley acknowledge that despite her many positive attributes, serving as a victim to be rescued was Lois’s primary purpose, for much of her history. I contend that the damsel-in-

\[124\] Though the title of “girl reporter” seems unnecessarily gendered and diminutive today, Hanley notes that the term was used frequently in the journalism field of the era as such infantilization was common to implicit that women were inferior to men in the same occupation.
distress trope is a key element in establishing performative masculinity in the superhero thematic paradigm and thus essential in understanding how gender, both masculine and feminine, is constructed within the superhero monomyth.

Campbell’s classic monomyth often utilizes the meeting with the goddess stage to provide the hero with an important quest (91). For Campbell, the goddess need not be — and frequently is not — a literal celestial being, but she is almost always a beautiful woman sought after as a prize by many men. Examples include Hesione, the princess of Troy of Greek myth, who is saved from sacrifice to Poseidon’s sea monster by Heracles; Guinevere of Arthurian legend, who Lancelot has devoted himself to protecting; and Princess Leia of Star Wars, who Luke must rescue as his first mission. Campbell sees the goddess as an earth mother, representative of life. She is “the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero’s earthly and unearthly quest” (92) and represents not only goodness made incarnate, but an early personal link for the hero. Campbell argues that the goddess “is incarnate in every woman” (99) and for the masculine hero “represents the totality of what can be known” (97). To seek her out is to go in search of knowledge that has heretofore been denied to him. Because the classic monomyth is inherently both patriarchal and heteronormative, the hero strives to marry the goddess, thus winning “the boon of love” (99). She represents sexual fulfillment that the hero cannot attain without her in the heteronormative world, for, as Campbell states, “woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure” (97). That is to say that the classic monomyth sees the achievement of romantic relationship as no more than an additional quest to be fulfilled on the hero’s journey.

As such, in many ways, the classic monomythic goddess is more an objective than a character. To win her hand in marriage, the hero must first overcome some set of trials that
would keep them apart, such as performing a task for her father, rescuing her from a dragon or vanquishing other less-deserving suitors. Once the final obstacle is overcome, the hero may claim her as his bride. The narrative often does not address the goddess’s desire for the hero, which is simply assumed. Agency for the goddess is irrelevant, and in fact Campbell argues that the goddess is effectively a part of the hero, rather than a distinct character unto herself (293). Her love is a prize that marks him as hero through his ability to possess her. He proves himself worthy of possessing her by defeating those who would possess her without worthiness. In effect, she serves to underscore the heroic performative masculinity of the hero. She loves him, rather than the villainous potential suitors, because of the hero’s moral righteousness, but that righteousness is defined in large part, by the hero’s ability to wield violence power.

While early Lois Lane shares many of these classic monomyth traits, the goddess is perhaps best instantiated by one of her predecessors in the superhero monomyth, Dale Arden, the romantic interest of the eponymous hero of the 1934 newspaper comic strip Flash Gordon. Created by Alex Raymond, the first installment of the series sees world-renowned professional polo player, Flash Gordon, seated across the aisle from the beautiful Dale Arden — whose sole characteristic descriptor at this point is “a passenger” — on a commercial airline flight. When the wing of the plane is suddenly struck by a falling meteor, Flash heroically grabs Dale — at this point a stranger — in his arms and holds her as he parachutes to safety. When they reach the

---

125 See Chapter 2.
126 Flash Gordon’s status as a “superhero” is the subject of some debate by fans and scholars, given conflicting definitions of the genre and tropes within (see Chapter 1). However, his narrative and presentation clearly fit within the confines of the thematic paradigm used here for the superhero monomyth.
ground they are quickly held at
gunpoint by a mad scientist, Dr. Hans
Zarkov, who forces them into a rocket
to intercept a rogue planet that is
hurtling towards the Earth.\textsuperscript{127} Once
they have deflected the course of the
rogue planet — which they will come
to know as Mongo — they crash land on its surface and are immediately captured by Mongo’s
emperor, Ming the Merciless.\textsuperscript{128} Ming decides to marry the beautiful Dale and orders Flash
executed (see Figure 37). Flash quickly escapes and embarks on a series of adventures to rescue
Dale from the clutches of evil, overthrow Ming, and bring freedom to Mongo.

Dale instantiates Campbell’s goddess in its purest form. She lacks agency or individuality
and primarily exists as a mission objective for Flash to continuously rescue. Throughout the first
year of serialized weekly episodes of the Sunday newspaper strip, she is kidnapped on at least
eight separate occasions, typically by men who explicitly state their intentions to claim her as a
sexual prize. Furthermore, the narrative gives no reason for her romantic interest in Flash other
than his devotion to rescuing her from other men who would possess her. Nonetheless, the reader
is quickly positioned to accept her as Flash’s lover despite her minimal dialogue and the two
being physically separated for the much of the narrative. They meet in the first strip, though Dale

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{flash_gordon_comic}
\caption{Dale Arden and Ming the Merciless in Alex Raymond’s \textit{Flash Gordon}, Feb 11, 1934}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{127} The "science" behind many of the early \textit{Flash Gordon} comic strips was rather suspect even for the time in which
they appeared, especially for a storyline that was intended to serve as science fiction, which typically attempted to
be somewhat plausible if speculative.

\textsuperscript{128} Like many comics of the Golden Age, \textit{Flash Gordon} is heavily influenced by “Yellow Peril” Orientalism.
Mongo is chiefly populated by a race of yellow aliens with heavy Asian stereotyped features and the planet’s
name has an obvious etymological connection to the Mongolia region of Asia. Ming himself is modeled after the
appearance of then popular pulp novel super villain Fu Manchu.
has no spoken dialogue. In the second strip she expresses concern that Dr. Zarkov might hurt Flash. Strip three has her silent once again, despite Ming’s proclamation that she is to be his wife; Flash protests in her stead. By the end of the strip, Ming has them separated and Dale does not appear again until strip six, where she is again silent while Ming attempts to brainwash her. Finally, the seventh strip presents the first direct evidence of romance between Flash and Dale. Flash tells his new ally, Prince Thun of the Lion men, that Ming is “forcing the girl I love to become his bride!” Thun provides Flash with a machine that telepathically links his mind to the captive Dale, and she receives her second line of dialogue where she only expresses concern for Flash’s safety over her own.

This seventh strip also cements Dale’s worth as a sexual object through fashion. In her initial appearance and up until this point, she is drawn in a simple white blouse with a period accurate, calf-length plaid skirt and matching jacket and scarf. However, by strip number seven, Ming has her dressed in a much more provocative outfit, a midriff exposing bra top with a flowing skirt, slit to her hip (see Figure 38). Clothing like this appears to be common for the female residents of Mongo and will be the standard fashion that Dale adopts for the rest of the series.

By the time Flash rescues Dale in the tenth strip, she affectionately refers to him as “dear” and clings to him until they are separated when she is kidnapped again in strip eleven. She does not see Flash again until the twentieth strip when Flash is captured by Ming who orders
Flash’s execution by firing squad. Dale throws her arms around the captive Flash stating “Flash darling, I love you so much! Let them shoot -- they’ll kill me, too, and we’ll be together -- forever.” Though Ming initially claims that he will execute them both, inevitably, he decides in the next strip that he would rather not kill Dale, and again separates the couple, ordering Dale to become his wife, and the pattern repeats. The perpetual publication model begins to codify Dale’s place as victim within the narrative. While theoretically Flash’s original mission was to save the Earth from Ming’s attempt to conquer it, Raymond dispenses with this motivation beginning in the third installment to focus on Flash’s constant rescue attempts for Dale.

When Lois Lane premiered in *Action Comics* #1, in many ways she seemed to fit the classic monomyth goddess mold like Dale Arden. Over time however, she developed distinct character traits beyond being a designated hostage. As early as 1938, the character positioned herself as a feminist, or at least what passed for such in the minds of her all-male creative team. Rather than swoon over the male protagonist simply because he exists, she rejects Clark’s romantic advances because she feels that he is beneath her. This allows her to act independently of him. While he still sees her as a prize that he can win through adequate performances of heroic masculinity, unlike the classic goddess, the actions she undertakes are to further her own advancement rather than the male hero’s. She is a strong willed and ambitious reporter\(^{129}\) constantly pursuing dangerous stories that she is frequently told are better left to her male

\(\text{\small 129} \) In her earliest appearances, Lois is noted as being a reporter for the society pages of the newspaper and appears to answer letters in a feminine advice column, a position that seemed more acceptable to the gendered notions of the day. Despite this, she often disobeyed her editor’s orders and ventured out after dangerous assignments on her own. However, the comic relatively quickly drops this pretense and establishes her as an investigative journalist colleague of Clark’s. However, at least for the Golden Age comics and into the Silver Age, the prejudicial attitude of male editors and colleagues attempting to limit her access and assignments because of her gender remained. It should be noted though, that the comic was often aware of this, and attempting to position her as a woman fighting against this stereotype. This became more and more prevalent as comics entered the Bronze and Modern ages.
colleagues. While this often puts her into mortal danger, like the hero, she ignores the risks because the importance of delivering the story outweighs her sense of self preservation. In effect, Lois employs the same elements of the superhero thematic paradigm typical of a male hero: a devotion to social justice, a penchant for independent autonomy, and, to an extent, a need to display performative masculinity. These traits layered on top of the classic goddess archetype result in a derivative archetype that I call the sweetheart. That is to say that the superheroic sweetheart differs from the classic goddess in that, rather than remain a passive plot objective, she may exhibit superheroic thematic paradigm traits to some minimal extent on her own.

However, the primary reason for the sweetheart’s employment of the thematic paradigm still focuses on entrenching the superhero’s masculine character rather than developing her own feminine agency. The Golden Age Lois serves two separate but equally important purposes to accomplish this goal. First, she provided Superman with constant opportunities to prove his heroic manhood. Despite Lois’s courage and resourcefulness, her risk taking frequently placed in peril that required Superman to rescue her. As a sweetheart, she possesses the propensity to attempt masculine performance but lacks efficacy. Although, she is not averse to violence, typically — at least in Golden and Silver Age comics — she is ineffective at utilizing it herself. She is frequently kidnapped or held hostage; however, unlike Dale Arden, she always attempts to resist and must be physically overpowered. Her inability to adequately perform masculinity through violence therefore undermines her independent autonomy while leaving her devotion to social justice intact. Superman’s rescuing of her illustrates his own superior masculinity, solidifies his role as hero, and establishes her second role as a sweetheart, romantic love interest.

Positioning the sweetheart as a love interest ultimately strips her of her independent autonomy and makes her reliant on the hero. Action Comics #1 introduces Lois as Clark’s
attractive coworker on whom he has an unrequited crush. Lois, for her part, rebuffs Clark’s advances because she considers him emasculated. Her first speaking role occurs when Clark nervously asks her out on a date, and she decides that she will “give [him] a break… for a change” (6) thus implying that his asking is a frequent occurrence. While dancing, Clark later questions her as to why she will not consent to engaging in a relationship with him and she tells him that, as a reporter, she has been “scribbling ‘sob stories’ all day long. Don’t ask me to dish out another.” Throughout the scene, Lois, despite agreeing to go dancing with Clark, appears bored and annoyed by him. Soon, another man, Butch, attempts to cut in on their dance. Although Lois makes it clear that she is not interested, Butch threatens Clark, who quickly relents, telling Lois to “be reasonable” and dance with the aggressive stranger (7). Butch continues to berate them until Lois slaps him — a display of masculine violence that Clark admires despite its limited effect — and storms away, telling Clark “You asked me earlier in the evening why I avoid you. I’ll tell you why now: Because you’re a spineless, unbearable coward” (7). Soon after, Butch and his friends run Lois’s car off the road and kidnap her. Superman soon arrives to defeat the men and rescue Lois, carrying her home in his arms as he leaps over the city (10). A grateful Lois becomes enamored with Superman and even more disinterested in Clark. Lois thus places Superman in a love triangle with himself as rival. Rather than enhance her character, this move effectively underscored the heroic masculinity of her male savior. Clark Kent pined away for her, but she ignored him in favor of Superman.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence argue that a key feature of the American monomyth is that the American hero remain celibate (12-13). They argue that American culture equates sexual renunciation with purity and, by showing the hero to be above the base

---

130 See Chapter 1.
carnal needs of the common man, he exhibits a greater heroic strength. While this argument works for some heroes, it appears somewhat incongruous with others. To prove their point, Jewett and Lawrence go so far as to provide asexual readings of clearly hypersexualized male characters including Star Trek’s James Kirk (23-39) and real-life founder and magazine publisher Hugh Hefner (64-83). They accomplish this move by conflating sexual union with romantic entanglement. In actuality, their base premise is that the life of adventure to which the monomythic hero must be devoted for the communal good prohibits his ability to settle into domesticity. In Superman’s case, they argue that he is beyond sexual desire (62). Jewett and Lawrence note that, while Clark Kent pursues Lois unsuccessfully, Lois pursues Superman only to be rejected. Thus, they argue, the presumed young masculine reader who identifies with “the fumbling advances of indecisive males like Clark Kent” can believe that “the blundering exterior merely disguises the true self” of an übermensch that attractive women cannot recognize but would be powerless to resist if they could (62). In this reading, reversing the traditional male and female roles of sexual courtship and allowing Superman to reject Lois empowers the young male reader and validates their sexuality even if he is not given real life sexual attention.

However, Jewett and Lawrence’s reading ignores the fact that Superman does in fact appear to both love and sexually desire Lois. In his guise as Clark Kent, he frequently pursues her for dates, only to be rebuffed and his internal monologue often expresses genuine emotional pain. In Action Comics #5, the two share their first kiss, which he admits he enjoys (5) and the two are romantically linked to varying degrees from this point onward eventually marrying in
1996\textsuperscript{131} and having a child in 2015.\textsuperscript{132} In actuality, the slowness of their relationship development can be attributed to the shift in the status quo that necessarily accompanies marriage, which threatens the superhero monomyth with the consumption\textsuperscript{133} actively resisted by the perpetual publication model. While this resistance may create the appearance of sexual renunciation, many superheroes have romantic relationships that are clearly consummated sexually and sometimes — though admittedly not often — engage in domesticity through marriage. Spider-man married his longtime sweetheart Mary Jane Watson in 1987,\textsuperscript{134} however in 2007 that marriage was retconned away as editor Joe Quesada felt that a married hero would not be as easy to identify with for young readers (\textit{One More Day}). The reluctance to depict wedded superheroes is indicative of the independent autonomy aspect of the superhero thematic paradigm. The hypermasculinity of the superhero archetype resists the commitments of family.

However, the possibility of domestic happiness can provide the superhero with motivation to act to protect his domesticity when it is threatened or avenge it when it is destroyed. The sweetheart is used so often in this capacity that then comic book fan and later author Gail Simone coined the term \textit{women in refrigerators} in a 1999 internet forum discussion:

\begin{quote}
This is a list I made when it occurred to me that it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics. I'm curious to find out if this list seems somewhat disproportionate, and if so, what it means, really. These are superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator. I know I missed a bunch. Some
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{131} The wedding took place in two cross media events with the comic characters marrying on October 6th, 1996, in the pages of the special one-shot comic, \textit{Superman: The Wedding Album} on the same day that their live-action counterparts married in third episode of the fourth season of the television show \textit{Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman}.

\textsuperscript{132} Their son, Jon Kent, would eventually grow to become the fourth character in the DC Comics shared universe to utilize the name Superboy, and a superhero in his own right. Jon’s existence is evidence that character development and growth can occur (albeit very slowly and gradually) within the perpetual publication model without a total reset to the status quo so long as doing so allows the superhero to remain in Campbell’s second act and not, as Eco warns, consume his own myth (see Chapter 1).

\textsuperscript{133} See Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{134} Amazing Spider-man Annual #21 by David Micheline and Jim Shooter with art by Paul Ryan.
\end{footnotesize}
have been revived, even improved -- although the question remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place. (*Women in Refrigerators*)

Simone’s mention of refrigerators refers to a story in *Green Lantern* vol. 3 #54135 wherein Kyle Rayner, the new title character,136 receives his superpowers and rather than hide his identity, immediately shares his secret with his estranged girlfriend Alexandra “Alex” DeWitt. Alex and Kyle had broken up a week prior when she had grown weary of his irresponsibility and ineptitude. However, after witnessing Kyle successfully fighting crime, Alex forgives him and the two reconcile and have sex.137 Up until this point, their story in effect mirrors the Charles Atlas “The Insult That Made a Man out of Mac” advertisements.138 Through performative masculinity, Kyle has become an übermensch and Alex essentially gifts sex to him

135 Cover dated August 1994 by Ron Marz with art by Steve Carr, Derec Aucoin and Darryl Banks.

136 The *Green Lantern* comic book series assumes the conceit that “Green Lantern” is a title given to any member of the superheroic intergalactic police force. Several characters have therefore held the mantle. The longest running was Hal Jordan, the Silver Age Green Lantern, who served as the protagonist from 1959 until 1994. Storylines from 1993 to 1994 chronicled Hal’s fall from grace, corruption by evil, and eventual termination from his role as Green Lantern, in a sense culminating his story in accordance with the Campbellian monomyth. However, the perpetual publication model necessitated the continuance of the *Green Lantern* story with Kyle as the new protagonist. Hal would eventually be restored to his status as a Green Lantern in 2004 lending credence to Eco’s theory that a superheroic myth cannot ultimately be consumed (see Chapter 1).

137 CCA restrictions against characters engaging in sexual relations were relaxed in the Bronze and Modern ages of comics. While the original 1954 code stated that “illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed” (Nyberg 168), the 1971 update removed the restriction of “hinting at” (173) for romantic relationships and the 1989 version allowed for love scenes “presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner in which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience” so long as “primary sexual characteristics will never be shown” and “graphic sexual activity will never be depicted” (178).

138 See Chapter 2.
to celebrate his violence power and value in the superhero economy. Unlike Superman, Kyle shares his secret identity with his sweetheart. The next morning, after Kyle leaves to embark on more superheroic community service, a supervillain, Major Force, breaks into her apartment and murders her, forcing her remains into her refrigerator, for the sole purpose of antagonizing the new hero (see Figure 39). Major Force has no personal connection to Alex; he had simply seen a photo of Alex speaking with the Green Lantern and determined she must be important to him. Her murder served only to give Kyle a reason to seek revenge on her killer and to provide him with an emotional trauma to color his future stories.

Simone created a website, which she updated for some time, that tracked the female characters that encountered such fates either temporarily or permanently. As such, Simone showed that often female characters are victimized in superhero stories not to further their own narratives, but rather to motivate their male superheroes to future action. Comic fandom came to refer to this practice as fridging the female character. The effectiveness of fridging essentially requires the superhero to maintain a romantic and implicitly — if not explicitly — sexual relationship with the sweetheart. In contrast to Jewett and Lawrence’s claim, the comics never implied that the superhero is asexual, rather, the demands of the CCA during the Silver Age

139 Ibid.
prevented direct representation of specifically sexual acts.\textsuperscript{140} In truth, the social standards enforced by the CCA forced the superhero monomyth to be decidedly heterosexual and often utilized romantic relationships specifically to narratively reinforce this notion. The presence of a heterosexual romantic relationship cements the masculine identity but risks the superhero myth being consumed by domesticity. Fridging the romantic interest not only provides a motivation for the male superhero to seek justice but frees him from the threat of domesticity without sacrificing his masculine heterosexuality.

Despite Jewett and Lawrence’s claims to the contrary, the sweetheart helps to establish the heterosexuality of the male superhero beyond damsel-in-distress and women in refrigerator situations as well. Silver Age comics often depict Superman and Lois on dates despite her unawareness of his true name.\textsuperscript{141} Though Superman repeatedly insists that his secret keeps the two of them apart, this seems not to be the case. Instead, Superman controls their relationship status to reinforce his dominance in the gendered power dynamic. Their relationship extends the superhero economy. If the base currency of the superhero monomyth is the capacity to effectively perform violence and Lois lacks that capacity, then she can only participate in that economy by purchasing violence through a market exchange. She and other sweethearts of the superhero monomyth pay for this purchase with their greatest asset, their sexuality.

In effect, the sweetheart is engaged in a form of \textit{superprostitution}, where her body is for sale to the most masculine bidder. The value of her sexual power is one of the foremost reasons that she finds herself as a constant damsel-in-distress. The sweetheart is without true sexual

\textsuperscript{140} Indeed, as will become clear later in this chapter, the CCA’s social standards during the Silver Age essentially forced the superhero to be decidedly heterosexual and often utilized romantic relationships female characters specifically to narratively reinforce this notion.

\textsuperscript{141} She simply refers to him as Superman whenever they go out together.
agency. She must protect her virtue in order to retain its value for her superhero and thus rejects the advances of lesser men, including the superhero’s emasculated secret identity facade and the sub-übermensch supervillain. Because the supervillain is without the moral devotion to the social good, he attempts to take the sweetheart for himself by force. Since she lacks the violence power to defend herself, she relies on the superhero for rescue. The rescue occurs through the use of his violence power — in a display of performative masculinity that only he can achieve — and serves the social good. As such, the sweetheart’s very existence serves to create opportunities for the male superhero to embody all aspects of the thematic paradigm.

While at first seemingly antithetic to the thematic paradigm’s edict of serving the social good, Superman’s superdickery helped to underscore his implicit heterosexuality. As the diegetically most powerful superhero, Superman makes Lois work hard to purchase his violence power because doing so ensures that the reader sees his masculine violence power as more valuable than her feminine sexual power. In this way, as R. W. Connell suggests, hegemonic masculinity is enforced. While Lois’s fearlessness and aggressive devotion to reporting serves to further emasculate the more passive Clark, it also underscores the differences between his meek civilian persona and his hypermasculine superheroic identity, albeit at Lois’s expense. As a sweetheart, Lois is depicted not only as beautiful, as all monomythic goddesses are, but far more capable than the everyman represented by Clark. However, she remains inferior to the übermensch that is Superman. That said, because he loves her above all other mortals, she must inherently be remarkable. To preserve the patriarchal structure, his masculinity must be maintained by positioning her as his inferior. This situation becomes more prevalent as the

142 See Chapter 2.
143 Ibid.
Golden Age gives way to the Silver Age and enforcing the status quo 1950s era gender roles increasingly became the focus of most of her storylines.

In 1958, DC Comics launched a title theoretically starring Lois, Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane, similar in theme and tone to Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen. Like Jimmy, the comic positions Lois not in terms of her own character, but by her relationship to the more important superhero, thus constraining her to be an extension of him. Unlike Jimmy, Silver Age Lois’s early misadventures stem not from trying to acquire superpowers of her own, but instead from her constant scheming to convince Superman to marry her, or her attempts to upstage Clark Kent by “scooping” him on a story and advancing her career beyond his. While the Golden Age Lois acknowledges her love for Superman her primary motivation was always career advancement. In the gender norm obsessed Silver Age, these motivations are reversed, and her driving ambition became convincing Superman to propose marriage. In either case, she often finds herself in peril through her own pursuits.

Whenever Lois causes a problem by violating acceptable gender norms, Superman often “teaches her a lesson” with superdickery much as he did with Jimmy Olsen. In some cases, Superman’s lessons for Lois appear even harsher than those for Jimmy as he often enlists Jimmy’s aid. The first issue of Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane finds Lois attempting to land an interview with an elusive foreign ambassador by impersonating a famous French actress who Lois knows is invited to the party but will not be attending. The ruse works, and Lois is admitted to the party while Jimmy and Clark are forced to remain outside. When another foreign

\[144\] Ibid.
\[145\] Ibid.
\[146\] As the Silver Age CCA mandates are overtly concerned with keeping gender roles as proper as possible, Lois overhears this fact while getting her hair done in a beauty salon, a socially acceptable female space in the public sphere.

158
dignitary announces his love for the disguised Lois, she reflexively reacts by claiming that she will only ever love Superman. Clark overhears, realizes Lois’s subterfuge, and decides to teach her that it is unfair to use deception to gain an advantage as a reporter (even though he quite often uses his superpowers to do the same thing). The foreign dignitary challenges Superman to a duel with pistols. Although Superman does not fire his gun, the dignitary’s bullet ricochets off of the Superman’s impenetrable chest and strikes the shooter killing him. Lois is mortified that her deception has cost a life. However, Superman soon reveals that the dignitary was actually Jimmy Olsen in disguise and the pistols were fake. Lois is relieved and promises only to use honest reporting methods in the future (a promise she ultimately fails to keep as she ends up in these situations quite frequently).

Deception is a frequent tool that Superman uses to manipulate Lois. He often breaks up with her or feigns romantic interest in another woman in order to trick Lois into behavior that she would not consciously choose. He regularly berates and belittles her. No matter how great his abuse, however, the narrative always presents his actions as ultimately altruistic and secretly "for Lois’s own good”. Sometimes the superdickery involves a level of physical in addition to the psychological abuse. In a story from *Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* #5, Lois witnesses a gang shooting and writes a news story about it. The next day, while interviewing a scientist, she is accidentally hit with an experimental “growth ray” that causes her to become obese overnight. She spends the next few days hiding in shame as she is afraid that if Superman sees her, he will never propose because “nobody loves a fat girl” (29). However, when she does happen upon
Superman, he seems not to recognize her heavier appearance, commenting when he saves her that “I must say a girl like you is… er… quite a load! I’m more used to flying Lois Lane around! You would make two of her!” (27) (see Figure 40). Later, when she chances upon the gang shooting killer again, Superman saves her, revealing that he recognized her all along, and in fact was responsible for her transformation. Knowing that she would never consent to hiding from the mobster, he enlisted the help of the scientist in enlarging her against her will in hopes of disguising her and will happily change her back now that the criminal has been apprehended. Not only does the narrative imply that manipulating her emotions and violating her body is a reasonable course of action for her male protector, but it also seemingly excuses Superman for fat-shaming her, even though he knew her true identity.

Lois naturally forgives Superman for these transgressions; in a way she shares in them. Under the superhero thematic paradigm, morality is just as subjective for the sweetheart as it is for the superhero. Under the mandates of the Silver Age CCA, Superman and Lois both interpret his rigid enforcement of gender roles as defending the social good. Inside of the superhero economy, she understands that Superman must solve problems through performative masculinity, the only currency he has. She accepted that he kept secrets from her to remain independently autonomous, because she is driven to do the same, even when doing so produces an outcome that might threaten her safety. Much like Superman hides his identity from her, her independence causes her to hide problems like her sudden obesity from him. Superman is correct in assuming that Lois’s vanity will cause her to hide when she is overweight. Not only is she
embarrassed by her new figure but fat-shames other women even while overweight herself. Though she is not a superhero, as a representative of the thematic paradigm, her impossible body still has some economic value for her. However, as her role is principally non-combative, the capacity for violence cannot be her currency. Instead, Lois, and other sweethearts with her, learn to trade on their sexuality. Much as the male superhero’s violence power achieves economic value only when measured against the capacity of villains, the sweetheart’s sexuality achieves value when compared with other female characters within the superhero monomyth; chief among these is the seductress.

**Deadly Kisses: The Seductress Archetype and the Sex/Violence Exchange**

“Mistletoe can be deadly if you eat it.”


“But a kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it.”


Campbell’s classic monomyth includes a second option that places the male hero in contact with a feminine counterpart. The *woman as temptress* stage follows the meeting with the goddess and represents the point in the hero’s journey where the allure of personal satisfaction and enrichment distracts him from his pro-social mission. For Campbell, in this stage, the hero learns that “our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally, we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell” (101). While, like the goddess, the temptress need not be a literal physical being, the most classic variation sees the hero seduced — successfully or unsuccessfully — by the sexual charms of a woman with ill intentions. Campbell uses the examples of the Greek Jocasta for Oedipus and Shakespearean Gertrude for Hamlet, though the trope can as easily be connected
to the Arthurian Morgan Le Fey or the biblical Eve. The presence of the temptress when placed in opposition to the goddess creates a Madonna/whore dichotomy. If the union with the pure goddess fulfills the male hero, yielding to the wanton temptress represents the threat that femininity poses to masculinity as, in Campbell’s words, “no longer can the hero rest in innocence with the goddess of flesh; for she is become the queen of sin” (102).

Thus, the classic monomyth presents its only two options of femininity as warring for the soul of the hero. Neither woman is a full-fledged character in her own right, but instead a motivation for the hero to continue his pro-social mission or fall from grace. Perhaps this is in part why Jewett and Lawrence view the American hero as asexual. In their version of the monomyth, the union with the goddess and the achievement of marital domesticity becomes the reward for completion of the heroic journey. Thus, any sexual temptation that occurs before the denouement is presumed to be an instance of the woman as temptress that must be resisted by the hero in order to remain faithful to the pure goddess. The American hero is therefore not truly asexual; rather, he remains chaste as a matter of faithfulness to the goddess. The ability to repress his carnal desires is therefore one of his masculine virtues and the perpetual publication model associated with the superhero monomyth makes this virtue intractable. Moreover, since masculine power is a function of his impossible body, the greater the value of his capacity to perform violence, the more capital he possesses in the sex/violence exchange. Not only does his power win him the love of the sweetheart but it also makes him valuable to other women.

As with the conversion of the classic goddess into the sweetheart archetype, the superhero monomyth embodies the temptress in an analogue archetype which I call the seductress. Like the sweetheart, the seductress is primarily defined by her relationship to the male superhero, and her chief asset in the superhero economy is her sexuality. However, the
seductress’s distinction lies in how she utilizes that sexuality. Whereas the sweetheart preserves her sexual virtue as a gift to be bestowed upon her hero in exchange for protection, the seductress takes an active role in using sex as a means of control. The difference is one of agency. While the sweetheart’s sexuality in effect belongs to her male superhero, the seductress owns her sexuality. Rather than existing solely as a superprostitution commodity who allows her worth to be set by men, the seductress attempts to raise her own market value as an active participant in the sex/violence exchange, and in doing so threatens the value of the superhero’s violence power.

While all Golden Age seductresses inherited many hypersexualized traits from the femme fatales of the pulps, perhaps the best example is Selina Kyle, also known as Catwoman¹⁴⁷ (see Figure 41). The character was first introduced in 1940 as a villain.¹⁴⁸ Selina owed much of her design and modus operandi to the femme fatales found in the work of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and other popular hardboiled detective fiction that was published concurrently with the Golden Age of comics. In her first appearance, Batman and Robin are investigating a jewel theft that occurs during a yacht party with many wealthy attendees. A clue alerts them that the culprit is an enigmatic underworld figure known only as “the Cat”. The heroes first presume the Cat to be one of several male

¹⁴⁷ During the relatively lax continuity of the Golden Age, Catwoman’s secret identity was inconsistent. In early appearances, she is referred to only by the pseudonyms of Catwoman and the Cat. Subsequently, different stories give her real name as Marguerite Tone, Elva Barr, Belinda, and others. This is likely due to poor editorial control rather than any intentional narrative purpose. In accordance with the multiple histories theory all these characters are clearly part of the same mythic gestalt that is Catwoman (see Chapter 1). Eventually, the authors settled on the alter ego of Selina Kyle for Catwoman. For simplicity, these are the two names that I use throughout regardless of what name she was given in that individual story.

¹⁴⁸ *Batman* vol. 1 #1. Cover Dated Spring 1940 by Bill Finger with art by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson.
suspects, until Batman suddenly deduces that the thief is actually a beautiful young woman disguised as an elderly heiress. In this way, the first comic attempts to subvert reader gender expectations of the time. However, in doing so the male creators constructed their own vision of superheroic femininity, which has become entrenched in not only the seductress archetypes, but all female archetypes in superhero comics.

Like all hardboiled femme fatales, the Golden Age Catwoman is both explicitly sexual and decidedly unwholesome. The Golden Age Batman appears smitten with her beauty; so much so that he intentionally allows her to escape capture on multiple occasions. Batman’s attraction to her is contrasted with his relationship with his fiancée, Julie Madison.\textsuperscript{149} Whereas Julie, while beautiful, is a proper and respectable socialite and actress, Selina is the opposite of what would be considered a reputable woman of the 1940s. She is a sultry raven-haired woman who, while not initially presented as a costumed supervillain in the truest sense, always wears elegant evening gowns that reveal more of her legs and bosom than period decency standards allowed.

Cultural theorist and detective fiction artist, John G. Cawelti theorizes a central character in the hardboiled detective narrative that he calls the\textit{ female betrayer} (147).\textsuperscript{150} For Cawelti, the key identifier of the female betrayer is that she initially appears sympathetic. Typically, she is a

\textsuperscript{149} First appearing in \textit{Detective Comics} vol. 1 #31 (cover dated September 1939 by Gardner Fox with art by Bob Kane and Sheldon Moldoff), Julie Madison functions as Batman’s sweetheart during the Golden Age. In many ways Julie duplicates the relationship that early Lois Lane has with Superman. Her primary function is to serve as a damsel-in-distress who is often kidnapped by villains and needs to be rescued by Batman. Though, unlike Lois, she is romantically involved with the non-heroic alter ego, she considers Bruce Wayne to be cowardly, lazy, and emasculated compared to Batman whose performative masculinity fascinates her. With the increasing popularity of Catwoman, and the desire to portray Bruce Wayne as an uncommitted bachelor playboy, Julie was ultimately written out of the series and stopped appearing after Detective Comics #49 (cover dated March 1941).

\textsuperscript{150} Cawelti avoids the usage of the generalized popular term “femme fatale” throughout his work. Instead, he favors the term female betrayer to designate a female character that fits his specific archetype. In brief, a femme fatale could refer to many women of hardboiled fiction and film noir; it is in effect merely the female version of the male hardboiled hero. A femme fatale might be a protagonist, or an incidental character; she might be heroic or antagonistic. Female betrayers, on the other hand, provide a specific storyline purpose in the hardboiled detective formula (147).
damsel-in-distress who approaches the hardboiled hero for assistance. Often, she is the impetus for the story, hiring the protagonist to protect her from an apparent villain who seeks to rob or harm her or steal her fortune. Seduced by her beauty and unfortunate circumstances, the hardboiled hero agrees to help. In effect, the female betrayer begins as a goddess of classical monomyth, often developing a physically intimate relationship with the hero. However, by the end of the story, the female betrayer shows her duplicitous nature, turning on the hero and revealing that she, like the antagonist, is motivated by greed or personal enrichment and merely using the hero to achieve her goal. Thus, Cawelti’s female betrayer transforms from classical goddess into temptress, forcing the hero to confront and defeat her as well.

While Selina, as a villain, is duplicitous, unlike the hardboiled female betrayer she does not present herself as a damsel-in-distress. Unlike Julie and other sweethearts, not only does she not require rescuing, but she actively resists it, often risking injury or death to avoid capture. In her first appearance she escapes Batman and Robin by diving from a moving speedboat into the ocean. In her second appearance, she again escapes by diving into the ocean, this time from a plane in flight without a parachute. In her third appearance she is captured by rival thieves while attempting a jewel heist. Batman does ultimately rescue her, but only because he incidentally happens upon her while pursuing the criminals on his own. Before he can apprehend her, she kisses him passionately. Batman is stunned momentarily by her

---

151 *Batman* vol. 1 #1, cover dated Spring 1940 by Bill Finger with art by Bob Kane.
152 *Batman* vol. 1 #2, cover dated Summer 1940 by Bill Finger with art by Bob Kane.
153 *Batman* vol. 1 #3, cover dated Fall 1940 by Bill Finger with art by Bob Kane.
forwardness, and she quickly pushes him away and escapes (see Figure 42). This is a technique that Catwoman uses to evade capture from Batman frequently during the Golden Age.

Because of Catwoman’s many escapes, Robin frequently questions his mentor’s commitment to capturing her. Robin’s doubt of Batman’s motives is quite reasonable given that Batman frequently seems to compromise his values whenever Selina is involved. In their first encounter, once Batman has discovered the identity of “the Cat” and confronts her, she responds by throwing her arms around him and inviting him to partner with her saying that if they worked together, they could become the “king and queen of crime” (“The Cat” 13) (see Figure 43). Batman admits that he is tempted but asserts that he is devoted to working on the side of law. However, rather than leave Catwoman in the hands of the police with the other criminals, he decides that Robin and he will deliver her to jail personally. When she suddenly jumps overboard, Robin attempts to chase her, but is slowed down when Batman uncharacteristically trips into him, allowing for Catwoman’s escape. When Robin accuses Batman of doing this on purpose, Batman denies it while at the same time musing about how attractive she is. At least for that moment, Batman appears to abandon the social justice imperative of the superhero thematic paradigm. Even entertaining Catwoman’s offer is a threat to Batman’s prosocial mission. To accept this would be to abdicate the moral authority that superheroness requires.

Batman’s attraction to Catwoman forces him to compromise the other aspects of the superhero thematic paradigm as well. Within the superhero thematic paradigm, Batman is required to advance his prosocial mission personally and proactively. While he can be a part of a
team, as he is with Robin and the Justice League, that is always in the service of acting as a unit to advance the social good of the community. A superhero cannot place his personal romantic or domestic happiness above the community. In repeatedly allowing Selina to escape, Batman is in a sense responsible for future crimes she might commit later. Additionally, Batman’s interactions with Catwoman limit the value of his performative masculinity and sacrifices some of his worth in the sex/violence exchange. In accordance with 1940s societal gender roles, the heroic Batman cannot physically strike Catwoman. As such, his confrontations with her are typically against her male underlings. The Golden Age Catwoman is presented as a clever, competent, and strong-willed woman who dominates men who surround her. Her minions are hired muscle that she controls in the superhero violence economy. While Batman’s impossible body is always capable of easily besting them in physical combat, thus establishing his greater value in that economy, a kiss from Catwoman can freeze him and make him question his convictions.

Thus, Catwoman attempts to subvert Connell’s assertion that performative masculinity is the most valuable social commodity, a position that the sweetheart archetype reinforces. The seductress rejects the implicit superiority of masculine coded violence in favor of feminine coded sexuality. While she does desire Batman, Catwoman is unwilling to subjugate herself to the level of male property in the way the sweetheart does. Selina wants her relationship to be an equal partnership — “the king and queen of crime.” More so than her actual crimes, this attitude positions her as a villain in the mythos of Golden Age Batman. As a vigilante, much of Batman’s

154 Batman does defensively slap Catwoman when she tries to smash a vase over his head in *Batman* vol. 1 #10 (cover dated April/May 1942, written by Jack Schiff with art by Jerry Robinson, Fred Ray and George Roussos). While the incident is clearly an act of physical violence, he appears to put very little effort and power behind the slap compared to the combat he engages in with her hired thugs in the panels prior to it firmly establishes him as far more physically powerful than she is, even if he is loath to use that physical power against her directly. Such depictions of direct physical violence between the two are extremely rare during the Golden Age.
behavior is illegal as well. However, Catwoman does not simply violate legal codes, she destabilizes social ones. Her sexual dominance and resistance to domestic and financial dependence on a male partner place her in opposition to the 1940s status quo. Since the Golden Age Batman is predominantly a champion of conservative and bourgeois values,\textsuperscript{155} she can only be seen as a villain by comparison.

Selina’s depiction, or lack thereof, during the transition out of the Golden Age and into the Silver Age underscores her usage of sexuality as a means of acquiring power. Selina’s final Golden Age appearance occurs in 1954 in *Detective Comics* \#211\textsuperscript{156} where she, as usual, utilizes hired thugs as physical muscle against Batman and Robin. In a reversal of many of their earlier encounters, Catwoman and her underlings capture Batman early in the story, however when she learns that the minions intend to kill him, she aids him in his escape by pretending she had forgotten to remove his weapons from his utility belt. She is then captured by Batman and Robin but escapes as well. Robin notes the affection that Batman and Catwoman have for each other and Batman claims that he is sure they will see her soon. However, Selina does not appear in another comic book for twelve years. Catwoman’s absence during the bulk of the Silver Age preserves her seductress character from the CCA mandates that affected the sweetheart archetype during that era. The 1954 CCA regulations stated that “illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed,” “passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way to stimulate the lower and base emotions,” and “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and sanctity of marriage” (Nyberg 168). One of Wertham’s chief complaints in *Seduction of the Innocent* is what he perceives as inappropriate and harmful

\textsuperscript{155} See chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{156} Cover dated September 1954 by Edmond Hamilton with art by Dick Sprang.
depictions of gender roles. The seductress archetype requires the ability to use her feminine hypersexuality to match or exceed the masculine power of the superhero. As such, Selina, and other seductress characters like her, faded from the pages of comics.

Upon her return in 1966, Catwoman and Batman’s mutual flirtatious relationship is significantly downplayed, and her character is used sparingly.\textsuperscript{157} Perhaps inspired by Julie Newmar’s portrayal of the character in the 1966 Batman television series (see Figure 44), the new version of her character embraces the silliness of Silver Age style storytelling without become subject to the superdickery that plagues the sweetheart. Like many male Silver Age villains,\textsuperscript{158} both the television and comic book Catwoman involves herself in crimes focused heavily on her costumed theme, the cat motif. Selina still harbors feelings for Batman, but he now no longer returns her affections. In Batman #201,\textsuperscript{159} Catwoman captures Batman, Robin and their new partner Batgirl, with the express purpose of forcing Batman to marry her. Much like Lois Lane and the sweetheart of the Silver Age, wedding the superhero becomes the seductress’s primary goal. However, unlike his Golden Age incarnation, the Silver Age Batman is easily capable of resisting her charms, firmly establishing his masculine power as superior to her feminine one. He does not hesitate to capture

\begin{center}
Figure 44: Batman (1966 TV show)
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{157} Where Golden Age comics typically held several short episodic stories in any given issue, Silver Age comics tended towards serialization and stories continued across multiple issues. This shift began the loose continuity that defines the shared comic universes (see Chapter 1). The Catwoman character appears in only four comic book stories spread across six issues during the 1960s.

\textsuperscript{158} See Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{159} Cover dated May 1968 by Gardner Fox with art by Frank Springer.
her and send her to prison. Catwoman’s appearances on the television show follow a similar pattern. Although Batman acknowledges his attraction to her, he never considers giving in to her sexual advances. In this way, the Silver Age seductress is essentially synonymous with the classical monomythic temptress. Her sole purpose is to show the resolve of the superhero who can resist temptation as per the edicts of Jewett and Lawrence’s American monomyth.

It must be noted that, during this period, the seductress’s power continues to reside in her sexuality. However, because of the CCA prohibition on salacious drawings or behavior, particularly in female characters (Nyberg 167-168) her hypersexuality becomes purely metaphorical; she speaks in puns that emphasize her feline affinity, frequently saying things like “CATasrophe” and “PURRfectly” or using vague double entendre. She often places Batman in bondage in her unsuccessful attempts to seduce him, and her chosen weapon is a whip with sexually fetishistic connotations. However, none of her vaguely sexual power signifiers compare to his violence power. Batman continues to resist engaging with Catwoman through physical violence, though she does unsuccessfully engage in combat with both his girl sidekick, Batgirl — whom Catwoman attacks because she falsely believes Batgirl is romantically involved with Batman — (Batman #201) and Superman’s sweetheart, Lois Lane (Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane #71). In both cases the women are able to quickly defeat her, as the Code insisted that “in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” (Nyberg 166). Thus, during the Silver Age, the seductress’s sexual power, like that of the sweetheart, is established as being less valuable than the superhero’s violence power and what little violence power she possesses emerges as inferior to that of the girl sidekick or even the sweetheart.

As the Silver Age ended, the value of the seductress’s sexual power began to grow once more. During the latter half of the 1960s, the guidelines set forth more than a decade earlier by
the CCA — rules based on the Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s and designed to be morally conservative even for that time\textsuperscript{160} — were increasing viewed as unreasonably dated and restrictive. Rather than didactically preaching a set of moral lessons that their teen readers were likely attempting to escape, comic creators desired to address social issues that plagued a new generation of youth. During the early 1970s, comic creators from the Big Two strove to directly address these issues by pushing the boundaries of the CCA, on some occasions even publishing issues without the seal for the first time since 1954.\textsuperscript{161} As a result, comics touting more mature stories returned and ushered in what came to be known as the Bronze Age of comics.

In addition to Selina’s return, Batman’s rogues gallery began adding other seductress characters during the Silver and Bronze Ages, most notably Poison Ivy who first appears in \textit{Batman} #181\textsuperscript{162}. Like the Silver Age Catwoman, Ivy’s primary goal seems to be entrapping Batman in a romantic relationship. As a Silver Age villain, she is devoted to doing evil for evil’s sake. She first appears when Batman and Robin, in their civilian guises as Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson, are viewing a museum exhibit showcasing the world’s deadliest female criminals. Ivy, an attractive redhead clad only in a green leotard covered in leaves, enters the museum, and announces that she more beautiful than all other criminals and the only reason she is not more well known is that her crimes are so perfect that people have not realized that she is committing them, and she has not gotten proper credit, an error she intends to rectify. Ivy never states what

\textsuperscript{160} See Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{161} Stan Lee was asked to write a Spider-man comic that addressed the teen drug problem by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services) in 1971. The three-issue story which saw Spider-man dealing with a drug overdose by his best friend was rejected by the CCA as their regulations prohibited any mention of narcotics at all. Lee come to publish the storyline anyway, omitting the code seal from the cover, correctly assuming that readers of the 1970s would likely purchase the book regardless. The success of these issues of \textit{The Amazing Spiderman} — #96-98, with art by John Romita Sr., cover dated May-July 1971 — directly resulted in the Code being updated (Nyberg 139). This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{162} Cover dated June 1966, by Robert Kanigher with art by Sheldon Moldoff.
her previous crimes were or even what crimes she intends to commit now. In fact, she commits no actual crimes throughout the issue. Her evil is simply established by her proclamation that she wants to be seen as a villain and her lack of modesty about her own feminine beauty. She is evil because she actively resists the social norms that require her to be demure.

Ivy announces her desire to possess Batman as a partner in evil because of his supermasculine violence power, telling him, “Forget all this nonsense of fighting for the law, Batman! Join me! Together — we can be the no. 1 royalty couple of crime!” (“Beware Poison Ivy!”11). She then kisses him, placing him in a hypnotic stupor from which Robin must rouse him (see Figure 45). Once the spell is broken, Batman and Robin capture her without direct physical confrontation. Her only offensive weapon is her kiss, thus establishing Poison Ivy’s relationship to Batman in the sex/violence exchange. Like Catwoman, Ivy’s primary capital on that market is her sexual desirability. In her following appearance,163 Batman is still enamored with Ivy, and finds himself constantly reminiscing about their kiss, so much so that she charms him into helping her temporarily escape prison. He does ultimately break her spell and return her to prison, though there is still with no clear sense of what crime she has committed other than being a self-professed public enemy who desires sexual control over men rather than the opposite.

The seductress roadmap that Catwoman and Ivy create is followed by the vast majority of female villains to male heroes of the Golden, Silver and Bronze Ages of comics. Spider-man

163 Batman #183, cover dated August 1966, by Robert Kanigher with art by Sheldon Moldoff.
finds himself sharing an immediate mutual attraction with female burglar the Black Cat when they first meet and, like Batman, is stunned into inaction when she kisses him.\textsuperscript{164} Similarly, Marvel Comics’ version of the Norse god Thor\textsuperscript{165} is attracted to Amora the Enchantress, a beautiful sorceress who has the power to seduce any mortal man. However, she desires only the immortal Thor because of his superior masculinity. Thor rejects her in favor of his human sweetheart, Jane Foster, and this alone establishes the Enchantress as a villain.\textsuperscript{166} Amora is not interested in robbery, world domination or any other evil endeavor. She is positioned as a villain only because of her unrequited desire for Thor and her insistence on pursuing him against his wishes. In effect, Enchantress, Black Cat, Poison Ivy, Catwoman, and other seductresses like them, are positioned to demonstrate that the most unforgivable crime of femininity is resisting patriarchal norms of acceptable female sexual desire.

\textsuperscript{164} Amazing Spider-man \#194, cover dated July 1979 by Marv Wolfman with art by Keith Pollard and Frank Giacola.

\textsuperscript{165} In accordance with the Many Worlds and Multiple Histories theories, Marvel Comics has several superheroes patterned after gods of ancient mythology. These characters inherit some elements from their classic myth interpretation, but also have stories within the Marvel canon continuity that override their mythic origins. As such, the comics rely on individual readers’ head canon to merge the lack of truth copy with the perpetual publication model’s ongoing continuity even more so than with other characters (see Chapter 1 for more details). Amongst these mythologically inspired characters, Thor is the most popular.

\textsuperscript{166} Journey into Mystery \#103, cover dated April by Stan Lee with art by Jack Kirby.
The dichotomy between sweetheart and seductress with respect to sexual aggressiveness is probably best illustrated by Star Sapphire (see Figure 46). When the Silver Age Green Lantern’s sweetheart Carol Ferris — who like many sweethearts is torn between her love for both the superhero and his secret identity, Hal Jordan — encounters an all-female alien race known as Zamarons, they give her a magical gem that grants her cosmic powers as Star Sapphire.\footnote{\textit{Green Lantern} vol. 2 #16, cover dated October 1962, by John Broome with art by Gil Kane.} The Zamarons believe that women are naturally superior to men, and task Carol with defeating Green Lantern to prove her superiority so she may rule them as queen. Though Carol at first resists, the Zamarons psychically compel her to accept. However, Carol’s love for Green Lantern remains and, despite being compelled to battle him,\footnote{As Star Sapphire, Carol is one of the few seductresses who engages in direct combat with a male superhero during the Silver Age. However, they never physically contact each other. Instead, they fly around and shoot at each other with energy beams.} she continuously hopes that she will be defeated so that she does not have to leave Earth and the man she loves, thus displaying a sort of implied sexual submissiveness of her sweetheart side warring with the dominant seductress.

In a second encounter, Star Sapphire decides that the solution is to defeat Green Lantern in combat to prove her female superiority and then have him propose marriage to her so that he can rule the Zamarons by her side.\footnote{\textit{Green Lantern} vol. 2 #26, cover dated January 1964, by Gardner Fox with art by Gil Kane.} In accordance with the gendered rules that pervaded Silver Age comics, even though Star Sapphire sees women as superior to men, it never occurs to her to initiate the proposal. Despite knowing that Star Sapphire and Carol Ferris are the same person
and his wish to marry Carol, Hal cannot abide these terms. In both these encounters, and several
others that follow, Green Lantern captures her, strips Carol of her powers and with them her
memory of being Star Sapphire and her newfound feminism. Green Lantern as a superhero,
cannot allow sexual desire for the seductress to emasculate him. His value in the sex/violence
exchange requires him to resist Star Sapphire the seductress even if he desires Carol the
sweetheart. He must wait for her to transform back. Since the classic monomyth had only two
possible roles for women, he is, at least in this point of the Silver Age, unable to conceive of a
woman who does not map onto one of these two associated archetypes.

**Like Him, But a Girl: Kid Sisters and Girl Sidekicks as Masculinity
Extensions**

> “Great Guns! I seem to see a youngster flying, dressed in a super-costume! It… uh…must
be an illusion!”

- Superman, *Action Comics* vol. 1 #252

> “Look again, Superman! It’s me… Supergirl! And I’m real!”

- Supergirl, *Action Comics* vol. 1 #252

Most instances of Campbell’s classic monomyth exist with only these two limited
representations for femininity by essentially avoiding featuring female characters within the
narrative. The heroic role is inherently active and, because of patriarchal cultural expectation,
presumptively male. Because the stories are typically heteronormative in scope and theme, the
role of female characters can be as either passive motivation for the protagonist — as is the case
with the goddess/sweetheart — or an obstacle to be overcome — incarnated in the
temptress/seductress. Indeed, in the beginning of the Golden Age, this is how female characters
were often treated. Lois Lane appears only when necessary to move the plot of early Superman
comics and other female characters, if they appear at all, are often unnamed one-offs who serve a
specific narrative purpose and are never seen again. Batman’s first appearance features no female
characters at all, even as unspeaking background characters. When he does receive female supporting cast members, such as Julie Madison, they either fall into the same narrative pattern as Lois, or they become villains such as Catwoman. In either case, when the storyline is not dealing with them directly, these women are rarely mentioned and seem to cease to exist. While the finite classical monomyths of Odysseus or King Arthur can flourish in this way, the perpetual publication model of the superhero monomyth requires at least the appearance of constant character growth, and as such the superhero monomyth evolved to allow for more regular interaction with the opposite sex, while avoiding the possibility of emasculation threatening the thematic paradigm. As such, the Silver Age evolved additional female roles to avoid the relative passivity of the sweetheart or implied malevolence of the seductress.

The first of these, the girl sidekick, is in effect an extension of the sweetheart archetype. Because the sweetheart is, by definition, mortal and unpowered, she is unable to accompany the superhero on the bulk of his adventures. The girl sidekick alleviates this problem by creating a romantic interest who may work alongside the superhero in battle, while still allowing him to maintain his performative masculinity by clearly positioning him as superior to his female counterpart. Unlike the sweetheart, the girl sidekick possesses some competency at performing masculine violence, and, therefore, has some non-sexual capital in the superhero economy. However, she is his lieutenant, and not a hero in her own right. Comics traditionally position her with less violence power than the male superhero, but supplementing that violence power with her attractiveness, in essence trading on both sides of the sex/violence exchange at once. She

170 While the superhero must appear to evolve to maintain reader interest over time, the perpetual publication model also mandates that this growth be illusory to keep the myth of the superhero from being consumed. See Chapter 1.
remains subject to superprostitution as she possesses her violence power only by consent of the male superhero to whom she is subordinate.

When the Code caused the seductress archetype to fall out of favor, it also caused a spike in the prevalence of girl sidekicks. Among Wertham’s many fears set forth in *Seduction of the Innocent* was the possibility that comics might encourage homosexual desires in young male readers. In particular, Wertham feared that the relationship between Batman and Robin was “psychologically homosexual” and “only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoerotism which pervades the adventures of the mature ‘Batman’ and his young friend ‘Robin’” (189-190). Even beyond such problematic, but at the time commonplace, demonization of homosexuality, Wertham can see no reason for a relationship between an adult man and a prepubescent boy. Although he is aware that Batman is Robin’s adoptive father, Wertham rejects the notion of a non-sexual familial relationship between the pair because of the lack of a motherly female influence. Instead, he calls the relationship of an adult male living in a mansion with a young boy, “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (190) that “may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies, of the nature of which they may be unconscious” (191). In this way, he not only disparages homosexuality,¹⁷¹ but also leverages that homophobia to imply that the very act of single fatherhood is a threat to proper gender development.

¹⁷¹ The evolution of the superhero monomyth regarding queerness will be further explored in Chapter 4.
The popularization of the girl sidekick occurs in direct response to Wertham’s fears, beginning with the first appearance of Batwoman in *Detective Comics* #233\(^\text{172}\) (see Figure 47). Premiering less than two years after Catwoman’s final Golden Age appearance, Kathy Kane is a circus performer who unexpectedly inherits a large fortune from a deceased relative. Inspired by newspaper articles about Batman, she decides to use her newfound wealth and her acrobatic skills to fight crime as Batwoman. Although she is successful at first in managing to aid, and in some cases even upstaging Batman and Robin, Batman soon tells her that he has successfully deduced her secret identity and that she must give up crimefighting as the activity is too dangerous for women. Kathy immediately consents to his patriarchal oversight and retires. However, several months later she returns to action briefly to help Robin when Batman is temporarily incapacitated with an injury, again retiring at Batman’s insistence at the end of the mission.\(^\text{173}\)

Finally, Kathy returns to her Batwoman identity once again to offer assistance to Batman, Robin, and Superman in tracking a criminal who is attempting to steal a pill that will temporarily grant him powers like Superman.\(^\text{174}\) Batman and his allies promptly dismiss her, saying they do not need her help for the dangerous mission. Though she is visibly annoyed, she once again agrees to leave the job to the men, however on her way home she encounters the criminal and apprehends him after taking the super pill herself. Now possessing superpowers, she once again

\(^{172}\) Cover dated July 1956 by Edmon Hamilton with art by Sheldon Moldoff.

\(^{173}\) *Batman* vol. 1 #105, cover dated by Bill Finger with art by Sheldon Moldoff.

\(^{174}\) *World’s Finest Comics* #90, cover dated September-October 1957 by Edmond Hamilton with art by Dick Sprang.
offers her assistance to the male superheroes, only to be told that powers are dangerous, and she should go home and rest until they wear off. However, now imbued with the capacity to perform masculine violence herself, she refuses, saying that she will use the twenty-four-hour duration of her powers to help as many people as possible while also attempting to discover the secret identities of the heroes — as Batman has previously deduced hers — feeling that this will put her on equal footing. Though she successfully assists the heroes in thwarting several crimes and rescuing people from danger, the men nonetheless employ superdickery tactics to prevent her from learning their secret identities. Once her powers wear off, Kathy immediately offers to retire forever. However, to her delight, Batman unexpectedly tells her that because of the courage and cleverness she has shown throughout the day, he is cautiously giving her permission to continue her crimefighting career.

After this point, Batwoman fights crime alongside Batman and Robin, but only on Batman’s terms. Even though they are both Batman’s sidekicks, Robin is treated as Batwoman’s superior despite being a preteen child and Kathy continues to be subject to superdickery, whereas the male Robin experiences it far less often. Kathy dates Bruce Wayne in his civilian guise, but he does not permit her to know that Batman and Bruce are the same people and often goes to extreme lengths to trick her whenever she is close to discovering the secret. As Batwoman, she attempts to pressure Batman into admitting his romantic feelings for her and validating their relationship — an analogue to the way in which Lois, Catwoman and other sweethearts and seductresses vie for marriage proposals — but he refuses. He does not want to sacrifice his bachelor status for domesticity, despite acknowledging to himself and Robin that he has romantic feelings for her, thus implying that the superhero cannot commit to a domestic partnership because he cannot recognize a girl sidekick as an equal. Batman continues to worry that
crimefighting is an inappropriate career for women, and often keeps vital information from her, under the pretense that it is too dangerous. This lack of knowledge often hampers Kathy’s ability to fight crime, resulting in her being captured and requiring rescue by her male superiors like other damsels-in-distress.

Furthermore, her superhero persona is burdened with gendered stereotypes that constantly reinforce her femininity. While CCA regulations and her sweetheart inspired modesty prevent her from overtly advertising herself as hypersexual in the way that Catwoman and the other seductresses do, her costume still has feminine references. Rather than wearing a full cowl as Batman does, she has a cutaway mask to display her long flowing hair. Her cape is attached to a pointed collar with discreet buttons that evoke the matronly feel of a shirtwaist dress. This costume is enhanced by a waist-cinching belt and black bodice that covers her vibrant yellow bodysuit to enhance her hourglass figure. Additionally, her weapons are all feminized. Rather than wearing a utility belt as Batman and Robin do, Batwoman carries a utility purse where she stores her crimefighting gadgets, all of which are based on typically feminine beauty products and accessories, including a makeup powder puff that produced a thick smoke cloud, a perfume bottle that sprays tear gas, charm bracelets that double as handcuffs, and a giant hairnet strong enough to ensnare criminals. To ensure that the reader registers her weapons as feminized Batwoman verbally announces their dual nature every time she uses them.
These constant reminders of Batwoman’s gender are essential not only to her own character development but also to her primary purpose of underscoring Batman’s heterosexuality and masculinity. Comics scholar Chris York argues that CCA mandated changes of the Silver Age were a direct response to socially conservative fears arising with the beginning of the Cold War as “an irrational fear of Communism in the early 1950s brought an increasing fear of deviant behavior and a pressure to conform to a very narrow definition of what was considered ‘normal’” and “the cultural emphasis on the nuclear family and a containment approach to both foreign and domestic affairs fueled a homophobic fire that began to spread in the immediate wake of World War II” (100). Kathy serves to entrench Batman firmly within the heteronormative status quo. Her presence as Batman’s girlfriend ensures that, no matter how homosocial Batman’s relationship with Robin, Superman, or other male superheroes appears, he will be read as decidedly straight. Eventually the creators would add the character of Kathy’s niece, Betty Kane\(^\text{175}\) (see Figure 48). Betty adopts the identity of Bat-Girl\(^\text{176}\) and serves a similar function for Robin, dating him and firmly establishing all four superheroes’ heterosexuality as the four form what York calls a “nuclear Bat-Family” (100) with Batman as patriarch.

Robin and Bat-Girl’s relationship mirrors that of their

\(^{175}\) Batman vol. 1 #139, cover dated April 1961 by Bill Finger with art by Sheldon Moldoff.

\(^{176}\) When Batman first appeared in 1939, his name was typically stylized as “Bat-Man” with a hyphen separating the human and animal identities. This version of his name was quickly dropped in favor of the now familiar non-hyphenated spelling. Despite Batwoman consistently using a non-hyphenated version from her first appearance in 1956, when Bat-Girl first appears in 1961, her name was always spelled with the hyphen. While no explanation for the inconsistency was ever given, it does helpfully serve to distinguish her from the later character of Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, who would be introduced in 1967 after new writers dropped Kathy and Betty Kane from the ongoing narrative.
mentors in that Robin is clearly portrayed to be the more competent of the two. Because the reader is constantly reminded that Batwoman and Bat-Girl are female and possess inferior crimefighting skill, and because Robin and Batman — the superior male members of the Bat-Family — constantly worry that “crimefighting is no job for a girl,” the reader is left with a clear connection between gender and the capacity to perform within the superhero economy.

Many comics replicated the basic girl sidekick formula. In, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, comic historian Mike Madrid explains that many of the most popular Golden and Silver Age superheroines were originally non-powered girlfriends (sweethearts) that were gifted abilities by their superpowered male romantic partners, in effect becoming an extension of the male’s superheroic identity rather than a hero in her own right. Typically, these female sidekicks gain a diminished version of the male superhero’s powers, and their names are a modified feminine, and often diminutive, form of the superhero’s name. Batwoman is one of the few heroines allowed a moniker that recognizes her adulthood; often comics use the infantilized suffix “girl,” thus highlighting the women’s subservience to the dominant male superhero who employs “man” in his name. Hawkman creates a feminized version of his winged flight suit for his girlfriend, whom he then christens Hawkgirl (Madrid 11) (see Figure 49). Bulletman duplicates his antigravity helmet to grant powers to his fiancée, Bulletgirl (12).

Figure 49: First Appearance of Hawkgirl in *Flash Comics* vol. 1 #24, 1941
Even in occasions where a sweetheart gains powers that do not mimic her male lover, the
girl sidekick remains a less powerful assistant to the male, as in the case of the Fantastic Four’s
Invisible Girl, Sue Storm. In her earliest appearances, while her male teammates possess combat-
ready abilities — super strength, control of fire, and the ability to stretch and hit things at a
distance — Sue’s gift is to turn herself invisible, avoiding the fight altogether. In effect, the
artists could simply choose to not draw her during fight scenes. In a medium predicated on the
visual depiction of impossible bodies performing violence, the sole female member of the
Fantastic Four removes herself from the spectacle so as not distract from the masculine action.
Eventually the character was revitalized and given the power to project force fields to be more
useful in combat; however, her capabilities were still primarily defensive, with the bulk of the
violence power remaining with her male teammates.

Furthermore, Sue owes her powers to her boyfriend, scientist Reed Richards. In their
first appearance, Sue accompanies Reed, on a space flight in an experimental rocket. During
the mission the crew is bombarded with cosmic rays granting them their powers. The rest of the
crew consists of pilot Ben Grimm and Sue’s brother, mechanic Johnny Storm. While each of the
men have a clear purpose to serve for the mission, Sue appears simply to provide a token female
presence. Sue is present only because she is Reed’s girlfriend. Thus, her origin relies on her
ability to provide a romantic, domestic, and sexual link for the more active superhero. Much as
nearly all girl sidekicks, she remains a victim to superprostitution, possessing superpowers —
that is violence capital in the superhero market — only because she has expended her sexual
capital by linking herself to a male superhero. Even with powers, Sue is more likely to be

\[177 \textit{Fantastic Four} \text{ vol. 1 \#1, cover dated November 1961 by Stan Lee with art by Jack Kirby.}\]
captured and held hostage than any other Fantastic Four member and so still often serves as a
damsel-in-distress.

While the girl sidekick is not as hypersexualized as the seductress, the comic book
medium relies on the depiction of impossible bodies to represent the capability to perform
superhuman feats, and so the girl sidekick is depicted as a hyperfeminine counterpart to the
hypermale superhuman. She is allowed some level of performative feminine sexuality that
exceeds that of the sweetheart. Often, this entails skintight costumes, plunging necklines, and
exposed skin on the legs, arms, or midriffs as well as being posed in ways that accentuated the
hips or bosom or subtly implied sexual submission. While the girl sidekick’s impossible body
granted some access to violence power, her depiction serves most crucially as an object of the
presumed adolescent male reader’s male gaze. In their 1978 artistic tutorial, How to Draw
Comics the Marvel Way, comic author Stan Lee and artist John Buscema write that “obviously,
we do not emphasize muscles on a female. Though we assume she is not a weakling, a woman is
drawn to look smooth and soft as opposed to the muscular, angular rendition of a man…. she’s
generally drawn somewhat smaller all over, except for the bosom” (44). While the dictates of the
CCA precluded the girl sidekick from advertising herself as completely sexually available, in
order to be considered a mate worthy of the superhuman übermensch, her body did have to be
supersexual.

178 See Chapter 2.
179 One of Wertham’s chief complaints was the depiction of female characters prone on the ground after being killed
or rendered unconscious. He argued that this caused the young reader to fetishize violence against women as a
sexual act. While the CCA resulted in greatly reducing the usage of violence against women in narratives and
toning down the level of sexualization in the rendering of the female form, some hyperfeminization remained,
particularly in the case of the girl sidekicks and seductresses.
One archetype, however, allowed a female character to procure violence power without purchasing it directly with sexual power: the *kid sister*. In many ways, the kid sister resembles the girl sidekick. Both are unique inventions of the superhero monomyth with no exact analogues in the classic one. Like the girl sidekick, the kid sister is essentially a duplicate of the male superhero in female form who can only perform heroism by the blessing of her male superior. Unlike the girl sidekick, the kid sister is immune to superprostitution. She cannot purchase violence power with her sexuality because to do would violate incest taboos in the mind of the reader. Instead, the kid sister relies on a familial relationship with the superhero. Whereas the girl sidekick’s sexuality is reserved for the superhero’s use in much the same way as the sweetheart’s, the kid sister’s sexuality is preserved as a mark of her virtue. However, to maintain the virtue, she must remain chaste and asexual in the manner in which Jewett and Lawrence imagine the male hero of the American monomyth.

Among the earliest examples of the kid sister archetype is Mary Marvel. First introduced in *Captain Marvel Adventures* #18\(^1\) (see Figure 50). Mary Bromfield is the long-lost twin sister of Billy Batson, the young boy who serves as the alter ego of Captain Marvel.\(^2\) She was an early Golden Age attempt to encourage young female readership of superheroes to match the male demographic. When Billy discovers he has a long-lost twin sister, he is overjoyed and immediately shares his secret identity with her. Mary wishes that she could also have

\(^{180}\) Cover dated December 1942 by Otto Binder with art by Marc Swayze.  
\(^{181}\) See Chapter 1.
superpowers, but Billy explains that the wizard “wouldn’t give his powers to a girl!!” (11) emphasizing the final word to highlight the inferiority of her gender. However, when Mary accidentally says Billy’s magic word, “Shazam”, she is struck by the same mystic lightning bolt that powers him and finds herself transformed into a superhuman being with great strength, bullet proof skin, and the power to fly, just as he has. Billy is perplexed as he knows that his abilities come from mythic gods that were all male\(^\text{182}\) and thus Mary’s ability to wield masculine power seems impossible. When Billy takes Mary to see the wizard, he explains that “though she is a girl” he has granted “her powers from a different group of my old friends” (15) all of whom are female. Thus, Mary has the grace of Selena, the strength of Hippolyta, the skill of Ariadne, the fleetness of Zephyrus, the beauty of Aurora and the wisdom of Minerva.\(^\text{183}\) While Mary is undoubtedly superhuman, the comics also emphasize her gender with her abilities. While she possesses enhanced wisdom and strength in the same way that Billy does, his stamina, power, courage, and speed are replaced with grace, skill, fleetness, and beauty.

Furthermore, the comics consistently position Mary Marvel’s superpowered form as subordinate to Captain Marvel. When twelve-year-old Billy says the magic word “Shazam,” he is transformed into a six-foot three-inch powerful adult in a form-fitting costume and takes on the name “Captain Marvel.” However, when Mary uses the same incantation, she retains her adolescent body and gains no military rank. Instead, Billy simply christens her Mary Marvel, a name which does little to hide her secret identity. He takes charge of training his less competent

\(^{182}\) Ibid.
\(^{183}\) In classic Greek mythology, Zephyrus is a male god, not a female goddess, though the writers of comics in which Mary Marvel appeared never acknowledge this. It is unclear whether this initially occurred because of a mistake or an inability to find an appropriate goddess whose named began with the letter Z. However, later comics would retroactively change two of the goddesses Mary received her powers from, substituting Artemis for Ariadne and Aphrodite for Aurora. Oddly enough, Zephyrus remained and continued to be referred to as female.
sister and the lead on their joint adventures. When Mary is on her own, she focuses on less
dangerous missions such as settling disputes with school bullies or rescuing kittens from trees.

The kid sister need not be a technical sibling of the superhero, and in fact often is not; the
key element is that the superhero be placed in a surrogate paternal role over his charge. While
primarily functioning as Robin’s girl sidekick, Batgirl also effectively serves the dual role of kid
sister to Batman and he treats her as such. While he holds patriarchal power over Batwoman as
well, a clear parental power dynamic comes into play when dealing with the younger Bat-girl,
despite having no biological relationship to her. Positioning the kid sister as a younger sibling
rather than a daughter allows the superhero to build a familial unit with himself as patriarch
without the sacrifice of the superhero thematic paradigm’s element of independent autonomy
through marital domesticity.

First appearing in *Action Comics* #252, Supergirl is Kara Zor-El, Superman’s
Kryptonian cousin (see Figure 51). When the planet Krypton
is destroyed, a portion of the planet where Superman’s uncle
lived managed to survive intact and float through space as an
asteroid trapped in an air bubble for a period of time. When a meteor shower threatens to destroy what is left of
this world, Kara’s parents put their adolescent daughter in a
rocket and sent her to Earth to join her long lost cousin.
Though Superman says he is overjoyed to suddenly have
family and promises to take care of her and train her to be a

---

184 Cover dated May 1959 by Otto Binder with art by Al Plastino.
185 While superhero comics of the Silver Age were certainly part of the science fiction genre, the validity of the
science that they used was often quite suspect.
superhero, he immediately balks at the young girl’s suggestion that she come to live with him because he has “adopted a secret identity on Earth which might be jeopardized!” (4.5). Superman offers no other explanation and Kara does not press the issue. She suppresses her own need for family so as not to threaten his bachelor identity. Instead, he adorns her with a brunette wig to disguise her blonde hair, gives her the human-sounding name of Linda Lee to disguise her Kryptonian heritage, and deposits her in a local orphanage.

Unlike Batwoman and the girl sidekicks who existed to entrench the superhero’s heterosexual identity, Supergirl, Mary Marvel, and the kid sisters provide a heroic Werther Effect\(^{186}\) behavioral blueprint for young female readers that aimed neither to threaten the strict gender roles enforced by the CCA nor, as Alex Link argues, “to emulate [the kid sister’s] efforts to secure limited freedom while under the ever-watchful gaze of patriarchy” (1178). Superman decides when and how Supergirl is allowed to use her powers. For the first several years of her publication, she is expressly forbidden from using her powers publicly or revealing her existence until such time as Superman feels she has gained the maturity to make decisions for herself. Initially, he declines even sharing his secret identity with her, and as a dutiful surrogate daughter, she declines to ask, instead being content to refer to him as “Cousin Superman”. Their joint adventures often see her being forced to disobey his parental rules to secretly help him. While he is grateful for her assistance, he always chastises her for taking chances and, to protect the secret of her existence, he claims public credit for her successes. The implication of her early stories is that women — or at least “super girls” — may be as capable as men, but their competence must be exercised with discretion so as not to fracture the male ego or threaten male authority.

\(^{186}\) See Chapter 1.
In contrast to the girl sidekick, the kid sister is often desexualized to increase her youthful appearance. Bat-girl, Mary Marvel and Supergirl all wore feminized versions of their patriarchal superhero’s uniforms, substituting demure, flowing skirts that recall the aesthetic of a schoolgirl uniform in place of the tights. Rather than the skintight spandex shirts of the male superheroes, the kid sisters were given loose blouses with less exposed skin than the girl sidekicks. These outfits deemphasized the bosom and downplayed the sexualized aspects of the kid sisters’ figures while retaining their femininity. The assumption was that in order to target young women readers, the protagonists must be not only be female, but also childlike and innocent. In order to serve as proper role models, the kid sister had to be chaste. As such, at least for the Golden and Silver Ages, the kid sister is overtly feminized but never hypersexualized.

Film theorist Cristina Lucia Stasia argues that action-oriented genres problematically equate sexuality and strength for female characters. They are “allowed to be violent only within the parameters allowed by patriarchal discourse. That is, they may be threatening but are always heterosexually attractive” (238). For Stasia, the action heroine must be infantilized to be accepted by the male reader, as evidenced by the terms by which she is often referred: chick, babe, and — as is particularly relevant in the superhero monomyth — girl. Since the superhero monomyth utilizes the masculine violence power as its primary currency and relegates feminine sexuality as a secondary currency only useful primarily for its exchange value, the reader tends to only consider any visual markers of female sexuality in accordance with their ability to purchase masculine power. If the male superhero’s impossible body is presented as a template for the adolescent boy to idolize, then the sweethearts, seductresses and girl sidekicks that surround the superhero must be constructed to this same template of perfection — the feminine ideal, as seen through the eyes of a teenage boy. Feminine power, to the adolescent male reader,
becomes defined by its ability to attract the male gaze. Therefore, by limiting the hypersexualization available to the female character, she must compete in the superhero marketplace with only her ability to utilize violence power. However, since her capacity to utilize violence power is necessarily lesser than that of her paternal sibling superhero counterpart, the kid sister still finds herself playing the role of damsel-in-distress and forced to call upon her big brother to deal with greater threats. In the direst of circumstances, she may find herself fridged.

However, Evie Kendal counters Stasia’s claims that action heroines must be sexualized by offering a reading of the children’s superhero cartoon *Powerpuff Girls* (see Figure 52). She argues that by presenting the heroes as kindergarteners, “infantilisation (sic) is not possible—they are already children” (238). As the Powerpuff Girls lack visible sexual characteristics altogether, they are insulated from the male gaze, while retaining their hyperviolent tendencies. In effect, despite having no paternal sibling to grant them their powers — though they are under the adult supervision of their human father and creator, Professor Utonium — they present themselves as kid sisters to the viewer with their childlike personalities. In this way, since incest taboos prohibit the teenaged boy from seeing his female siblings as sexually available, the kid sister’s power becomes acceptable because her sexual availability has been stripped away. The kid sisters’ chastity thus becomes not only a patriarchal morality edict for the female reader but a shield against objectification by the male reader. However, she is always seen as a kid sister first and a heroine second. This results in a
false equivalence between sexuality and maturity. In order to maintain the shield against objectification, sexuality must be prohibited. Kid sisters, while nominally feminine, were for practical purposes asexual. In order to be seen as mature, sexuality had to be embraced.

**No-one Wants to be a Girl: Wonder Woman and the Resistance to the Superheroine Archetype**

“As a little girl, Wonder Woman was the only female superhero, so she was irresistible. She was literally the only game in town, the only hero that made you feel good about yourself.”

-Gloria Steinem

Though most female characters in the superhero monomyth are supporting cast members for more established male characters, some do exist on their own monomythic journey. These characters embody a separate archetype, *the superheroine*, which attempts to be analogous to the central male superhero. Unfortunately, during the building phases of the superhero monomyth in the Golden and Silver Ages, true superheroines were quite rare. While at first, the superheroine archetype seemed to entail simply substituting a female protagonist for the traditional male one, the thematic paradigm complicates such a substitution. While the independent autonomy and social justice elements transfer well, the reader’s interpretation of the performative masculinity element limits the acceptance of the feminine hero.
While not the first female protagonist of a superhero comic, the most well-known superheroine in the history of comics is undoubtedly Wonder Woman\textsuperscript{187} (see Figure 53). Earlier Golden Age attempts at creating female comic book superheroes had seen some limited success but failed to match the popularity of Superman, Batman, Captain America, Captain Marvel or other male superheroes. First appearing in \textit{All-Star Comics} #8\textsuperscript{188}, Wonder Woman was created by writer William Moulton Marston\textsuperscript{189} and artist H.G. Peter. Both men had connections to the feminist community of the 1940s: Peter gained notoriety as an artist for suffragette political cartoons and Marston was an ally of prominent feminist Margaret Sanger, whom he knew through his lover, her niece, Olive Byrne. However, both of Wonder Woman’s creators were still men, and their view of feminism through the lens of 1940s sensibilities greatly colored her early adventures.

Marston was a psychologist by training who had received some renown early in his career as the inventor of the polygraph\textsuperscript{190} (Lepore 161) and the formulation of DISC theory (113), the mapping of human emotions into aspects of four behavioral traits: Dominance,

---

\textsuperscript{187} As with the male superheroes mentioned in Chapter 1, it is hard to quantify objective popularity across the board between characters because of many conflating factors. However, as with the examples of Superman and Batman, Wonder Woman has been appearing in comics and other media perpetually since her inception for so many years that she clearly ranks beyond most other characters.

\textsuperscript{188} Cover dated January 1942.

\textsuperscript{189} Marston wrote his comic books under the pseudonym “Charles Moulton.” Though they were not credited at the time as creators, later research generally accepts that much of Wonder Woman’s backstory was also devised by Marston’s wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and the couple’s polyamorous domestic partner, Olive Byrne.

\textsuperscript{190} While Marston frequently called himself the “inventor of the lie detector” Lepore notes that Marston’s work with detecting lies by measuring systolic blood pressure occurred concurrently with other individuals also working in the field. That said, he was certainly influential and pioneering in the early history of the polygraph. Marston’s work would go on to influence the Wonder Woman character as well, with her primary weapon, the Lasso of Truth, being inspired by his real-life invention.
Inducement, Submission, and Compliance. He reasoned that typical human behavior is patterned on reactions to environmental stimuli as dictated by the four DISC emotions (Lepore 113). Modern incarnations\(^\text{191}\) of DISC theory often employ alternate terms for the letters that have fewer negative connotations such as substituting “Supportiveness” for “Submission” or “Influence” for “Inducement”; however, the base model is still in use today. Marston saw all four DISC traits as having positive social value. The assertive traits (dominance and inducement) are needed to proactively influence society and react to outside influence, while the passive traits ( submission and compliance) are used to maintain cohesion within the community and encourage cooperation.

According to his biographer, Jill Lepore, Marston often claimed that Wonder Woman was “psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world” (qtd. in Lepore 190-191). Marston believed that previous superheroine characters failed to connect with audiences because of their depiction as essentially inferior men. In effect, he was referring to the superhero violence economy. He reasoned that, because superhero comics privileged the use of violence to solve problems, a characteristic which he considered gendered inherently male, then what he considered to be naturally female traits were in effect deprivileged:

It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics’ worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity. A male hero, at best, lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are as essential to a normal child as the breath of life. Suppose your child’s ideal becomes a superman who uses his extraordinary power to help the weak. The most important ingredient in the human happiness recipe still is missing — love. It’s smart to be strong. It’s big to be generous. But it’s sissified, according to exclusively masculine rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. “Aw, that’s girl’s stuff!” snorts our young comics reader. “Who wants to be a girl?” And that’s the point; not even

---

\(^{191}\) Though Marston never received the renown for DISC theory that he desired during his lifetime, the work was expanded upon by various psychologists after Marston’s death. Today, DISC assessment is often used in business and industrial companies to create successful interdisciplinary teams where members build on each other’s strengths.
As such, Marston decided to create a female übermensch with all of the physical gifts of the most powerful male hero, Superman, but also surpassing him by displaying attributes considered socially unbecoming of men. Marston held an essentialist view of gender, believing that certain DISC traits were naturally inherent in one gender or the other. He felt that men were better suited to physical dominance and women to submissiveness. However, he also recognized that, in the modern era, the masculine physicality was no longer necessary for survival. Modernity had made masculinity obsolete, a performance with no real value. He reasoned that the traits that he associated with femininity — kindness, mercy, affection, compassion, and the capacity for love — were the key to mankind’s continued development. In essence, he saw feminine power as the next step of evolution towards übermensch status. Wonder Woman, he believed, could prepare young readers, girls and boys alike, for a new age where matriarchy would eclipse patriarchy and feminine strength would be valued above all else.

As such, Marston attempted to honor the basic monomythic introduction to the male superhero while swapping genders in Wonder Woman’s Golden Age origin story and highlighting the ways in which he felt feminine sensibilities made her character superior to her contemporary heroes. Influenced by classic Greek and Roman mythology as well as the Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist science fiction novel *Herland*, Marston’s story sees United States Army Captain Steve Trevor crashing his plane on Paradise Island, the hidden home of an

192 See Chapter 2.
immortal race of the all-female warriors known as the Amazons. There his comatose body is discovered by Diana, princess of the Amazons, who nurses him back to health. Diana declares she has fallen in love with Steve, and against her mother’s objections decides to accompany the pilot back to man’s world, where she uses her mythic strength and skill to fight crime as Wonder Woman.

While Diana’s sudden romantic devotion to Steve seems irrational, it is simply a shortcut inherited from the monomythic pattern that superhero narratives were already using. Steve is a gender-swapped sweetheart. No reason is given for their love, and in fact the narration in the story notes that Steve is the only man that Diana has ever seen. However, the fact that they have fallen in love despite not having a conversation is left unquestioned. In essence Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor’s Golden Age origin mirrors that of Flash Gordon and Dale Arden. Once their love is established, Diana becomes Steve’s devoted protector. He is her male damsel-in-distress.

However, Marston’s view of what constituted feminine strength was heavily colored by his personal gender biases. His essentialist views led him to construct Wonder Woman’s personality such that she was devoted to what he saw as feminine ideals. This sometimes presented itself as naïveté as Marston went out of his way to make sure Wonder Woman was constantly performing femininity through stereotypes as clearly as possible for the reader: she constantly spoke of love and harmony with both her allies and her enemies; she did not understand capitalism and so was frequently cheated out of money by immoral associates; and she was fascinated to the point of distraction by fashion, hairstyles, and makeup.

Most importantly, Wonder Woman’s devotion to love meant that she retained the sweetheart-like desire to wed Steve Trevor. When she first returns his comatose body to America, she takes on the secret identity of a nurse named Diana Prince to watch over and care
for him. Once he has healed and is discharged, she transfers from working at the hospital to working as a secretary and administrative assistant at the US Army Intelligence base where Steve is stationed. This serves to set up the standard love triangle between her secret identity, her superheroine identity and Steve that mirrors the typical relationship that male superheroes have with their sweethearts. In her civilian identity, Diana pines after Steve; however, he only desires the more powerful Wonder Woman. However, unlike with male superheroes, Wonder Woman does not wish to maintain her autonomous bachelor freedom. She strives to show strength within traditional femininity rather than to destroy gender binaries. As such, she constantly wishes Steve would ask her to marry him. She does not however propose to him as to do so would upset the gender dynamic that Marston sees as essential. Despite her violence power, this firmly establishes Steve as the dominant force in their romantic relationship.

Wonder Woman has no real reason to masquerade in a mortal identity or to hide it from Steve Trevor; she does so purely out of superhero genre narrative convention. Unlike with Superman/Clark Kent or Batman/Bruce Wayne, the Diana Prince alter ego is not an identity with which Wonder Woman was raised. She does not maintain it to protect a family or create a semblance of normalcy. It only exists to position her in a role that makes her submissive to her male sweetheart. Despite, the fact that Steve is frequently positioned as a damsel-in-distress requiring Wonder Woman’s rescue, he frequently laments that, if she would only give up her superhero career, they could wed, and she might be safely at home cooking his dinner (Madrid 44). While such comments echoed Marston’s absolute belief in DISC theory and the relative psychological equality of dominant and submissive roles, the message that his stories sent to the average reader of the 1940s was mixed at best. Marston might have believed women that women
would “rule the world” but he also believed that they must remain submissive to men in order to do so.

Additionally, Marston was fascinated by BDSM\textsuperscript{193} and sexual kink. Lepore explains that these fetishes colored his psychological work long before he entered the comic book profession. Marston insisted that so-called “abnormal” sexuality was in fact entirely “normal” (Lepore 125) and was largely shunned by the psychological community for attempting to expand his DISC theory in more controversial areas, such as using the polygraph device to measure sexual excitement. Since he believed that innate gender roles tended to lead men towards the dominant and women towards the submissive end, he reasoned that exploring the sexual play of the BDSM community, where dominance and submission are practiced in more extreme manners than in normal daily activity, would lead to a greater understanding of gender dynamics. Thus, BDSM and other non-normative sexual and gender practices such as homosexuality and transvestism became a research interest of his, despite the taboo nature of discussing it at the time. He maintained that women would ultimately need to teach men the value of sexual submissiveness and felt that it was imperative that Wonder Woman imprint these values on her young readers.

\textsuperscript{193} BDSM is the common umbrella designation used by practitioners of several non-normative erotic and sexual fetishes. While not a true acronym, it is generally understood to stand for bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism. Though the acronym did not exist in Marston’s time, I use it for simplicity here to cover the aspects of sexual culture that he often worked with both in his psychological research and his comics writing.
As such, while Marston’s Golden Age Wonder Woman was physically superior to any man she encountered, she was at the same time also at their sexual mercy. A conventional trope of the superhero genre is to give an all-powerful superhero a single mundane weakness that allows villains to put the hero in danger for storyline purposes. Superman was allergic to the fictional radioactive element Kryptonite, and Green Lantern’s powers did not work on yellow. For Wonder Woman, Marston added the Achilles’ heel that she was rendered powerless if her wrists were bound together by a man (see Figure 54). Her violence power made her fast enough to deflect bullets with her Amazonian bracelets and strong enough to lift a car, but she frequently found herself captured by villains and bound in ropes or chains. The erotic undertones were undeniable. She was often gagged, spanked, and whipped or subject to other sexually coded humiliation while lying prone and in bondage. Marston’s scripts for H. G. Peter contained intricate notes on exactly how he wanted the various knots and chains rendered. He felt the details of the erotic elements were imperative:

Closeup, full length figure of WW. Do some careful chaining here—Mars’s men are experts! Put a metal collar on WW with a chain running off from the panel, as though she were chained in the line of prisoners. Have her hands clasped together at her breast with double bands on her wrists, her Amazon bracelets and another set. Between these runs a short chain, about the length of a handcuff chain—this is what compels her to clasp her hands together. Then put another, heavier, larger chain between her wrist bands which hangs in a long loop to just above her knees. At her ankles show a pair of arms and hands, coming from out of the panel, clasping about her ankles. This whole panel will lose its point and spoil the story unless these chains are drawn exactly as described here. (qtd. In Lepore 234-235)
As a psychologist, Marston held the diametrically opposed view of Wertham. Both men tended to link all non-heteronormative sexual desires together, equating homosexuality and bisexuality with BDSM fetish play. However, where Wertham feared the risks of exposing youth to excessive sexual content, Marston sought to normalize it. Wonder Woman comics were in essence his attempt to bring the arguments of his book, *Emotions of Normal People*, into practice. Marston reasoned that homosexuality — like heterosexuality — was simply an application of the dominance, inducement, submission and compliance aspects of DISC theory. Since he also argued that personalities in the submissive and compliant end of the spectrum were just as viable for either gender as those in the dominant and inductive end, it followed that for youth involved in homosexual relationships, as either the dominant or submissive partner, the development of non-normative sexual proclivities served to teach homosexuals “an unusually complete appetitive development” (*Emotions of Normal People* 253). That is, Marston believed that varied sexual experimentation led to a more complete social development and better understanding of the other gender than restraining oneself to traditional gender roles. Although the text never explicitly depicts it, it is heavily implied that Wonder Woman and her fellow Amazons — who preach a message of love and pleasure while living on an island populated solely by women — are involved in lesbian relationships. Wertham saw Wonder Woman as “the

---

194 See Chapter 2.
195 This was a relatively common attitude given the time in which both men were working. Since all non-normative sexual behavior was seen “deviant” from Wertham’s perspective, BDSM and homosexuality were effectively equivalent in their theoretical corruption of juveniles. He believed that one would invariably lead to the other. While Marston saw them as separate sexualities, the fact that both BDSM and homosexuality were both ostracized and could be explained in similar ways by DISC theory made his arguments in favor of them effectively the same.
196 Marston’s application of DISC theory to sexual relationships argues that one partner is always dominant over the other. In heterosexual relationships he attributes the roles to males and females respectively. In homosexual relationships, he argues the dichotomy is still there. In either case, the relationship is symbiotic. The dominant partner induces the submissive one to provide erotic pleasure and therefore teaches the submissive partner to be more proactive. In turn, the submissive partner teaches the dominant one the social benefits of compliance and providing for loved ones.
lesbian counterpart of Batman” (Wertham 192) and “morbid ideal” (193) for her young female readers, prompting them towards lesbian desires and away from their traditional maternal and domestic instincts. Marston considered this as a positive, using Wonder Woman’s attraction to women as well as to Steve Trevor to normalize bisexuality in a time where queerness was heavily demonized.

While Marston was attempting to be transgressive with the way in which he presented Wonder Woman, the superheroic design of her impossible body ultimately used the same visual tropes standardized with the girl sidekicks and kid sisters of the time. It was important to Marston that Wonder Woman represent what he considered the ideal of femininity visually as he felt that sexual attraction was the key to convincing the male reader to accept female dominance:

Didn’t I know that girl heroines had been tried in pulps and comics and, without exception, found failures? Yes, I pointed out, but they weren’t superwomen—they weren’t superior to men in strength as well as in feminine attraction and love-inspiring qualities. Well, asserted my masculine authorities, if a woman hero were stronger than a man, she would be even less appealing. Boys wouldn’t stand for that; they’d resent the strong gal’s superiority. No, I maintained, men actually submit to women now, they do it on the sly with a sheepish grin because they’re ashamed of being ruled by weaklings. Give them an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they’ll be proud to become her willing slaves! (“Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics”, emphasis in original).
Thus, Marston directed Peter to draw Wonder Woman as attractive as possible. He gave detailed instructions on the design of her costume with notes on everything from her hairstyle, to the height of her high-heeled boots, to the cut of her bustier (see Figure 55). Marston’s attempts to utilize the male gaze to ease his message into the consciousness of the reader recalls Stasia’s argument that superheroines must remain heterosexually attractive in order to be granted agency within the patriarchal narrative. While Stasia sees this as a limitation of the genre, Marston saw it as an opportunity for subterfuge. However, while Marston’s understanding of the reach of comics to an American audience during the Golden Age was correct, his attempt to use the Werther effect to influence them failed because he did not anticipate the effects of the multiple histories theory under which the American comic book industry has operated.

Marston exercised meticulous care over Wonder Woman’s messaging in the comics he wrote; however, since the character was owned by DC Comics and not Marston himself, she was

---

197 Under a perpetual publication model, a writer has no assurance that the backstories that any two readers bring to a given story are the same. Since the origin of Wonder Woman has been retold countless times in countless media formats, any two readers may have slightly or widely varying backstories for the character. This does not present a problem so long as the character conforms to a basic mythic gestalt. See Chapter 1.
subject to appearing in other titles and be written by different authors. Because of her growing popularity, DC Comics added her to the cast of their premiere Golden Age superhero team, the Justice Society of America (JSA). However, the writer of that series, Gardner Fox, was far less progressive about Wonder Woman’s disruption of gender roles than Marston. When America officially entered World War II, the Justice Society was deployed to Japan to fight alongside the army. Wonder Woman first meets the Justice Society when she is serving, in her civilian identity of Diana Prince, as a nurse on an American warship alongside Shiera Sanders, aka Hawkgirl, JSA member Hawkman’s girl sidekick. When Wonder Woman proves her value in combat against Japanese soldiers, the otherwise all-male team invites her to be their first female member. However, the status they convey to her is “honorary member” and she is asked to serve as the team’s secretary, a traditionally female role. Despite actively engaging in the war in her own comics written by Marston — and being physically stronger and more powerful than most of her male teammates — in Fox’s stories, Wonder Woman typically stays behind in America when the team embarks on a mission, wishing them luck and wistfully lamenting that as secretary and honorary member she cannot “join the boys” but will “be with them in spirit.” Where Marston’s vision of Wonder Woman — contradictory and exploitive as it sometimes seemed — was to explore the ways in which femininity was superior to masculinity, to Fox, Wonder Woman’s primary function as an ideal woman was to encourage the female reader to embrace her proper place supporting the domestic sphere and leaving the business of war to men.

198 All-Star Comics vol. 1 #11 cover dated June 1942 by Gardner Fox with art by Jack Burnley, Sheldon Moldoff, H. G. Peter, et al.
199 While Shiera Sanders did appear regularly in JSA stories both in her civilian identity and in costume as Hawkgirl, she was explicitly not a member of the team and used only as a supporting character by virtue of her girl sidekick relationship to Hawkman.
As a result, the mythic gestalt\textsuperscript{200} of the Wonder Woman character became quickly incongruous. No matter how much Marston wanted the character to progress through her own monomythic journey, Fox and other creators saw her only as support and accent for the male superheroes in which they were interested. Marston died in 1947, only six years after the Wonder Woman character had been introduced and seven before the adoption of the CCA would usher in the Silver Age. The writers that succeeded him did not share his DISC theory-based feminist ideology. While some allowed Wonder Woman to be far more of an individual hero than Fox, they also tended to rely heavily on the more gendered aspects of her story without any pretense of Marston’s subversion. While being the lead character in her own books mostly protected her from being subjected to the levels of superprostitution and superdickery plaguing Silver Age girl sidekicks and kid sisters, the Code removed all queer and lesbian subtext from her stories. The BDSM elements were downplayed as well, and her Silver Age stories began to focus more on her saving her male sweetheart, Steve Trevor, from damsel-in-distress scenarios and dejectedly turning down his constant marriage proposals because accepting would mean exposing her secret identity to him and giving up her career as a superheroine. No reason is ever given why Wonder Woman hides her secret identity from Steve, or why she even maintains one, other than the expectation that she does so as a genre trope. Thus, the Diana Prince alter ego primarily serves only to maintain her position as subordinate to him in their romantic relationship. While he frequently requires Wonder Woman to rescue him from damsel-in-distress situations, he avoids falling victim to superprostitution himself by constantly positioning his sexual power as greater than Wonder Woman’s violence power. Wonder Woman frequently laments that to accept Steve’s proposal would mean giving up her career as a superhero. However, there is no

\textsuperscript{200} See Chapter 1.
explanation ever given as to why she would have to make this sacrifice or why he wants her to. There is simply the expectation that upon marrying Steve she will become a housewife because of social convention. Their union can only be finalized if she forfeits her superheroine status and the performative masculinity that comes with it.

No other title featuring a true superheroine archetype achieved the success of Wonder Woman, and by the end of the Golden Age, most of them had ceased publication along with most other superhero comics. The comic book industry effectively gave up on female readership in the superhero genre, taking the gendered stance that romance comics were naturally more conducive to feminine tastes. For a time, Wonder Woman creators attempted to retain the female audience by focusing on her romantic life and Silver Age stories featuring Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor on dates became more and more common. As sales continued to decline, the ongoing Wonder Woman narrative underwent a dramatic editorially mandated makeover. When faced with the choice of returning to her Amazonian homeland and losing Steve or forfeiting her mystical superpowers to remain in “man’s world”, Wonder Woman opted to become an ordinary mortal. Soon afterwards, Steve was suddenly killed by an international terrorist — effectively positioning him as a man in refrigerator — and sending Wonder Woman on a revenge mission as a non-costumed human adventurer, Diana Prince. She was joined by her martial arts mentor, an elderly, blind, heavily Asian stereotyped gentleman spy named I-ching

201 Following the conclusion of WWII, superhero comics in general declined in popularity and most were cancelled by the time of Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings and the establishment of the CCA (see Chapter 2). During this time, DC continued publication of their most popular characters: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.
202 Wonder Woman vol. 1 #179 cover dated December 1968 by Denis O’Neil with art by Mike Sekowsky
and the duo formed a team patterned after the then popular television series *The Avengers* (see Figure 56).\(^{203}\)

While the comic retained the title *Wonder Woman*, it transitioned away from the superhero milieu\(^{204}\) and into crime and spy genre stories for the remainder of the Silver Age.\(^{205}\) The globe-trotting, martial arts practicing, fashionista, super spy Diana Prince portrayed in these stories is effectively an entirely different character from Marston’s original conception or the reinterpretations of Fox and others in all but name. While the miniskirts and bodysuits Diana wore during this era were technically more clothing than her traditional superhero uniform, the excessive focus on her body and fashion throughout this era served to hypersexualize her as much, if not more so, than Wonder Woman had been since the days that Marston and Peter depicted her constantly in bondage. Furthermore, the change in focus and attitude, combined with a return to visceral heightened violence and ambiguous moral choices seemed to pull her away from the superheroine archetype altogether, and to the extent that she

\(^{203}\) Not to be confused with the similarly named superhero comic book. The Avengers television series and its importance to the superhero monomyth will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

\(^{204}\) See Chapter 1.

\(^{205}\) *Wonder Woman* would not return to her traditional super powered incarnation until 1973, when pressure from feminist activist Gloria Steinem encouraged DC Comics to reconsider the need for a female superhero in their publication line. This was coincident with the Bronze Age of comics wherein the regendering of the superhero monomyth first began. See Chapter 4.
was still a part of the superhero genre\textsuperscript{206} at all, she seemed more akin to a different archetype, the sexpot.

**More Than a Lamp, Less Than a Refrigerator: The Sexpot Archetype and Hyperfeminine Gender Performativity**

“So, there’s the Bechdel test. I’ve got another test that works just as well. The Sexy Lamp test. If you can take out a female character and replace her with a sexy lamp, YOU’RE A FUCKING HACK.”

-Kelly Sue DeConnick

While the covers of late 1960s comics announced her as “The New” Wonder Woman, in actuality, her transformation into a violent and sexy Kung-Fu detective was more a return to the superhero monomyth’s pulp roots and an attempt to resurrect a female archetype that had fallen out of favor during the Silver Age. While the title eliminated many of the tropes associated with the superhero genre, it arguably offered her greater access to the superhero thematic paradigm than constrictive definitions of superheroine femininity during the Silver Age had allowed her. By 1968, the fourteen-year-old CCA, based on a Hollywood Production Code two decades older than that, seemed terribly dated. In the midst of second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution the excessive subservience of the kid sister and the marriage obsessiveness of the sweetheart and girl sidekick seemed preposterous to even the most socially conservative of readers. Wonder Woman — and the few truly independent superheroines that had tried to follow in her mold — had not fared much better, even without Marston’s confusing messages of dominance throughout submission. CCA sexuality regulations combined with the perpetual publication model’s mythic inconsupability\textsuperscript{207} had created a superhero genre convention that was by its very nature stagnant.

\textsuperscript{206} Arguably under many definitions, such as those set forth by Coogan and Busiek (see Chapter 1) she was not part of the superhero genre at all at this point.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
Since the predominantly male creators of the Silver Age saw the trappings of the female characters as directly connected to the prescribed gender roles of the Golden Age, it seemed logical that escaping them would mean adapting some of the tropes associated with the sole archetype that had always actively resisted them, the seductress. Thus, as the Silver Age gave way to the Bronze, the superhero comics returned to exploring their final feminine archetype, the *sexpot*, essentially repurposing the seductress as a superheroic protagonist.

Though it fell out of fashion during the Silver Age, the *sexpot* archetype has its origins in the Golden Age. Much as Superman inspired a number of derivative characters from both DC Comics and other publishers, attempts were made to duplicate Wonder Woman’s success with other warrior women including Miss America, Black Canary, Liberty Belle, Black Cat, and the Blonde Phantom. None replicated the widespread success of Wonder Woman. I would argue that this lack of success derived from the way femininity was portrayed, which was in opposition to the superhero monomyth’s thematic paradigm. If the superheroine focuses on marriage rather than serving the social good, then she cannot remain independently autonomous. If the sweetheart and girl sidekick cannot perform masculinity through feats of violence as well as a male superhero, she cannot match his superhero economy value and falls into superprostitution. While the kid sister avoids the superprostitution trap by forgoing hypersexuality, it comes at the cost of her independence. The seductress maintains her agency but forfeits any dedication to the social good. The *sexpot* is the female archetype that allows predominantly male creators to

---

208 The male superhero’s relationship with the sweetheart or girl sidekick is based on the classic monomythic goddess’s metaphoric representation of goodness, but the superhero thematic paradigm insists that the superhero must place his devotion to serving the community through masculine action as his primary concern. Preserving marriage as an end goal that is continuously just out of reach maintains masculinity’s position of power over femininity. Since the superheroine was often coded as hyperfeminine she was in the paradoxical position of possessing superior masculine violence power than normal men, while at the same time being positioned as the submissive partner in her romantic relationships.
maintain a female character’s autonomy and prosociality while gaining violence power and establishing her ability to perform masculinity by paradoxically increasing her sexual power and feminine performance.

Like the seductress and the male superhero, the sexpot grows out of the tradition of pulp fiction hardboiled crime and adventure stories. In the beginning of the Golden Age, before any of the archetypes were formalized, many female protagonists fell into the femme fatale mold. Much like the early appearances of Batman, Superman and other Golden Age übermensch heroes, early female protagonists were quick to invoke violence and frequently deadly when they did. At the same time, they were typically hypersexualized in appearance to an extent that matched and or even surpassed their hyperviolent tendencies.

One of the earliest sexpot examples in superhero comics is Sheena, Queen of the Jungle (see Figure 57), the title character of a comic strip created by Will Eisner and Jerry Iger for the first issue of *Wags*, a British comics anthology tabloid in January 1937, more than a year before the Golden Age appearance of Superman. Beginning in September 1938, these comics were reprinted by United States publisher Fiction House in *Jumbo Comics* #1. Sheena is the beautiful daughter of explorer Cardwell Rivington. Rivington, apparently a single parent, brings his young daughter on an expedition to the unchartered African

![Figure 57: Sheena in Jumbo Comics vol. 1 #78, 1945](image)

---

209 Cover dated January 1937, by Will Eisner and Jerry Iger with art by Mort Meskin, all working jointly under the pseudonym “W. Morgan Thomas”, a name Eisner and Iger chose “to give it a more literary affectation” (Madrid 34). It should be noted that in the years that followed Eisner and Iger had a falling out and would dispute each other’s contributions to the Sheena character, each claiming credit and insinuating that the other had little influence on her creation (Schumacher 316).
continent. There the white Rivington befriends an African witch doctor named Koba and teaches him English. When Rivington finishes his work and announces his departure, Koba — inexplicably jealous that the explorer is leaving and abandoning him — poisons Rivington with a “magic potion” killing him. Grief-stricken over what he has done, Koba then raises Sheena as his own daughter, teaching her the ways of the jungle, and pronounces her queen of his tribe who begin worshipping her as a goddess because of her pale skin.210 There she rules until adulthood when another white explorer, Bob Reynolds, happens upon the tribe and the two fall in love. Sheena takes Bob as her “mate” and the two live together in the jungle as adventurers, protecting her tribe and the local wildlife from a succession of enslavers, poachers, and enemy African tribes.

Sheena is clearly patterned as a female version of Tarzan, the then popular pulp hero of a series of novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs starting in 1912 and adapted in comic strips in 1929.211 However, the tradition of “jungle girls” in pulp magazines predates Burroughs’ 1912 *Tarzan of the Apes* by several years. A similar character, Rima the Jungle Girl, first appeared in W. H. Hudson's 1904 novel *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest* and would later resurface in various pulp stories before eventually being acquired by DC Comics in the 1970s. Rima is a beautiful woman gifted with the ability to speak to animals who is discovered amongst the indigenous people of South America — called Indians in the novel. Upon meeting the protagonist, Abel, she falls in love, but the virginal and childlike Rima is confused by the

210 Sheena comics, much like the jungle pulp novels that inspired them, were heavily plagued by colonial and racial stereotypes that were somewhat outdated even by the time of their original publication. Africa, is depicted as a dangerous, exotic, and unexplored continent, far removed from the modern world. African natives in Sheena comics are primitive and uneducated though always fascinated by the beauty of Sheena’s white skin and “corn colored hair.”

211 See Chapter 2.
unfamiliar feelings that sexual attraction creates. Sheena’s co-creator Will Eisner notes that she was also in part inspired by the character Ayesha, also known as “She Who Must Be Obeyed”, in H. Rider Haggard’s 1886 novel *She: A History of Adventure* (Heintjes). Ayesha is an immortal sorceress who rules over a fictional African tribe of cannibals known as the Amahagger. Ayesha is fierce, deadly and decidedly hypersexual, using her beauty to achieve her goals by enrapturing men and is quick to kill those who cross her. Like Sheena, Both Rima and Ayesha are beautiful Caucasian women who are prized among the dark-skinned indigenous natives because of their lighter complexions. However, where the benevolent Rima’s narrative is largely a love story, Ayesha serves as the antagonist of her novel. Sheena is an amalgamation of the two concepts. Like Ayesha she is the ruler of her tribe by virtue of little other than her skin tone. Though she lacks Ayesha’s supernatural powers, she is a fierce combatant, with savage strength honed from a lifetime in the jungle, who kills without fear of consequence when threatened. However, like Rima, Sheena is decidedly benevolent though not less immature and naive.

Unlike the superheroines, however, Sheena does not practice implied chastity. She and Bob are incontestably lovers, living together in her jungle treehouse, in a relationship that is understood to be sexual. Sheena refers to Bob as her “mate,” a term that Madrid argues denotes that she “was not a virgin goddess living in the wild, but a passionate creature willingly engaging in what could be presumed to be animal sex” (43). Furthermore, Madrid notes that Sheena is the dominant partner in her relationship, not only by being physically stronger and possessing greater capacity for violence power, but also by continuously saving Bob from damsel-in-distress peril. While Sheena clearly loves her mate, she is distinctly non-feminine by 1940s standards in

---

Iger disputes Eisner’s claims, saying that Sheena was entirely inspired by Tarzan and that he named her in reference to an anti-Semitic slur, “sheeny” (Heintjes).
her demeanor towards him. She is stoic and cold and in effect mirrors the hardboiled male heroes of other pulp stories. Unlike Steve Trevor, Bob Reynolds does not wish to possess Sheena or domesticate her. Instead, he happily serves as her submissive boy sidekick.

Furthermore, her sexual availability is advertised by the artwork. Sheena comics were rendered in the good girl art style, a tradition began in 1930s pulp magazines (see Figure 58). Comics art historian Ron Goulart notes that “the term refers not to magazines that control virtuous girls but rather to those featuring good drawings of attractive women” (5). Indeed, Goulart notes that many of the comics that featured good girl art during the 1940s featured evil hypersexualized villainess like Madam Satan who were “a forerunner of the destructive femme fatale of the Forties film noir” (24-37). The style, popular with adolescent and young adult male readers particularly during WWII, was designed to mimic glamour pin-up models, sometimes colloquially called “cheesecake” with form-fitting but revealing clothing, provocative poses, and on overemphasis on the buttocks, legs and breasts of the female model. As comics of the 1940s moved from a pure focus on prepubescent children as

---

213 As would be expected provocative pinup posters and magazines were popular with young male soldiers during WWII as were comics and pulp magazines. As the war continued, the use of good girl art increased dramatically on the covers of comics and pulps and the trend continued for some time after the war. Good girl artwork was so popular that WWII Allied Forces planes were often decorated with it as nose art, in particular the work of *Esquire Magazine* cartoonist and painter Alberto Vargas.
readers to marketing towards adolescents and pinup hungry GIs stationed abroad, the good girl art style flourished to attract the male gaze.

The buxom, blonde Sheena was indicative of this trend. She was typically clad only in a tight leopard-skin leotard or minidress with a neckline that exposed her cleavage to the navel and pushed the boundaries of 1940s decency standards even further than typical comic book seductresses. Sheena was a testament to the male gaze. Not only was her clothing revealing, but she was also often drawn such that her breasts were in danger of falling out of it. When she was fighting, she was posed to present her breasts or butt to the reader. She would provocatively straddle vines or trees and strip to swim nude in the jungle rivers with Bob. Like Wonder Woman, whenever she was captured, she was typically tied up in a manner evoking BDSM and whenever she was knocked unconscious, she would somehow land in a manner that evoked sexual ecstasy. Sheena’s capacity to yield violence power paired with her hypersexual attitude and scopophilic presentation granted her a sort of female masculinity while at the same time being undeniably female despite veering from conventional gender standards.
Fiction House’s successful Sheena formula was replicated by countless other publishers who created their own similar “jungle girl” comics, including Rulah the Jungle Goddess, Nyokah the Jungle Girl, Kara the Jungle Princess and Fantoma, Mystery Woman of the Jungle. The basic aesthetic set by Sheena even influenced the glamour photography that good girl art derived from with legendary pin-up Bettie Page donning a jungle girl costume in some of her most iconic photos (see Figure 59). However, none of the other jungle girls reached the continuing level of success of Sheena who was published continuously from 1937 until 1953 when the implosion of the Golden Age began.

The sexpot archetype was not limited to the jungle girls. One of the most notable sexpots of the Golden Age was the adventurer known as Phantom Lady. Originally drawn by Sheena co-creator Will Eisner, Phantom Lady first appeared as a backup feature of Police Comics #1, published in 1941 by Quality Comics (see Figure 60). In her earliest appearances, Phantom Lady was more superheroine than sexpot. She was secretly Sandra Knight, socialite daughter of a senator and fiancée to Don Borden, an agent of the US State department. Whenever

__________________________

214 Cover dated August 1941 by Arthur Peddy with art by Will Eisner.
she encountered crime, Sandra donned a yellow leotard and green cape and transformed into the mysterious Phantom Lady. Her early stories gave no origin or motivation for Sandra’s vigilante activity; they simply relied on the tropes standardized by characters like Batman and the Shadow to assume that readers understand that the wealthy sometimes began secret crimefighting careers. Unlike Batman, however, Phantom Lady rarely engaged her villains in direct physical confrontation in her early appearances. Though the narrative captions claimed that she was a gifted fighter, typically she beat her foes through subterfuge and confusion, blinding them with her primary weapon, the black light projector, a flashlight that emitted darkness. Many of her adventures involved her rescuing Don from damsel-in-distress situations. However, even in these stories, Phantom Lady generally only distracted the villains with her black light projector and allowed Don to punch them and knock them out. She would then quickly leave the scene to return home and resume her Sandra Knight persona so that Don could regale her with tales of his adventures for which he is unaware she was present. As a superheroine, she was thus more limited in value for violence power than her male sweetheart.

---

215 Although Phantom Lady does not wear a mask, or even glasses as Clark Kent does to differentiate himself from his Superman alter ego, no explanation is ever given for why Don, or anyone else, does not recognize Sandra and Phantom Lady as the same individual.
However, in 1947, Phantom Lady switched publishers to Fox Features Syndicate and was given her own self-titled comic with *Phantom Lady* #13\(^{216}\) (see Figure 61). With the shift in publishers came a new creative team. Fox Features Syndicate’s version of *Phantom Lady* was written by Ruth Roche, one of very few women working as writers in the mainstream comic book industry of the time, and drawn by prominent good girl artist Matt Baker, who similarly was one of the very few African American artists of the industry.\(^{217}\) Roche’s stories update Phantom Lady to be a far more formidable opponent. Where originally Phantom Lady avoided direct hand-to-hand combat, she now engaged in combat quite frequently, jumping into danger, often dodging gunfire at the first sign of criminal activity. She no longer required Don as a surrogate fist during her rescues and often bested multiple larger male opponents at once. Roche’s version of the character effectively embraced the performative masculinity aspect of the superhero thematic paradigm and with it was granted far greater violence capital in the superhero economy than previously.

Phantom Lady’s enhanced violence power was accompanied by enhanced sexual power. Baker updated Phantom Lady’s design to match the good girl art aesthetic, rendering her body as far more buxom and shapelier, and replacing her yellow leotard with a blue low-cut backless halter top and a short miniskirt. Comic artist and historian Trina Robbins notes that Baker’s

---

\(^{216}\) Cover dated August 1947. The first issue of Phantom *Lady* was listed as #13 because Fox Features Syndicate cancelled an unrelated humor title called *Wotalife* with issue #12 and continued its numbering in the new *Phantom Lady* title.

\(^{217}\) While Fox Features Syndicate was being rather progressive in hiring Roche and Baker, it should be noted that neither is credited with a byline and instead Phantom Lady is simply attributed to the pseudonym “Gregory Page”. 

215
redesign was popular with female readers because his “dashing and glamorous women have a kind of forties movie star appeal. He also had a flair for fashion and paid loving attention to details of clothing and hair styles. During Baker’s all-too-brief life — he died prematurely from a congenital heart condition — he drew jungle queens, aviatrixes, girl detectives and superheroines; they were always beautiful and strong” (72). However, Robbins acknowledges that Baker’s artwork was primarily geared towards male readers. While Phantom Lady’s fighting prowess was far more impressive than it had been previously, like Sheena, she did so while constantly playing to the male gaze. For example, Baker frequently positioned her now enhanced bosom towards the reader. Comic panels often presented her in her lacy bra and panties as the readers were now given ample opportunities to observe Sandra changing from her civilian guise into her superheroic one, something that previously happened off-panel as it did for nearly all male superheroes. Sandra now found herself tied up in bondage with relative frequency. Though she had escaped the trappings of superprostitution within the narrative and gained a far greater ability to wield violence power, it came at the cost of selling her body even more to the male gaze of the reader.
A frequent complaint about the depiction of female characters in superhero comics is that they are always, as Stasia says, “heterosexually attractive” (238). In actuality, they are more than just attractive; they are often unnaturally hypersexual. Particularly in the Modern Age of comics, in order to highlight their impossible bodies and attract the male gaze, superheroines and other female characters are often drawn with exaggerated proportions, unnaturally large gravity-defying breasts, and flesh exposing costumes. Artists pose them awkwardly to focus attention on the chests, buttocks and legs. In 2014, Marvel Comics commissioned veteran comic erotica artist Milo Manara to paint a variant cover for a relaunched *Spider-Woman* series that featured the heroine, clad in skintight spandex, crawling across a rooftop in a provocative prone position that seemed impossible for a human spine (see Figure 62). Outrage by fans and online media outlets led the company to cancel the cover soon after it was announced. Similarly in November 2016, Marvel cancelled a variant cover, painted by artist J. Scott Campbell, for the first issue of a series featuring their new African American female character Ironheart over concerns that the image, with the character’s hips seductively tilted and wearing stretch pants and a midriff baring crop top many readers felt was inappropriate and too sexually objectifying for a female character written as being fifteen years old.

---

218 That is, after 1985, see Chapter 4.
219 Variant covers are limited edition runs of a comic book with alternate cover artwork designed to serve as special collectors’ editions. Frequently, they are drawn by popular artists hired only for the cover and differing significantly in style from regular artists drawing the interior pages of the book.
In each of these cases the pushback from the fandom occurred because of the problematic history that superhero narratives have had portraying female characters as pure objects of the male gaze. Criticism within superhero fandom will sometimes refer to the sexy lamp test, a term coined by Kelly Sue DeConnick — best known as the writer of the superheroine comic Captain Marvel and the feminist dystopian science fiction comic Bitch Planet. DeConnick first mentioned her test in a 2012 interview, arguing that, “if you can replace your female character with a sexy lamp and the story still basically works, maybe you need another draft. They have to be protagonists, not devices” (Hudson).

DeConnick’s “sexy lamp” is a reference to the 1983 film A Christmas Story where the protagonist’s father wins a novelty lamp shaped like a woman’s leg in a fishnet stocking and high-heeled shoe in a crossword puzzle contest (see Figure 63). The sexy lamp is a key story element to develop the father’s character. To the mother’s chagrin, the father prominently displays the lamp in their living room window for others to see, as he believes that it is a “major award” celebrating his “mind power.” He revels in the status that owning the sexy lamp grants him with other men. When the lamp is ultimately destroyed, he mourns it and solemnly buries it in a private funeral. To the father, the lamp has become a woman in a refrigerator.

Figure 63: Sexy Lamp from A Christmas Story (1983)

---

220 This version of Captain Marvel, owned by Marvel Comics, is a distinct character from the Captain Marvel discussed in Chapter 1. Marvel’s version, Carol Danvers, was first introduced in 1968 as sweetheart of yet another character with the name Captain Marvel. In 1977, the character was promoted to girl sidekick status as Ms. Marvel. Finally, in 2012, DeConnick revamped the character yet again to transform her into a full-fledged superheroine, adopting the Captain Marvel name.
For DeConnick, the flaw in the hypersexualized female character is that she possesses exactly as much agency as the *Christmas Story* lamp. Here, DeConnick echoes Laura Mulvey’s original criticism of the male gaze from her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Because the superhero thematic paradigm is only concerned with the performance of masculinity and its building blocks for femininity from the classic monomyth, as it standardized its monomythic tropes throughout the Golden and Silver ages, women were often used as plot points rather than full-fledged characters. Damsels-in-distress, women in refrigerators, and superprostitutes were often little more than furniture that set a scene or advanced the male superhero’s character development. To increase the presumed sexual value of a sweetheart or girl sidekick, and therefore the masculinity of the male superheroes to whom she was attached in a predominately visual medium, the ability to attract the male gaze was often more important than character development.

The sexpot seeks to avoid this lack of agency by increasing both her violence power and sexual power. While this at first seems paradoxical given that the other female archetypes use sexual power only for its exchange value, here it is an attempt to utilize the male gaze to undermine the assumptions that it typically presents within the superhero monomyth and heteronormative culture in general. In his book, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown investigates the assumption that performative violence in action movies is only acceptable as a male coded quality. Brown argues that the assumption that utilization of violence power as inherently male “limits the acceptability of toughness as a legitimately feminine characteristic” (47). While Brown acknowledges that the utilization of violence by an action heroine is a performance of masculinity, he adds that a character’s masculine performance does not necessarily preclude their simultaneous feminine
performance. He extends the theories of Judith Butler, arguing that the male gaze is disrupted by the contrariness of the hypersexual action heroine. Brown believes that hyperviolence leads the observer to read the performer of the violence as male or “men in drag” in Butler’s parlance. However, by over-exaggerating the heroine’s female characteristics, the audience is positioned to be constantly reminded of the heroine as a woman.

To accomplish this cinematic action, heroines often find themselves exhibitionistically playing towards the male gaze by fighting in lingerie, high heels, and otherwise impractical costuming as well engaging in unrealistically erotic fight choreography. Sometimes, such scenes extend beyond fight choreography and blatantly play towards the scopophilic gaze of the camera.

In the 1996 action film Barb Wire\textsuperscript{221}, star Pamela Anderson is first introduced as the eponymous character by spending more than four minutes of the film’s one-hundred-minute runtime dancing on a slow-motion erotic striptease (0:00:50-0:05:02). The camera focuses on Anderson peeling off her latex dress, repeatedly caressing her own nude breasts and sensuously rolling around on a bar dance floor while she is sprayed with a continuous stream of water and champagne to the delight of dozens of adoring male onlookers. However, she suddenly interrupts her performance to hurl a stiletto shoe across the room impaling a patron who has committed the unforgivable sin of calling her “babe” and rendering him unconscious. This opening scene serves several purposes. Obviously, it sets the tone for the film’s level of camp and unapologetically exploitive nature. The audience is immediately positioned to objectify Anderson’s body as a sexual object

\textsuperscript{221} Barb Wire was based on a 1994 comic book series of the same name. While the comic’s bounty hunter adventuress was already firmly entrenched in the sexpot archetype, the Anderson’s film portrayal exaggerated her hypersexuality even further. Some of these changes were then reflexively adapted back into the comic series.
before they are given any other characterization or plot elements to react to for an uncomfortably long period of time. However, once she is established as a performative sexual object, she displays her violence power as well by attacking a man who has chosen to objectify her. Barb’s resistance to the word “babe” is a key point of the film. Being objectified in this manner repeatedly causes her to attack the men who use the term throughout the narrative, even though she often invites sexual objectification in other situations. Her use of the fetishized women’s shoe as a weapon, combined with the flesh-exposing, dominatrix-inspired wardrobe of latex and leather bodysuits she adopts for the duration of the film serves to permanently tether her violence and sexual power together (see Figure 64). One cannot be considered without the other.

Of note here is what Brown calls the “striper” heroine, a common archetype in the action movie genre. Like comics, action movies are a visual medium. As such hyperfemininity is often encoded visually and in this case through the spectacle of excessive male gaze, presenting the heroine as a stripper, dominatrix, sex worker or otherwise hypersexually aggressive woman. As Brown states,

The sexualized body of the stripper heroine that is always abundantly shown naked and dancing (or in the case of the Blonde Justice films, actually having sex) is meant to be understood by audiences, and in fact is, as ideally female despite whatever strong actions she may take to protect herself from harm. In the stripper revenge films (and most other films with strong female leads) the heroine’s body is so heavily coded as feminine that it overrides the masculine connotations of “triumphant self-rescue.” In other words, rather than being masculinized by performing traits such as self-reliance and toughness, these films—as exploitive as they are—argue that such traits are accessible to “heroes” of either gender. (125-126)
Sexpots like Sheena and Phantom Lady were effectively the Golden Age’s attempts to break this same gender binary within superhero comics. If the base currency of the superhero monomyth is violence power, then female characters may only be seen as equal to males within the narrative if they have equal access to that currency; they must be able to perform violence in order to inhabit the thematic paradigm as übermensch\(^{222}\) protagonists. In the simplified ideology of the superhero monomyth, as Connell suggests,\(^{223}\) the performance of masculine violence makes the presumed heteronormative male reader cast the character as male. Thus, as with Brown’s stripper heroines, this hypermasculinity must be overcome with hyperfemininity. In the action film, the hyperfemininity need not be sexual. Again, as Connell notes, the Western patriarchal construction of gender equates domesticity to femininity as well as sexuality. Indeed, in their independent work on the action film genres, Brown and Stasia both point to Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2* and Ellen Ripley of *Aliens* as women who epitomize femininity in their otherwise masculine hero roles through their portrayal as devoted mothers (see Figure 65). In both cases, the female protagonists retain their femininity through their devotion to the protection of their children, John and Newt\(^{224}\) respectively, despite the decidedly athletic and non-traditionally feminine bodies of the actresses that portrayed them. However, because the independent

\(^{222}\) While the term is typically translated as “superman” mensch is gender neutral in the original German and has a connotation of “human” more than “male”.  
\(^{223}\) See Chapter 2.  
\(^{224}\) Though Newt is not Ripley’s actual daughter, a key element of the plot revolves around Ripley serving as a surrogate mother to the young girl as a substitute for the loss of her own daughter.
autonomy element of the superhero thematic paradigm eschews familial life, the options for domestic femininity are limited for the female superhero. With relative few exceptions, motherhood was not seen as a viable status for active superheroines in comics until the twenty-first century. Instead, the sexpot traditionally served as the female archetype best suited to offset the presumed maleness of violence by performing femininity through blatant exploitation of her impossible body. Her hypersexuality combined with her hyperviolence allows her to value both aspects of currency on the sex/violence exchange above her male counterparts. However, as Stasia suggests, she is only problematically able to do so through subjecting herself to the male gaze of the reader. In effect, she has traded freedom from diegetic superprostitution for subjugation in the extradiegetic one.

As he had with Wonder Woman and Batman, Wertham took special note of the sexpot characters in *Seduction of the Innocent* because of the transgression of what he saw as appropriate gender and sexuality standards. Though he never mentions Phantom Lady by name, he includes a good girl art cover of her by Matt Baker as an example of how the prominence of her breasts combined with the insinuation of bondage might entice young readers towards “sadistic” — that is BDSM fetishistic — sexuality (see Figure 66). He calls Sheena “man-hating” (88) with no rationalization, referencing her specifically by name on five occasions and several more times by reference to jungle girls in general, not only because of her hypersexuality, but expressly because her penchant for violence and her

Figure 66: *Phantom Lady* vol. 1 #17, 1948

---

225 See Chapter 4.
physical superiority to men might entice young girls to have inappropriate notions of proper female behavior towards boys. Accordingly, the regulations that the CCA introduced in response to Wertham effectively prohibited the existence of the sexpot archetype throughout the Silver Age. Thus, with the cancellation of the good girl art titles featuring sexpots, the neutering of the power of the superheroine, and the elimination of the seductress as a viable villain during the time period when the tropes that defined the genre were being entrenched, the sweetheart, kid sister and girl sidekick became the most viable avatars of femininity within the superhero monomyth; all three were definitionally inferior to the men they served.
Chapter IV: And Then There was Sex: Evolving the Superhero Monomyth

Of the four commonly accepted ages of comics, the beginning of the Bronze Age is probably the hardest to pinpoint. Whereas the Golden Age began with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* #1, and the Silver is generally considered to have started with the establishment of the CCA, the Bronze Age is characterized by a gradual shift towards the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s when comic creators endeavored to create more mature and socially aware content in accordance with contemporary societal standards while still adhering to the CCA. Comics of the era attempted to directly address issues including drug abuse, racism, the Vietnam war, gender inequality and the sexual revolution. While the early ages of comics codified the basic tropes of the superhero genre, the latter half of the twentieth century allowed for its maturation as literary form. The versatility of the thematic paradigm allowed the superhero monomyth to adapt to cultural shifts outside the industry which ultimately evolved the tropes of the genre. However, the strength of the thematic paradigm allowed the superhero monomyth to resist mythic consumption and ultimately evolve into the dominant model for heroic narratives in American popular culture.

If the Silver Age was defined by strict adherence to the patriarchal and heteronormative values of the CCA model, the Bronze Age was characterized by creators’ attempts to subversively work around those dated norms and the Modern Age by outright ignoring them. The initial rejection of the CCA began quietly during the Silver Age. While the Big Two and other mainstream publishers were beholden to the Code, some creators like Robert Crumb, Aline

---

226 Golden, Silver, Bronze and Modern. See Chapter 1.  
227 Marvel and DC Comics. See Chapter 1.  

225
Kominsky, Harvey Pekar and Trina Robbins, who grew up reading comics prior to the CCA, strove to craft content free of restriction. Their magazines, popularly known as
*underground comix*, were self-published or produced by smaller independent and limited run presses. Crumb, the most famous of the underground comix artists, idolized the horror and crime comics like those produced by the now defunct EC Comics. He produced titles like Zap Comix (see Figure 67) which were a complete rejection of Code standards. Rather than toning down elements of sexuality and violence, Crumb intensified them to absurd vulgarity. He used obscenity to comment on cultural and social ideas and questions that were prohibited in the mainstream comics media of the time. However, because underground comix did not feature the Comics Code seal of approval, they could not be sold on conventional newsstands and instead were distributed at head shops, street vendors, and rock and roll concerts. They directly addressed, without demonizing, more mature issues that resonated with the 1960s youth subculture, including Vietnam war protests, feminism, drugs, and queer sexuality. While the underground comix movement never posed any serious threat to the market dominance of the major comics publishers — certainly not to the extent of the romance, crime, and horror comics of the Golden Age — they were not without their influence on writers and artists working on mainstream titles.

228 Lacking a reliable distribution channel for his comics, Crumb sold early issues of *Zap* by himself, by walking the streets of San Francisco, pushing copies in a baby carriage, and selling them to passersby.
While publishers like DC and Marvel offered greater prestige, wider readership, and better pay to their creators, the Underground allowed for greater creative freedom. Crumb and the other Underground creators mostly avoided superheroes, often working with biographical material or surrealist humor. Mainstream comics creators yearned to explore the topical issues about which their underground counterparts wrote. While misguided, Wonder Woman’s depowering during the late 1960s was an attempt to explore the feminist movement and make her more palatable to contemporary audiences by both positioning her to encounter relatable problems, and breaking the conventions that had trapped her in the confines of acceptable superhero gender performance in the first place. However, the mod era Wonder Woman’s failure to connect with its intended female audience was evidence of a lack of understanding of the superhero narrative as myth rather than genre. While the depowered Wonder Woman maintained the aspects of the thematic paradigm that connected it to the superhero monomyth, she violated the mythic gestalt previously established for the character. The mod fashioned mortal Diana Prince of the late 1960s was as much of a superhero as any other sexpot archetype character, but aside from the title on the magazine, she was unrecognizable as Wonder Woman. She no longer seemed to be the same character. In Eco’s terms, Wonder Woman was consumed and Diana Prince no longer seemed to be part of the same myth.

This is not to say that character progression within the superhero monomyth is impossible. As previous chapters have detailed, characters like Batman, Superman, Catwoman and Lois Lane dramatically updated their motivations and personas over time. In fact, for a superhero narrative to thrive over several decades, Stan Lee’s illusion of change was

\[\text{229 See Chapter 3.} \]
\[\text{230 See Chapter 1.}\]

227
The ability to maintain this illusion while adapting to outside cultural changes is both reliant on the mythic gestalt and paradoxically also makes that gestalt possible. This circular synergy resists mythic consumption and ultimately allows the superhero thematic paradigm to remain current.

**A Titan for All Seasons: The Superhero Monomyth Grows Up**

“Dear, Bruce... I guess it's time for me to move on. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do if I'm not allowed to help you anymore. Alfred doesn't need to worry about entertaining me and taking care of you, too. You don't want a partner. And you don't need a son. I'm sorry I failed you. I won't forget everything you've given me. Thanks for teaching me how to be strong. —Dick”

-Robin, *Robin: Year One*

Though sexuality was the Code’s greatest restriction and one of the most common themes explored by underground comix, it was pushback against other restrictions that ultimately led to the superhero monomyth maturing to the point that sexuality could be addressed. Since the Code, by design, forced comics to target a preteen demographic, the superhero narratives which filled those comics throughout the Silver Age tended to be focus on juvenile motivations and themes. At the same time, the perpetual publication model, and the illusion of change locked the status quo of most superheroes, severely limiting any character progression. In effect, superheroes throughout the Silver Age mostly remained emotionally stunted and by the 1970s remained locked into a maturity level prescribed by the increasingly outdated ephebiphobic fears of the grandparents of the children at which the comics were now targeted. As such, the Silver Age almost entirely failed to address any meaningful societal changes that occurred during the period. To remain relevant to the social issues that concerned the later generation, the superhero monomyth needed to mature.

---

231 See Chapter 1.
While the illusion of change resists modifications to the mythic gestalt, it does not preclude them. Massive deviations from the mythic gestalt are often rejected by the fandom, as was the case with the electric Superman\textsuperscript{232} and the depowered Wonder Woman.\textsuperscript{233} However, changes to the status quo can be accepted and even welcomed if they appear to be organic progressions of the fictional canon narrative. This allows the superheroic protagonist to remain in sync with changing real world social norms. Indeed, some characters have adapted their mythic gestalts so much over time that their current incarnations bear little surface resemblance to their first appearances. This evolution is possible because real-life cultural shifts eventually forced the modification of the Comics Code during what came to be known as the Bronze Age of comics. The Bronze Age is defined more by the way it challenged the Silver Age genre norms than any specific event. Whereas the Silver Age promoted a childlike subjective morality mired in ephemiphobic fear and conservative values, the Bronze Age strove to address the concerns of a younger generation while still existing within the CCA framework.

For most monomythic superheroes, the perpetual publication model’s illusion of change keeps the character locked at the same apparent age indefinitely to avoid mythic consumption.\textsuperscript{234} Even if a superhero’s comic is cancelled and he is not published for decades, if he later returns, he typically ignores the passage of time, even though the shared universe’s canon has progressed

\textsuperscript{232} See Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{233} See Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{234} See Chapter 1.
in the interim. In the Big Two, only DC Comics’ Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman comics have been in continuous publication since the early Golden Age. In that time, all three have updated with changing cultural norms, but as of 2022 each remains relatively recognizable in basic appearance, apparent physical age, and general demeanor to their earliest appearances. At the same time, one DC superhero best illustrates the evolution of the superhero monomyth from the Golden Age through the Bronze by gradually adapting to changing cultural influences while maintaining his mythic gestalt. In his eighty-year publication history, Dick Grayson, also known as Batman’s original sidekick Robin, provides a roadmap of the multi-age evolution of the superhero genre. Alongside his friends the Teen Titans, Dick has evolved with the comic book superhero genre nearly since its inception.

There are exceptions to this rule. As noted in Chapter 1, Captain America’s mythic storyline requires aging of some characters, such as Peggy Carter, to place him in relative distance from World War II despite the apparent continuity difficulties this causes from their earlier interactions with other characters. John Byrne’s 1989 satirical superheroine comic Sensational She-Hulk, which stars fourth-wall-breaking characters metatextually aware of their status as comic book characters, lampshaded this concept, postulating that characters aged in real time whenever their adventures were not being published but were immortal while they were. Thus, supporting character Louise Mason, who had last appeared as the twentiesomething Golden Age sexpot Blonde Phantom in 1949 now appeared to be a woman in her sixties.

Few other comic characters outside of the Big Two can claim this distinction either. While not a superhero, Archie Comics has published at least one title featuring the Archie Andrews character continuously since 1941. A rare superhero example outside of the Big Two, The Phantom (see Chapter 1) has been in continuous publication as a newspaper strip and in various comics and adapted media since 1936.
Bill Finger and Bob Kane introduced the Golden Age Robin in April 1940’s *Detective Comics* vol. 1 #38, less than a year after the debut of his mentor, Batman (see Figure 68). Dick Grayson is the prepubescent son of trapeze artists who are killed by gangsters when the circus owner refuses to pay into a protection racket. Batman agrees to train the orphaned boy so they can avenge the Graysons’ murder. Dick’s background as a circus acrobat makes him an ideal student. After the duo track down the murderers, Batman offers Dick the opportunity to return to the circus. However, Dick refuses because “Mother and Dad would like me to go on fighting crime, - and as for me… well… I love adventure!” (12). Thus, Batman, as Bruce Wayne, adopts Dick and makes him his permanent sidekick, Robin. From this point on Dick progresses through the classic monomythic stages alongside Batman. However, unlike his mentor, Dick would mature beyond his original appearance as the character evolved along with the superhero genre.

In Robin’s earliest appearances he is effectively a younger version of the then homicidal Batman. Indeed, Bruce only agrees to take Dick in because he sees him as a kindred spirit; both of their parents were murdered, and Bruce recognizes and respects the boy’s need for vengeance. When Batman and Robin confront the gangsters at a construction site for a skyscraper, Dick is directly responsible for at least four of the men falling to their apparent deaths. Neither Batman nor Robin seems concerned for the criminals they push from the tower and the narrative makes no expository note of what happens to the gangsters after they fall. Because the criminals are running an extortion racket, they are evil and in the simplistic morality of Golden Age Batman,
illegally acquiring wealth is an unforgivable sin. However, over time Robin would be used to temper Batman’s darker tendencies adding youthful levity and humor to their vigilante adventures.

Indeed, throughout the Golden Age, Robin served as a counterbalance to Batman’s darker nature. While Robin’s origin mirrored the familiar orphaning for many superheroes of the age, and he began with a similar quest for vengeance to Batman’s, the two partners quickly adopt complimentary personalities to create narrative synergy. For Batman, crimefighting was serious business and he was fiercely dedicated to the heroic mission, following a strict moral code of behavior, except when tempted away by one of his seductress villainesses. Conversely, Robin, was more high-spirited and light-hearted. He was quick-witted and provided comic relief with his dialogue during battle. As a prepubescent boy, he was immune to the coquettish manipulation of the seductresses. While he shared Batman’s devotion to the social good, Robin was also heavily motivated by the excitement that being a superhero provided. More so than Batman or his other adult counterparts, Dick Grayson reveled in the joy of being a costumed adventurer.

Robin’s exuberance for superheroing made him a perfect reader surrogate. Because he was of the approximate age as the target reader, Dick Grayson, like Billy Batson before him, provided greater opportunity for wish-fulfillment fantasy. Unlike Captain Marvel however, Robin did not transform into an adult to fight crime. Instead, Robin was a youth who

---

237 See Chapter 1.
238 Often Catwoman. See Chapter 3.
239 Dick does not state his current age in Detective Comics #38, though he does state that he had been performing with the circus since the age of four (3). Due to the inexactness of the DC timeline and the comics’ use multiple histories (see Chapter 1), various later comics have placed the beginning of his career as Robin at anywhere from age eight to twelve.
240 See Chapter 1.
was still allowed to function within the adult superhero world. Furthermore, because he was able to physically best the same villains Batman battled, he appeared to have his own hyperviolence capital in the superhero economy. Unlike Jimmy Olsen, Lois Lane or other supporting characters, Batman and Superman typically respected Robin as a junior associate rather than an inferior and he was rarely the subject of superdickery. While he was occasionally captured, Robin was just as likely to rescue Batman and the elder hero was always appreciative for Robin’s assistance. Robin was proof to the young reader that it was possible to be superhero without waiting to grow up or relying on magic or otherworldly origins. In this way, Dick Grayson allowed the reader entry into Batman’s world.

The Batman and Robin formula proved so successful with younger readers that other Golden and Silver Age superheroes replicated it. Bachelor superheroes adopting young boys in their civilian lives to serve as sidekicks to their costumed alter egos became commonplace. Teen superhero sidekicks became so popular that in 1965 DC Comics decided to feature them in a joint team up comic. Created by Bob Haney and first appearing in the anthology comic *The Brave and the Bold* vol. 1 #60 before being spun-off into their own self-titled series the following

![Figure 69: Teen Titans vol. 1 #1, 1966](image)

---

241 See Chapter 2.
242 Superdickery towards Robin did occur in some instances, typically when Batman was under the influence of a mind-controlling villain. However, this was far less frequent than the abuse that Jimmy Olson, girl sidekicks and sweethearts faced, and Robin was often responsible for saving Batman from whatever villain was psychically controlling him. This effectively served to raise Robin’s superheroeic value rather than lower it.
243 Cover dated July 1965, with art by Bruno Premiani. Robin, Kid Flash and Aqualad had also teamed up (without Wonder Girl or Speedy) in *The Brave and the Bold* vol. 1 #54, cover dated July 1964, also by Haney and Premiani. This prequel of sorts is also often called the first Teen Titans story, though the team’s name is never used.
year (see Figure 69), the Teen Titans teamed Robin with three other three boy sidekicks — Aquaman’s Aqualad, Green Arrow’s Speedy, and Flash’s Kid Flash — and Wonder Woman’s kid sister Wonder Girl to engage in superheroic adventures without their adult mentors. The four male Teen Titans all followed the basic formula of an orphan adopted by an older bachelor male superhero — save for Kid Flash, who was the nephew of the Flash’s sweetheart Iris, but otherwise functioned in the same manner. All were well-meaning youths with powers that duplicated those of the mentors they idolized. They spoke in colloquial slang, or at least what seemed to pass for that in the minds of the middle-aged writers. All five shared Robin’s enthusiasm for the adventure of superheroing. The cover of the first issue of their self-titled series underscores this enthusiasm by proclaiming “they just couldn’t wait to start their own mag!” They represented youth as passionate, if somewhat reckless.

In the beginning, most Teen Titans stories followed a simple formula. The Titans receive a hotline phone call from teenagers in a Middle American town being menaced by a supervillain. The Titans then ask their mentors for permission to leave on a “special teen mission”. This request establishes that the Titans, while capable of acting independently, still respect parental authority and pose no ephebiphobic threat. The Titans then arrive on scene to find that the town’s adults disparage their children as lazy and disrespectful. Similarly, the teens mistrust their controlling and out-of-touch parents. However, the presence of the supervillain overshadows the generational conflict. The Titans then overcome the supervillain, often enlisting the aid of the

---

244 Teen Titans vol. 1 #1, cover dated February 1966 by Bob Haney with art by Nick Cardy.
245 The first appearance of the team featured only Robin, Kid Flash, and Aqualad. Wonder Girl was added in their second appearance in The Brave and the Bold #60 (cover dated July 1965, also by Haney and Premiani). Speedy appeared with the team for the first time in Teen Titans vol. 1 #5 (cover dated August 1966, by Haney with art by Nick Cardy) and functioned as an occasional part-time member for several issued before eventually joining the team full-time.
local teens to fight alongside them. Once the villain is vanquished, the parents express newfound respect for their children’s bravery and social responsibility. In this way, early *Teen Titans* comics present a Werther Effect\(^{246}\) map arguing America’s youth need not be at odds with the older generation, so long as their social values are mostly aligned. At the same time, the stories assure parents that, while they might express their passions differently, teenagers can still demonstrate good moral fiber if given the chance.

At the same time, the series strove to address what the middle-aged creators imagined were the changing priorities of 1960s youth culture. In addition to the generational rift over teen independence, early issues focused on topics like the Peace Corps, high school dropouts, rock and roll, and the mod subculture. Curiously, the Titans were so devoted to pursuing their social missions through performative violence, autonomous from their mentors — in effect embodying all parts of the superhero thematic paradigm\(^{247}\) — that they began to abandon traditional tropes of the superhero genre. Most notably, the team never appeared outside of their costumes or used their real names in their early adventures. For all intents and purposes, at least within the *Teen Titans’* narrative, their superhero identities were their only identities. This was a shift in focus across superhero comics of the Silver Age. Whereas Golden Age superheroes were ordinary men — reporters, businessmen, and soldiers — who put on the guise of hero, the Titans represented a new breed of superhero for whom adventuring was their primary profession as it had been for the heroes of classic myth. The identity outside of superhero was largely immaterial.

---

\(^{246}\) See Chapter 1.  
\(^{247}\) See Chapter 1.
The privileging of the superheroic identity was best illustrated by Wonder Girl, whose mild feminist presence on the team was progressive for the Silver Age, but also highlighted the fragility of superhero canon. *Wonder Woman* comics began publishing Wonder Girl backup stories\(^\text{248}\) in 1958. These comics featured flashbacks Wonder Woman/Princess Diana during her youth.\(^\text{249}\) However, because Haney wished to have a female presence on the team and DC’s options for appropriately aged female characters at the time were limited, Wonder Girl’s backup feature ceased and she was added to the team with the retconned explanation that she was a distinct character from Wonder Woman, her kid sister, and always had been.\(^\text{250}\) Since she was no longer Princess Diana, and the Titans only referred to each other by their superhero names, the Wonder Girl appearing in *Teen Titans* had no secret identity for the first several years of her independent existence. Coincidentally, Wonder Woman underwent her depowering for the Diana Prince era\(^\text{251}\) less than four years after the younger Wonder Girl’s introduction. To maintain her place in *Teen Titans*, Wonder Girl suddenly needed an independent backstory. Thus, after Wonder Woman’s depowering, Wonder Girl was given the secret identity Donna Troy,\(^\text{252}\) however she still had no interaction with her elder sister. In fact, Donna did not appear in the main *Wonder Woman* comic until 1980, sixteen years after her introduction as a separate character and Diana’s theoretical sidekick. Therefore, despite technically being a kid sister archetype, Wonder Girl was not saddled with the typical parental oversight of her male teammates or other kid sister characters. Her independent autonomy allowed her to effectively

\(^{248}\) Backup stories are shorter comic features included in a non-anthology comic devoted to another character.  
\(^{249}\) Superman had similar comics published as Superboy.  
\(^{250}\) This created many continuity problems in later years as the illusion of canon became more important and the inconsistencies in Wonder Girl’s origins across multiple stories was questioned. The multiple histories theory, and Mark Waid’s hypertime (see Chapter 1) has been employed by writers repeatedly over the years to try and clean up the character’s backstory.
function as a solo superheroine archetype within the *Teen Titans* series. Beginning in 1969, Donna would adopt a new Wonder Girl costume (see Figure 70). While not pushing her into sexpot archetype territory, the new outfit was more formfitting than her previous kid sister attire. It highlighted her figure, and her previous adolescent ponytail was let out to reveal long flowing raven locks. Moreover, the new outfit was visually distinct from that of Wonder Woman’s, thus further establishing her as a superheroine with an identity separate from her mentor. Over time, the changing of costume in this manner would become an important rite of passage for each Teen Titan.

Unlike most Silver Age superheroines, Wonder Girl was not overshadowed by her male teammates. Haney quickly established Wonder Girl as the physically strongest Titan. Where Wonder Woman had often been sidelined by the Justice Society, Donna was an equal member of her team. In her first appearance in *Brave and the Bold* #60, as she flies off to join the other Teen

---

251 See Chapter 3. This also created continuity problems as the ongoing storyline of the *Wonder Woman* series required all the Amazons to abandon Earth forever with no contact with Wonder Woman, however Wonder Girl somehow remained in communication.

252 In *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #22, cover dated August 1969, by Marv Wolfman with art by Gil Kane and Nick Cardy.

253 In *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #22 (see above) and #23, cover dated October 1969, by Bob Haney with art by Gil Kane.

254 Robin would eventually grow into the adult hero Nightwing. Speedy would adopt the name Arsenal. Kid Flash would graduate into replacing his mentor as The Flash. Aqualad would evolve into Tempest. Each of these identity changes would be accompanied by a costume change that shifted them away from their sidekick origins. Donna Troy would undergo this process multiple times as she would also adopt the superheroic identities of Troia, Darkstar, temporarily Wonder Woman, and eventually adventuring under her given name with no dual identity at all.
Titans, her mother Queen Hippolyta warns “be careful, Wonder Girl… despite your Amazon powers -- you’re just a girl amongst male super-heroes” (emphasis in original). Donna replies “oh, mother, stop babying me! I can do anything any boy can do -- and better!” (5) (see Figure 71). Like other kid sisters, Wonder Girl was not forced to trade on her sexuality to enter the superhero economy; she possessed her own violence power and did not shy away from utilizing it, even against male opponents. Donna was not used as a damsel-in-distress and was as likely to rescue her male teammates as the other way around.

Though Wonder Girl’s relationship to the male Titans was progressive for the era, she could not entirely escape the Code’s mid-twentieth century gender norms. While she spurned male superiority, she was nonetheless fascinated by female gendered hobbies that the boys rejected including sewing, dancing, and fashion. Supporting characters constantly remarked on her beauty. Teenage boys complimented her, and girls feared she might tempt their boyfriends to stray. Wonder Girl had a flirtatious relationship with each of her male teammates, who affectionately referred to her as “Wonder Chick”[255] and she eventually settled into dating Speedy, though their on-again-off-again relationship remained relatively chaste in accordance with CCA guidelines. Their romance, like the Titans’ social activism was only

---

[255] The male Titans began referring to Wonder Girl as WG or Wonder Chick during the period when she had no other name and continued using those nicknames once her Donna Troy alias was adopted. Though the Wonder Chick sobriquet was clearly meant to be flirtatious and slightly sexually suggestive, it was intended to be affectionate rather than disparaging as it would appear in later years.
possible so long as it did not violate the ephebiphobic fears that necessitated the adoption of the
Code in the first place. No sexual intimacy was ever depicted or even implied.

While the sexlessness of Donna and Speedy’s relationship was indicative of the
restrictions that faced mainstream comics under Silver Age, Speedy would come to mark the
transition point to the Bronze Age for another reason, drug abuse. As previously noted, rather
than a specific comic issue, or a response to a specific real-world event, the Bronze Age is
marked by a gradual shift towards more serious and mature content. While the Titans’ early
missions were decidedly prosocial, progressive, and serious in comparison to slapstick
superdickery adventures of their contemporaries, they were still limited in the topics they could
address. Not only was sexual intimacy never depicted, but other topics prescient within sixties
youth culture were also ignored. Most notably, the CCA entirely forbade depiction or discussion
of drugs in any way, even as cautionary tales. This meant that comics — and therefore the
superhero genre — were unable to accurately approximate the youth experience during the 1960s
heyday of the sexual revolution and drug counterculture.

In 1970, representatives of the United States Department of Health, Education, and
Welfare, under the direction of President Richard Nixon, asked Marvel Comics publisher Stan
Lee to write a story addressing the drug crisis. Stan responded with a three-issue story in The
Amazing Spider-man vol 1. #96-98\(^{256}\) wherein Peter Parker discovers that his roommate, Harry
Osborne, has become addicted to unnamed pills which cause him to behave violently and
delusionally. Eventually Harry overdoses, prompting Peter to confront the drug dealers without
first changing into his guise of Spider-man. As always, masculine violence is the primary capital
available to the superhero, and thus Peter’s only way of addressing a problem. The story ends

\(^{256}\) Cover dated May-July 1971, with art by Gil Kane.
with Harry recovering in the hospital. Even though the narrative unequivocally paints drugs as dangerous, the CCA rejected the story. Nonetheless, Lee published the three issues without the CCA seal of approval, the first comics to do so since the Code’s adoption two decades prior. The Spider-man storyline was well received and in response, in 1971 the major publishers decided to update the CCA guidelines for the first time in seventeen years.

The 1971 revision of the Comics Code attempted to update regulations to meet contemporary social sensibilities while maintaining the CCA’s strong moral messaging. The original 1954 code never specifically mentioned drug use, only stating that “criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation” and that “all elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited” (Nyberg 166-167). The CCA originally argued this prohibited all recreational drug use depiction. The 1971 revision was far more detailed, explicitly allowing their usage in stories that do not “encourage, stimulate or justify the use of such narcotics or drugs,” and never “stresses, visually, by text or dialogue, their temporarily attractive effects,” or “suggests that the narcotics or drug habit may be quickly or easily broken” (172). This meant comics could now address the drug counterculture in cautionary tales where the effects of drugs were shown to be negative. In August 1971, only a month after the conclusion of the drug storyline in Marvel’s Amazing Spider-man, rival DC Comics was able to address the drug culture in their own code-approved comic.
In *Green Lantern* vol. 2 #85-86, while trailing a gang of drug dealers, Green Arrow and Green Lantern discover that Arrow’s adopted ward Roy Harper, also known as the Teen Titan Speedy, is addicted to heroin. Under the new Code the drug references are far more explicit than those that appeared in the controversial *Spider-man* story only a month earlier; the first issue’s cover clearly depicts the teen hero with drug paraphernalia preparing to inject himself (see Figure 72). Furthermore, the physical and emotional consequences of drug abuse are dealt with more viscerally within this story, by detailing the pain associated with Roy’s detoxing as well as the toll that it takes on his relationship with his adoptive father. When Green Arrow discovers Speedy has become an addict, Arrow strikes his ward in the face, underscoring the importance of masculine violence in the superhero thematic paradigm. The elder hero sees drug addiction as a moral failing, telling the younger that he is “a lousy *junkie* -- no better than the rest of the sniveling punks!” (*Green Lantern* vol. 2 #86 1, emphasis in original). When the strung-out Roy blames his father’s self-righteousness and neglect as the impetus for his addiction, Arrow throws him out of the house.

Here Bronze Age complexity deviates from the relative simplicity of Silver Age superheroics. Green Arrow experiences a crisis of masculinity. He strikes out against his son because his Silver Age sensibilities are unable to see any other solution to the problem. Violence

257 Cover dated September-November 1971, by Dennis O’Neil with art by Neal Adams. The series is also sometimes known as *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. As Green Arrow did not have his own comic at the time, O’Neal began featuring him as a co-lead in the *Green Lantern* title, even altering the cover logo to read “Green Lantern co-starring Green Arrow” for the duration of the 1970s. However, the publication indicia of the comic was never changed to reflect this, and as such the comic’s official name remained *Green Lantern*. 

241
power is the only means available to him for conflict resolution and his black-and-white moral ideology has little room for nuance. After banishing Roy from his home, Arrow briefly questions his own parenting skills, thinking, “was it me? Did I somehow fail the kid? I haven’t paid him much attention lately!” before quickly absolving his own guilt “but he shouldn’t need attention -- at his age! No, I’m innocent of blame -- I’ve always taught him to be strong…independent! -- To hang tough!” (Green Lantern vol. 2 #86 2, emphasis in original). Here Arrow specifically notes the importance of two-thirds of the thematic paradigm: independent autonomy and performative masculinity. However, conflict resolution through performative masculinity has failed him. Rather than care for his son during the traumatic crisis, Green Arrow chooses to hunt down the drug dealers who supplied the heroin. Roy spirals even further until he receives compassionate help from Black Canary, Green Arrow’s sexpot girlfriend, to detox.

Roy’s ordeal highlights two important changes to the superhero genre that occurred in the Bronze Age. First, problems now exist that violence alone cannot solve. Roy’s recovery requires care coded in traditionally feminine values rather than masculine combat prowess. Second, the story ends with Green Arrow and Speedy now at odds with each other. Feeling abandoned by his father figure, the teenager moves out. Rather than resetting to the status quo, their relationship fundamentally changes. From this point on, Roy ceases being a major supporting character in Green Arrow’s stories. However, Roy’s recovery — including occasional relapses — becomes a focal point of his character development in his further adventures. Green Arrow is plagued by his failures as a father, thus affecting his future relationships. It takes several years of comics for the relationship between Speedy and Green Arrow to be rebuilt, and even then, it is never the same. The Roy Harper who emerges from the heroin storyline is a fundamentally different character than the one who entered it. His mythic gestalt is updated. This implied that in the Bronze Age,
character progression and growth were now possible without violating Eco’s mythic inconsumability. In this way, the illusion of change ceased being illusory. Even though the perpetual publication narrative forces the collapse of time within their mythic world, the Teen Titans were now allowed to grow up with the readers.

Another way in which the Teen Titans and the superhero monomyth matured in the Bronze Age was in their treatment of race. While the 1954 Code contained no explicit rule against depicting non-white characters, the CCA tended to lean on the blanket provision that prohibited elements “not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency” (Nyberg 167) to enforce a de facto segregation in the name of societal standards. This is to say, that while the 1954 Code prohibited “ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group” (167), the CCA at the same time used the Code as an excuse to reject any storyline they saw as disruptive to the status quo of what they deemed socially unacceptable for children.

One of the earliest challenges to the Code came from EC Comics — the company most cited by Wertham in Seduction of the Innocent. EC’s publisher William Gaines had always seen his comics as adult fare and testified as such at the same United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearing that heard Wertham and resulted in the creation of the CCA. Many of the child-friendly regulations of the 1954 Code were targeted specifically towards EC’s crime and horror themed titles and with these stories neutered of their traditional content, EC’s sales plummeted. In 1956, Gaines reprinted “Judgement Day”, a racial awareness allegory he

258 See Chapter 1.
259 See Chapter 2.
260 Incredible Science Fiction vol. 1 #33, cover dated February 1956. Originally printed in Weird Fantasy vol. 1 #18 cover dated March 1953.
had first published 1953, just before the code was established. In the futuristic sci-fi story, an Earthborn astronaut travels to an alien planet to offer membership in a galactic alliance. Upon arrival, the astronaut is dismayed to find the alien races practicing appearance-based discrimination. The astronaut returns home deciding that the aliens are not ready to join his enlightened society. On his spaceship, he removes his helmet to reveal that he is a black man and ponders how intelligent beings can cling to appearance-based prejudices (see Figure 73). When Gaines submitted the issue for CCA approval, it was rejected, and he was told the comic could be approved if the final panel were redrawn to reveal the astronaut as a white man. Believing such a change would rob the story of any meaning, Gaines refused and published the story as-is. This was the final traditional comic book EC would publish; unable to gain distribution for their more mature stories without CCA endorsement, EC’s comic division was forced out of business, and served as a cautionary tale to the other publishers. Because the Comics Code went into effect in 1954 and remained unchallenged until 1970, mainstream Silver Age comics essentially ignored the bulk of the American Civil Rights movement.

The original Titans, like most Golden and Silver Age superheroes, were all visibly Caucasian. Even Aqualad, who hailed from the underwater kingdom of Atlantis and was not

---

261 EC’s satirical Mad Magazine which, while including comics content, was in a large format that was accepted as a non-comic periodical was not subject to the CCA. EC continued to publish Mad Magazine until the company was sold to Kinney National Company, predecessor of WarnerMedia in the 1960s, who continues to publish it to this day.
technically human at all, was rendered as a typical white male adolescent. As the comics industry eased into the Bronze Age, the Teen Titans added two African American characters. However, both were relegated to subordinate character status to the main characters, effectively serving as sidekicks to sidekicks.

Mal Duncan, DC Comics’ first black superhero, was introduced in 1970 in Teen Titans vol. 1 #26. Mal was a teenaged boxer, who became involved with the Titans and eventually joined their ranks. While Mal diversified the team far beyond what the title had presented up until that point, in many ways he seemed quite dated by the time of his debut. Marvel Comics introduced the first mainstream black superhero, the Black Panther in 1966, followed by the Falcon in 1969 after the Civil Rights Movement was already well underway. By the time DC Comics followed with Mal in 1970, civil rights leaders Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had already been assassinated, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had already been passed, and — while racism was still certainly a large topic of discussion — the United States had moved on to a more nuanced stage of race relations than Mal’s token existence was designed to address.

Mal Duncan, and other Bronze Age black crimefighters, strengthened the link between superheroism and performative masculinity by underscoring it with the cultural stereotype of the angry black male. Black superheroes, like all others were committed to the thematic paradigm; they felt a personal responsibility to serving their social cause through masculine violence. For

262 There is some debate in comics fandom as to who DC’s first black superhero was. Some cite Black Racer (1971) or Green Lantern John Stewart (1972). Mal is often ignored because, as he premiered without powers, a traditional costume, or codename, he fails the MPI framework test. However, he falls well within both the superhero milieu and thematic paradigm, and as such is included here.
263 Cover dated April 1970, by Robert Kanigher with art by Nick Cardy.
264 Fantastic Four vol. 1 #52, cover dated July 1966 by Stan Lee with art by Jack Kirby
265 Captain America vol. 1 #117, cover dated September 1969 by Stan Lee with art by Gene Colan.
the black superhero, that social cause was almost always defending blackness. However, in the hands of white writers with little direct experience with the actual Civil Rights Movement and still working under the simplified morality codes enforced by the CCA, the implementation of that defense of blackness was simplistic and reductive. The black superhero’s purpose was to prove his own value, and transitively that of the black community. Since value within the superhero monomyth was defined only by the capacity for violence, this meant continuously trying to establish his worth through hypermasculine performance. Since black male bodies are already culturally fetishized as a hypermasculine stereotype, the hypermasculine performance of the black superhero seemed exponentially enhanced. Mal epitomized this trope. He was angry, brash and spoke in exaggerated 70s jive-slang, aggressively confronting any problem with a right hook. He had no alter-ego, wore street clothes rather than a costume, and possessed no powers beyond his boxing training. He was not the ward of a more established older hero. He was simply an aggressive young black man determined to use his fists to fight for justice (see Figure 74).

However, paradoxically Mal was also plagued by self-doubt and an inferiority complex towards his white teammates. His primary function in his earliest adventures was to prove his worthiness of being on the team. His lack of superhero uniform and codename is initially explained by Mal himself claiming that he feels he has not yet earned it. This further drives him to enhance his hypermasculine performance to gain superhero capital. His inferiority complex extended beyond his white colleagues to his white opponents. Supervillains often overlooked
him as a non-threat. While this was auspiciously due to his lack of superpowers, Mal’s teammates Speedy and Robin were also ordinary humans and never seen as inferior in this way. The few other prominent Bronze Age black superheroes — Black Panther, Falcon, Green Lantern John Stewart, Black Lightning, and Luke Cage — followed a similar pattern. The defining trait of 1970s superhero blackness was anger at the mistreatment from whites.

*Teen Titans* was suddenly cancelled due to low sales in early 1973, and Mal — being unassociated with any established adult superhero — failed to appear in any other titles. When the comic returned in late 1976, the explanation for Mal’s absence was that he had been given the task of maintaining the Titans’ equipment and headquarters, while his white colleagues disbanded and pursued their independent interests. Mal, as an angry black man, voices his displeasure at being reduced from team member to custodian, saying “some team! You guys coulda dropped me a post card or something’! Sure -- you were busy -- but I never heard from anybody!” (Levitz and et al. 2, emphasis in original). Even once Mal acquires a high-tech exoskeleton granting him enhanced strength and the costumed identity of Guardian, he continues to think of himself and be treated by others as an auxiliary member of the team, constantly deferring to the original members. As the sole representation of blackness on the Teen Titans team, and for a time throughout all of DC Comics, Mal presented a singular role for African American superheroes: striving for equality that could never be achieved amongst white peers.

In *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #45, Mal is joined on the team by a second African American, his girlfriend Karen Beecher aka Bumblebee. Although Karen possesses her own superpowers of flight and shrinking, she nonetheless is treated primarily as a girl sidekick to the less powerful

---

266 With issue #43, cover dated February 1973 by Bob Haney with art by Art Saaf.
267 *Teen Titans* vol. 1 #44, cover dated November 1976 by Paul Levitz and Bob Rozakis with art by Pablo Marcos.
268 Cover dated December 1976 by Bob Rozakis with art by Irv Novick.
Mal. As both black and female she is positioned as even lesser amongst the team and has no real narrative beyond fleshing out Mal’s character as his racially appropriate romantic interest. Teen Titans was cancelled again with issue #53 in a story where Mal and Karen read a flashback to days before they joined the team. After Mal and Karen marvel at their white compatriots’ early adventures, the rest of the team explains that they have decided to disband again to follow their own paths as young adult heroes. Mal and Karen are not given a vote, nor afforded the opportunity to continue the Titans without the white members, all of whom return to their mentors’ books, leaving their black friend in narrative limbo. Even in these explicit attempts to diversify the team, a racial hierarchy remained clear.

A second attempt to diversify the team occurred in November of 1980 when writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Perez relaunched the series with The New Teen Titans vol. 1 #1 (see Figure 75). In this new series, Robin, Wonder Girl and Kid Flash, now in their late teens or early twenties, are joined by new teen heroes: the shape-changing Changeling, other dimensional psychic Raven, alien princess Starfire, and the half-machine man Cyborg. Unlike the original Titans, these new members are not sidekicks to established adult superheroes, but rather simply teens looking to find their

Figure 75: The New Teen Titans vol. 1 #1, 1980

269 Cover dated February 1978 by Bob Rozakis with art by Juan Ortiz.
270 Aside from the three original Titans who remained with the team, only Changeling had any preestablished history. Previously known as Beast Boy, he had been a member of another superhero team, Doom Patrol, and was an occasional guest in the original Teen Titans series. The other three characters were created expressly for this series.
way. This puts Robin, Kid Flash and Wonder Girl, all of whom were raised in the superhero business, in the position of serving as mentors to a new generation. Over time other young heroes would join the ranks and on occasion original members Aqualad and Speedy would return.

The new team was explicitly multicultural, or at least what passed for that in the Bronze Age superhero world. The roster included the African American Victor Stone, aka Cyborg, as well as two members with unnaturally inhuman skin tones, the green Changeling, and the orange Starfire. Unlike Mal, Victor did not seem to view himself as inferior to his teammates or feel the need to prove his worth. The team did not other him because of his blackness. In some ways this was enhanced by the inclusion of Changeling and Starfire who also lacked the ability to pass as Caucasian. Similarly, Raven, though white in appearance, was raised in another dimension and had trouble fitting in because of her lack of understanding of human social cues. Nonetheless, Cyborg’s race, and his experiences with society at large because of it, were a major aspect of his character. He was subject to the same racially discriminatory treatment as any other black man of the era. Victor often faced discrimination not levied at Starfire or Changeling despite their inhuman appearances. This was exacerbated by the cybernetic machinery that was grafted to his body, further disconnecting him from humanity. In some respects, this enhanced his hypermasculinity. Moreso than any other Titan, Cyborg was visibly an impossible body, even when not actively engaged in combat. He was a living weapon, built for combat and therefore possessed superhero capital at all times. However, this also removed any possibility of maintaining a secret identity. Therefore, Cyborg saw himself as a monstrous freak and was

---

271 The original series of *Teen Titans* also added occasional new members to the roster, including Lilith, Gnarrk, Hawk and Dove, Hornblower, and Bumblebee. However, the core team always focused on the original five sidekicks.

272 Starfire is particularly of note here. Previous alien superhuman characters, like Superman, were typically rendered as conventionally white-passing.
ostracized by the regular people he encountered. His fondest wish was acceptance, not by the other Titans, but by humanity. He became a greater allegory for the struggle against racism than Mal had ever been, albeit still a problematic one. There was an implication that he could never be fully accepted as human because he no longer was. No matter how much superhero violence capital he possessed he could never punch his way through the problem of prejudice.

Rather than pushing moral allegory, or bridging the ephebiphobic gap, Wolfman and Perez’s *The New Teen Titans* focused on the interpersonal relationships that youth built within their own subculture and their attempts to reconcile that culture with world around them. While their superheroic adventures still contained metaphors for social issues like racism, sexism, sexuality and drugs, the Titans also faced these threats directly. Unlike the Silver Age incarnation where the characters appeared almost exclusively in costume, the Titans now spent an equal or even greater amount of time focusing on their secret identities and personal lives. They casually referred to each other by their first names: Robin was Dick, Wonder Girl was Donna, and Kid Flash was Wally. Cyborg, Changeling, and Starfire were usually referred to as Victor, Garfield, and Kory. Like many close-knit teen peer groups, they became a makeshift family, sharing a communal headquarters that recalled a college dormitory. Appearances by the adult mentors were infrequent. Whereas the original series tried to show that teens could develop individuality while remaining deferential to their adult authority figures, by positioning the team as “on their own,” *The New Teen Titans* recognized youth culture as both distinct from the elder generation, and responsible unto itself and thus viable in its ideological differences.

---

*Raven’s actual name was Raven, and she was referred to as such. She would not receive a civilian identity until she adopted a fictitious alter ego, Rachel Roth, decades later.*
Despite the Bronze Age’s increased focus on social awareness, under the 1971 Code mainstream superhero comics’ capacity to address social issues remained limited compared to their Underground Comix counterparts. Bronze Age writers were often either afraid to fully embrace sensitive or were unsure how to do so within Code standards. After the initial stories, Harry Osborne and Speedy’s drug addictions were only referenced via vague references to “their ongoing personal problems” or similar euphemisms. Few other characters had any direct experience with narcotics at all. Marvel Comics’ magical superhero wizard Dr. Strange appropriated psychedelic imagery from hippy subculture as early as his first appearances in 1963 (see Figure 76), but never acknowledged a direct connection to drugs. Editor Roy Thomas outright rejected any drug connection in a 1971 Rolling Stone interview claiming, “people who read Doctor Strange thought people at Marvel must be heads [drug addicts], because they had had similar experiences high on mushrooms. But Stan [Lee]’s pretty straight, and I am too, pretty square, not to the point of being completely ignorant of such things, but obviously I don't use hallucinogens, nor do I think any artists do. Probably if they did, they wouldn't do any work at all” (qtd. in Green). Even supervillains eschewed illegal drugs as a means of profit, focusing on crimes like robbery and terrorism instead.
This apprehensive treatment was common for sensitive topics during the Bronze Age. Despite the addition of characters like Mal Duncan and Cyborg, race was only addressed only sparingly until well into the 1970s and even then, mediated with almost apologetic storytelling as white authors struggled to express black experiences without alienating young white readers. The assassinations of civil rights leaders Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and John and Robert Kennedy were never addressed by any Big Two comic, even though all four had appeared in Bronze Age stories beforehand. A 1972 *Fantastic Four* comic\(^\text{274}\) featuring Marvel’s first black superhero, the Black Panther, attempts to address South African apartheid, through its depiction of Rudyarda, a fictional segregated nation attempting to steal Afrofuturistic technology from Black Panther’s own Wakanda. However, Black Panther defends his nation, but paradoxically changes his name to Black Leopard to avoid negative political affiliation with the controversial American civil rights party of the same name, expressly stating that his name and identity are less important than American — and implied White — discomfort (Maverick 68).\(^\text{275}\) Superhero comics, which had actively promoted patriotism during World War II and the Korean War, all but ignored the Vietnam War. Where Golden Age creators had used their comics to boldly express political opinions, the Bronze Age creators had to proceed cautiously. The Code maintained that legal and government authority should be respected and that good must always triumph over evil (Nyberg 171). However, by the 1960s and 1970s, the youth culture being marketed to was growing increasingly wary of the traditional authorities the Code argued must be beyond reproach. Increasingly, the creators found themselves unable to address issues where the sides of good and evil were not necessarily clear.

\(^{274}\) *Fantastic Four* vol. 1 #119, cover dated February 1972, by Roy Thomas with art by John Buscema.

\(^{275}\) I deconstruct this storyline at length in my chapter “Wakanda Forever! (Except for That One Time...)” in the essay collection *The Ages of the Black Panther*.  

252
In a rare exception to Bronze Age apprehension, Captain America did allegorically address the Watergate scandal in 1974.\textsuperscript{276} In the story, Captain America battles the evil Secret Empire, which is attempting to use supervillains to take control of the U.S government. Captain America tracks the villainous organization all the way to the White House, where he confronts and unmasks the enigmatic leader of the Secret Empire, an individual only known as Number One. It is implied, though never outright stated or shown, that Number One is in actuality American president Richard Nixon, who then immediately commits suicide in disgrace (see Figure 77). The Code mandated that good must clearly triumph and evil must always fail. Thus, in Captain America comics rather than a complex political espionage scandal and coverup, this president was actively engaged in clear treason. Captain America was able to confront him in physical combat, much like the Black Panther could with the military forces of Rudyarda. Because the superheroes comics of the Bronze Age were still tied to the thematic paradigm, they remained constrained by limits of performative masculinity. Superheroes were unable to deal with any problems that they could not punch.

\textsuperscript{276} Captain America vol. 1 #175, cover dated July 1974 by Steve Englehart with art by Sal Buscema.
One of the Bronze Age superhero monomyth’s greatest challenges due to its reliance on performative masculinity was feminism. While the greater visibility of female characters like Wonder Girl, Bumblebee, Starfire, and Raven strove to be more gender inclusive during the Bronze Age, the 1960s and 70s Women’s Liberation movement was relatively downplayed, and the sexual revolution was never acknowledged. *Wonder Woman* and *Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* both saw the eponymous characters attempting to become more socially aware during the early 1970s. However, in each case, the narrative tries to make feminism more palatable by emphasizing that, while the female protagonists are ambitious and self-sufficient neither wants to upset the status quo. Lois began engaging in stories not defined by superdickery as her comics frequently saw her using her journalism skills to investigate social issues. However, she remained devoted to the prospect of one day marrying Superman, implying that regardless of a woman’s career aspirations, marital domesticity should still be a primary goal. *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #203, promoted on the cover as “Special! Women’s Lib Issue” (see Figure 78), sees the then still depowered Diana Prince invited to join a feminism activist group and responding that “I’m for equal wages, too! But I’m not a joiner. I wouldn’t fit with your group. In most cases, I don’t even like women” (13, emphasis in original). This response seems incongruous, given the character’s feminist history and her origin of being raised in an all-women society. In the shadow of the homophobia aimed at Wonder Woman in *Seduction of the Innocent* nearly twenty years earlier, the character still seemed unable to embrace feminism without
unequivocally denouncing lesbianism. The Bronze Age of comics showed that the superhero monomyth could be adapted to address the contemporary concerns of the late twentieth century, but if comics were shackled by any version of the CCA, an honest exploration of one theme would remain beyond its reach: sexuality.

**I’m not that Innocent: Canon Innuendo and Fanfic Pornography**

“He's faster than a speeding bullet. He's more powerful than a locomotive. He's able to leap tall buildings at a single bound. Why can't he get a girl?”

-Larry Niven

While the 1971 Comics Code allowed creators to begin to address contemporary social issues, most of the revisions allowed for the mature themes to be addressed only if they were clearly presented as undesirable. Furthermore, the 1971 Code largely retained its restrictions against the depiction of sexuality. While the language was modernized, the Code still mandated that “suggestive and salacious illustration is unacceptable,” “illicit sex relations are not to be portrayed,” and “seduction may not be shown” (Nyberg 173-174). The Code remained vague as to what constituted these violations, leaving the discretion to the CCA review board in individual cases and the ephebiphobic fears of teenaged sex perversion remained present in the minds of the CCA board members. Thus, throughout the bulk of the Bronze Age, sexual relations between characters remained relatively unaddressed and comics remained didactic and morally conservative. However, the push to produce more mature modes of storytelling regarding non-sexual themes did directly lead into the transition from the Bronze Age into the Modern Age which completely freed comics creators from CCA oversight. Furthermore, it is my contention that the cultural shifts that led to the Modern Age — combined with fundamental elements of the

\[277\] Cover dated December 1972, by Samuel R. Delaney with art by Dick Giordano.
thematic paradigm, popular paratexts outside of the comics canon, and the constant sexual subtext that was always present within the canon narratives — led directly to the hypersexualized view of gender that pervades superhero comics today.

Sexuality presented a special challenge to superhero comics since the beginning of the Silver Age. The Golden Age firmly established both the need for performative hypermasculinity as a key element of the superhero thematic paradigm, as well as the sex and violence market exchange of superprostitution as the basis for most of the female archetypes. However the Comics Code made any real exploration of sexual behavior impossible in mainstream comics after 1954. Indeed, the 1954 Code stated that “nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure” and that “suggestive and salacious illustration, for suggestive posture is unacceptable.” Female characters were to “be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.” Finally, the storylines were limited such that “Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed”, “passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way to stimulate the baser emotions”, and “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage” (Nyberg 168). While the 1971 Code update removed many of the regulations on drugs, crime, and violence, it left the sexual restrictions largely unchanged. Though the Code restrictions were not targeted solely at the superhero comics, it nonetheless effectively forced the privileging of the sweetheart archetype over the sexpot. Acceptable femininity required a desire to preserve sexual chastity for marriage.

278 See Chapter 2.
279 See Chapter 3.
280 During the Silver Age, romance comics were popular among young female readers. The Code imperatives towards marriage and family as the desirable result of romantic encounters seems particularly targeted towards encouraging heteronormative domestic gender roles. Both the 1954 and 1971 Codes note that romance should be aimed at the ultimate goal of promoting the sanctity of marriage and family life.
Likewise, the performative masculinity of the thematic paradigm required male heroes to protect the virtue of the sweethearts, girl sidekicks and kid sisters in their charge. Proper gender performance was tantamount to the Silver Age superhero monomyth; but while the sex violence exchange structured the gender dynamics and relationships between characters, the underlying currency — any actual sexual relationships — was effectively erased from the canon.\textsuperscript{281}

Since Silver Age superheroes rarely married — as doing would domesticate them and violate the independent autonomy aspect of the thematic paradigm — they needed to demonstrate their heterosexuality through other methods. Like most other aspects of the superhero monomyth, this typically occurred through the primary currency available to them, the display of violence power. Scott Bukatman argues that superheroes “embody the displacement of sexual energy into aggression” (185). For Bukatman, the comic book superhero is necessarily juvenile. Bukatman sees the displacement of sexual energy as evidence that the superhero serves as a child’s ideal of a strong adult. In this way he recalls Jewett and Lawrence’s theories on sexual renunciation.\textsuperscript{282} However, I argue this is a misreading of the very sexual nature of the comic book superhero.

Bukatman’s displacement theory suggests that the lack of explicit evidence of superheroes in sexual congress implies a lack of interest on the part of the readers or creators. In fact, the opposite is true; throughout the Silver Age superhero comics were steeped in sexual innuendo that called for fan speculation. Since the appearance of homosexuality was one of Wertham’s chief complaints which led to the creation of the CCA in the first place,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{281} Even with the Code in effect, there were occasional references that hinted at sexual desires within the characters. For instance, many of the plots Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane and other books focused on character’s romantic desires for each other (see Chapter 3). However, the only intimacy that was hinted at or even implied between non-married characters was kissing and the end goal of marriage was always implied. \textsuperscript{282} See Chapter 1.
\end{flushright}
heterosexuality needed to be actively promoted. The existence of the sweetheart and the girl sidekick were essential for maintaining this veneer of straightness. Superheroes were often seen accompanying their sweethearts on dates and were frequently rewarded with kisses when rescuing damsels-in-distress. The concept of superprostitution was certainly implied, even if the consummation of the act was never depicted — at least not in the canon texts. However, the fandom and creators demonstrated a clear fascination to explore the sex lives of superheroes outside of the canon comics.

As early as the 1940s, superheroes were featured in *Tijuana bibles*, unauthorized satirical precursors to underground comix that featured pornographic versions of popular comic strips and magazines. Tijuana bibles were typically short, eight-page mini-comics, cheaply produced with a single panel to a page. Plot was nearly non-existent beyond getting the well-known characters into a position to have as graphic and explicit sex as possible (see Figure 79). While they were typically uncredited or produced under pseudonyms, researchers today believe many might have been produced by artists working within the mainstream comics industry on the very comics they were satirizing. Similarly, after leaving DC Comics, Superman co-creator Joe Shuster turned to illustrating pornographic fetish stories in 1950s men’s magazines featuring characters that bore a suspicious resemblance to Superman’s cast of characters. Fans speculated about the love lives of characters and noted their desires to see various romantic pairings in letters to editors, a practice that would
later be come to know as shipping. Fanfic in independently published zines has delved into the erotic realm since at least the 1960s and occasional pieces were published in erotic men’s magazines like Playboy and Penthouse. Since the rise of the Internet the prevalence of erotic fanfic has only increased. Prose, comics, and pinup fan art depicting the explicit mechanics of superpowers during sexual activity are commonplace on websites like Archive of Our Own, DeviantArt and Tumblr and the adult film industry produces frequent unauthorized erotic parodies of mainstream superhero comics and movies, with production values sometimes rivaling mainstream cinema.

Like any adaptation, the fidelity of fanfic to the canon source material varies wildly. Some erotic fanfics diverge widely from the original narratives, swapping genders, altering sexualities, romantically shipping characters who might be enemies in the canon, and even merging unrelated storylines from entirely separate fandoms and companies together to explore themes and concepts entirely absent from the originals. In particular, slash fiction — fanfic focusing on homosexual relationships aimed at the LGBTQ+ community — often ships characters with no prior canon romantic relationships, even romantically pairing superheroes with their sworn enemies, to adjust for the relative lack of queer representation in mainstream superhero narratives. Conversely, other fanfics attempt to remain as close to the original storylines as possible, maintaining character personalities and often taking meticulous steps to

283 Shipping, derived from “relationshipping”, came into usage as a term in various fandoms in the early 21st century through internet forums. However, the practice was common in fandom before then.

284 Fanfic, a portmanteau of “fan fiction”, describes fan created texts, produced without the authorization of the intellectual property owner. These works may be extended sequels or prequels, alternate storylines, mashups with other storylines. In some cases, they strive to be as authentic as possible to remain true to the original text. In other cases, as is the case with erotic fanfic, they may take great liberties with the truth copy for the artistic license of the fanfic author.

259
avoid violating the official canon while
inserting the fanfic plots into existing
narratives. This is often the case with adult
filmmaker Axel Braun whose pornographic
parody films attempt to replicate visuals and
storylines of mainstream superhero comics
and films with only minimal changes made to
the storylines in order to accommodate interludes of sexual activity (see Figure 80). While fanfic
need not be sexual or even romantic in nature, the freedom from the dictates of the CCA as well
as editorial control of the publishing companies allows the fans to explore their sexual fantasies
and kinks in ways that are otherwise unavailable. Much like mainstream superhero comics allow
readers to imagine lives free from human limitations and societal restrictions, fanfic invites them
to imagine impossible bodies engaged in sex without complication or consequence. As such,
eroticism in fanfiction is relatively common.

Perhaps the most notable Bronze Age fandom exploration of superhero sexuality is
science fiction author Larry Niven’s 1971 satirical essay “Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex.”
Unlike superhero erotic satires that focus on titillation, Niven’s parody explores the scientific and
practical aspects of Superman’s reproductive systems and speculates that Superman is likely a
virgin because the act of sexual intercourse with him — both his superhuman strength during the
act and the culmination of the event in a superhuman ejaculation — would likely prove fatal to
his human love interest Lois Lane. Niven then goes on to explore the potentially fatal concerns
of the human Lois being pregnant with a superhuman fetus, before finally speculating on the
queer possibility of Superman serving as his own surrogate, gestating an artificially inseminated
fetus inside of his own male body. While the essay is satirical, it nonetheless focuses a lens on the multiple sexual aspects of the superhuman impossible body from its functional capabilities and limitations in the sexual act, to its capacity in reproduction, and even questions the very nature of gender in the superhuman world by speculating that Superman could essentially serve as both father and birth mother to his own offspring. The essay has remained popular in superhero fandom for fifty years.

While erotic fanfics are not canon to the superhero myths they explore, they may certainly enter the head canon of the individual readers. The continued popularity of erotic fanfic from the Tijuana bibles to Internet archives suggests that some readers must reject Jewett and Lawrence’s notion of sexual renunciation entirely. Such a rejection presupposes superprostitution’s sex/violence exchange, which makes the decidedly asexual Code era superhero seem incongruous. Bethan Jones argues that pornographic parodies of popular media should be seen as *paratexts* in the same way as any officially produced supplemental material to the primary texts. According to Jones, paratexts increase the reader’s engagement with the primary text by adding pathways of interpretation. In particular, Jones claims that erotic parody of the television show *The X-files* critiques the lack of sexual representation in mainstream media by foregrounding the sexual tension between the protagonists that exists as subtext in the canon narrative and allowing the reader to enjoy a more complete vision of the diegetic world within their personal head canon. I would extend Jones’ argument to say that for the superhero

285 See Chapter 1.
286 Paratexts may include any supplemental material that exists in concert with the extant narrative of the primary text, informing the readers experience with it, but are not a part of it. Typically, officially produced supplemental paratexts to comic books might include interviews with the creators, alternate media adaptations, and non-canon stories. Unofficially produced paratexts include fanfic, satire, and criticism from scholars and fandom. Narrative paratexts inform the multiple histories theory of superhero monomyth, but even non-narrative parataxis can, and often do, affect individual reader’s head canons (see Chapter 1) and experience with the overall narrative.
monomyth, erotic parody can add to the suspension of disbelief by humanizing the characters. Because the Code approved canon texts entirely omit sexual intimacy even in instances where it realistically should be expected to occur, such as long-term romantic relationships between superheroes and their sweethearts, the porn parody serves as an important counterbalance. For the fan who finds the chaste superhero implausible, the overemphasis on eroticism in the porn parody fanfic averages out the superhero’s persona resulting in a more human and approachable mythic gestalt in the fan’s head canon.²⁸⁷

Furthermore, erotic fanfic serves to alleviate concerns the doubting fan might have about the sexual compatibility of the superhero’s impossible body. Where Niven worried that coitus with the impossible body might in some cases prove deadly to the human sexual partner, porn parody assures that reader that this need not be the case. Fanfiction not only postulates that superheroes engage in sexual activity, but also often detail the explicit mechanics of the superhuman physiology, and the ways superpowers can be used erotically. In the hands of the erotic fan fiction author, superhuman strength, flight, shape and size changing, telekinesis and other powers could all be utilized to enhance lovemaking (see Figure 81). Spectacles of supersex thus mirror the impossible body in combat. The comic book medium had always encouraged superhero masculinity to be portrayed as violent visual spectacle.²⁸⁸ In effect, the

²⁸⁷ See Chapter 1.
²⁸⁸ See Chapter 2.
impossible body’s capacity to perform supersex as spectacle in fanfic is just as indicative of that body’s superheroness as its ability to perform combat.

Continuously seeing familiar superheroes utilize their fantastic powers in new and unique ways was much of the appeal throughout the Silver Age. Performative combat was the primary way in which superheroes defined relationships between each other and with their supervillains. Seeing the superhero perform supersex in inventive ways serves much the same function. However, because the Code prohibited referencing sexual activity, the sex/violence exchange became unbalanced. Violence power, which could be explicitly depicted appeared more valuable than hidden sexual power. The superhero’s relationship with the sweetheart was clearly presumed to be sexual, but since no spectacle of performing the sexual exchange existed, heterosexual intimate relationships appeared subordinate to the homosocial combat bonding rituals of the male characters. Although sweethearts, girl sidekicks and seductresses clearly desired the male superhero’s perfect masculinity,289 there was no clear explanation as to why this was the case. The superhero’s sexual prowess, unlike his combat effectiveness, remained unproven by the narratives. Within a genre in which masculinity exists only by repetitive performance, the absence of overt indications of sexual prowess seems to imply that the superhero’s sexuality might not exist — hence Jewett and Lawrence’s theory of sexual renunciation. In contrast, the porn parodies reveal that the superhero’s impossible body makes him not only a superior combatant, but a superior lover. He is skilled and virile and capable of providing immense pleasure to his sexual partners. Similarly, even without superpowers, the sweetheart seems to excel as a lover in the porn parody. Sex is in fact the one way in which

289 Male supporting characters, like Wonder Woman’s sweetheart Steve Trevor, similarly desired the perfect femininity of the superheroine.
superhero and sweetheart appear on equal footing. Despite being mortal, she retains the sexual prowess of the classic monomythic goddess from which she is derived. In this way, the porn parody fills the gap left in the Silver Age Code approved superhero narrative. As such, the value of sex in the superhero economy is made explicit.

However, the fascination with supersex is not merely the fanciful dreams of fandom. Like the *X-files* fanfics Jones examines, Tijuana bibles, Braun’s porn parodies like Braun’s function as paratexts that extend the erotic subtext within the canon texts. While the superhero monomyth under the Comics Code prohibited explicit references to sex, the sex/violence exchange remained in effect for relations between male and female characters, particularly the superheroes and their sweethearts. Even with Silver Age Code restrictions, the existence of sexual activity was constantly hinted at within superhero narratives. Control of the sex/violence exchange was necessary to establish the superhero’s masculine value. To maintain his patriarchal position — an unstated but implied goal of the gender norm maintaining requirements of the CCA — at the top of the exchange, the superhero needed to demonstrate his sexual dominance over the feminine archetypes. Since superheroines and girl sidekicks fought by side with the superhero not only was masculine dominance clearly demonstrated through greater ability at performative violence but seeing their powers work in concert with each other left plenty of fodder for shipping by fanfic authors. This was also the case for the few seductresses that remained during the Silver Age, such as Poison Ivy and Catwoman. The seductress’s wanton attempts to corrupt the superhero away from CCA morality, and the superhero’s ability to resist underscored his masculine superiority to feminine power. Since sexpots were essentially eliminated during the

---

290 See Chapter 3.
Silver Age, this left only the kid sisters and the sweethearts as the two heroic female archetypes whose sexuality was most clearly owned by their associated male superhero.

Due to the kid sister’s innate chastity and their familial relationship, the superhero’s ownership of her sexuality seems least obvious. However, it may be the most complete instance of male dominance over female sexuality the superhero monomyth has to offer. Particularly in the Silver Age, the superhero’s relationship to the kid sister is literally patriarchal. He typically serves as her father figure, and as such seems to claim more dominion over her sexuality than she does. Along with Wonder Woman, Supergirl was one of the few female protagonists to maintain the lead position in her own title during the Silver Age. She was the featured story in the anthology series *Adventure Comics* from 1963 through 1972 when she was spun-off into a self-titled solo series. Supergirl’s earliest adventures were decidedly chaste. She was focused on finding a family to adopt her from the orphanage in which Superman placed her when she first arrived on Earth, but she selflessly placed the other orphans’ happiness above her own. Once she was finally adopted, her primary concern became trying to prove her worth as a hero to Superman. Although she first debuted in 1959, Supergirl forbade Supergirl from revealing herself to the world in-story until three years later (see Figure 82). Instead she helped him in secrecy, often subjected to superdickery under the guise of his training her to be a more

---

291 *Action Comics* vol. 1 #252, cover dated May 1959 by Otto Binder with art by Al Plastino.
292 *Action Comics* vol. 1 #285, cover dated February 1962 by Jerry Siegel with art by Jim Mooney.

Figure 82: *Action Comics* vol. 1 #285, 1962
Superman decided when and where Supergirl was permitted to use her powers and punished her for disobedience. Even after Supergirl’s existence was made public, she still served as Superman’s lieutenant rather than a hero in her own right throughout the bulk of the Silver Age. As Alex Link notes, Superman’s patriarchal oversight of Supergirl was a hallmark of the kid sister archetype during the Silver Age.

However, Superman’s patriarchal control extended beyond Supergirl’s superheroic adventures. She also subjugated her sexuality to him. Kid sister archetypes were initially asexual throughout the Silver Age. Though Supergirl initially had a very limited supporting cast consisting of her adoptive parents and Superman, over time, she developed relationships of her own. In her secret identity of Linda Danvers, she had a male sweetheart, Dick Malverne, but as idealized CCA era teenagers, their relationship remained extremely chaste. He accompanied her on dates to movies and malt shops but was far more interested in discovering Supergirl’s secret identity than pursuing intimacy with Linda. She also had other potential suitors: Braniac-5, a time-traveling teenaged superhero who lived in the 30th century; Jerro, a teen merman who lived under the sea; and Comet an ancient centaur who spent most of his time cursed to be a full horse. With narrative circumstance prohibiting any possibility of sexual encounters with any of her love interests, Supergirl’s chastity was always preserved. She was however, particularly invested in securing Superman’s marital bliss.

In a 1962 story soon after Superman permitted her public debut, a romantic movie on television inspires Supergirl not to seek love for herself, but instead to find a perfect woman for Superman.

---

293 It should be noted that while Superman did establish his dominance over Supergirl with superdickery, she was less subject to this treatment from her cousin than his mortal companions Jimmy Olsen and Lois Lane. In fact, she often assisted him in performing superdickery on his human supporting cast.

294 See Chapter 3.
her heroic cousin to wed. Supergirl leads Superman on a time travel journey, but he fails to form romantic connections with both Helen of Troy in the ancient past and the superheroine Saturn Woman of the distant future. Finally, Superman informs a dejected Supergirl — who has been drowning her sorrows by tidying Superman’s Fortress of Solitude headquarters and marking her feminine domesticity — that

> If I ever did marry it would be to some one super and lovable like… you! We can't marry because we're cousins! Though cousins can marry in certain countries on Earth… we're both from the planet Krypton, where the marriage of cousins is unlawful! (Action Comics vol. 1 #289, emphasis in original)

Oddly, Supergirl finds her cousin’s casual suggestion of incest encouraging rather than presumptuous or off-putting. She uses a computer to search the universe for a woman that has superpowers and looks exactly like her and finds one on distant planet. When she informs Superman, he flies to that planet, immediately falls in love with his cousin’s doppelgänger, and soon proposes marriage. However, the couple breaks up when they discover that the doppelgänger cannot survive on Earth. In another comic, three years later, Supergirl and Superman fall under the mind-altering influence of red kryptonite and for several days live together believing themselves to be husband and wife. Again, the incestuous undertones are clear, and while the comic does not detail any specific sexual act between the two, it leaves the possibility open for speculation in erotic fic.

Arguably, Supergirl’s earliest appearances were used to establish Superman’s sexuality identity more than her own. Supergirl is ecstatic that Superman has fallen in love with her doppelgänger and even more dejected than he is when the relationship does not work out. As a

---

295 Action Comics vol. 1 #289 cover dated June 1962 by Jerry Siegel with art by Jim Mooney.
296 Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane vol. 1 #55, cover dated February 1965 by Leo Dorfman with art by Kurt Schaffenberger.
kid sister, Supergirl is less interested in her own sexual fulfillment than securing marital happiness for her patriarchal surrogate father-figure. Whereas the Silver Age Superman represented the ideal boyhood wish-fulfillment fantasy in the minds of the middle-aged male writers, Supergirl denied that sexual fantasy to the adolescent girls while maintaining her femininity. Silver Age Supergirl was only allowed to be viewed as a sexual being under the context of serving as a suitable fantasy mate for her elder cousin. Beyond this, Supergirl gleefully allowed Superman to shroud her from the lustful male gaze. In this way Supergirl presented a notion that protecting a young woman’s virtue was the responsibility and privilege not only of her father, but of any male relative.

Conversely, the sweetheart strongly desired a marital union because of the superhero’s perfect hypermasculinity. While the superhero resisted this threat to his independent autonomy, the pair was consistently presented as a romantic couple and monogamous fidelity, at least on the part of the female sweetheart, was expected. The presumption of monogamy was less stringent for the male superhero who, because of the value of his hypermasculinity was desired by multiple women and sometimes finds himself in love triangles that effectively presented him as polyamorous. Throughout the Silver Age, Superman maintained two long-term sweethearts, Lois Lane and Lana Lang, as well as occasional brief dalliances with outside relationships like those mentioned above with Supergirl, Helen of Troy, and Saturn Woman. The presence of multiple devoted girlfriends vying for his affection was used to make him seem even more masculine and desirable. Other superheroes, like Batman, engaged in serial monogamy with a string of relationships with various sweethearts and girl sidekicks. In all cases, the male superhero was unable to commit to long term monogamy. The female superheroine, girl sidekick, and sweetheart desired nothing more. Again, the possibility of marriage was the reason Wonder
Woman renounced her powers. The tension between desire for and resistance to monogamous marriage thus became gender coded. However, this did not prevent the male superhero from performing ownership over his connected sweethearts.

In a common Silver Age plot conceit, supervillains often kidnapped the sweetheart to claim her for themselves, thus further cementing her sexual value. Matt Yockey examines the clear sexual desires of Bizarro — Superman’s doppelgänger with chalk white skin, blockish facial features appearance, broken speech patterns and mannerisms evoking early film versions of Frankenstein’s monster. As an imperfect and distorted clone of Superman, Bizarro has all the original’s abilities, but his intelligence and morality are as fractured and warped as his physical appearance (see Figure 83). However, because Bizarro shares Superman’s base motivations and desires, he sees Lois as his potential mate and proposes marriage to her, only to be rebuffed. This sets up a fight between Bizarro and Superman as Bizarro attempts to prove his value through a display of performative masculine violence. Superman reacts similarly to maintain his own value in the superhero economy by resisting Bizarro and protecting Lois. However, their powers and impossible bodies are equally matched, and no clear victor emerges. Lois then creates an imperfect doppelgänger of herself, Bizarro Lois, who immediately falls in love with Bizarro Superman and the two clones depart for deep space where they eventually settle on another planet and raise a family.
The Bizarros illustrate the sexual subtext of the Silver Age in multiple ways. Yockey directly references Bukatman, agreeing that Silver Age superheroes displace sexual energy with violence, but he notes that displaced sexual energy is displayed in other ways as well “given that Silver Age Superman stories rarely feature the kind or degree of physical violence that is a primary characteristic of superhero comics, the displaced sexual energy in these stories is rendered in different psychic terms” (65) and that any aggressive act must be examined for symbolic sexual representation. For Yockey, the consummation of the Bizarros’ relationship acknowledges the sexual relationship between Superman and Lois without violating the illusion of change and risking mythic consumption. If doppelgängers of Superman and Lois have sexual desire, then transitively the originals must as well. Furthermore, since Bizarro Lois has no superhuman powers, her ability to successfully mate with Bizarro Superman implies that the original Superman and Lois must also be sexually compatible. Thus, Niven’s fears of fatal supersex are dispelled; Silver Age Superman stories lack of explicit sexual storylines do not imply sexual incompatibility any more than they imply the sexual renunciation.

Moreover, the Bizarros’ relationship serves to solidify Superman and Lois’s relationship in the sex/violence exchange.\textsuperscript{297} As the consummate sweetheart, Lois’s attraction to Superman is firmly entrenched in his hypermasculine superiority to normal men. While Bizarro, in duplicating Superman’s powers and strength is also superior to the average man, because he is an imperfect copy of the original, Bizarro’s value is diminished. Where the original Superman resists Lois to maintain the value of his masculine violence power over feminine sexual allure, the imperfect Bizarro is willing to domesticate. However, Lois cannot accept Bizarro as a mate because his masculine value is lower than her feminine value. Only the imperfect Bizarro Lois

\textsuperscript{297} See Chapter 3.
can accept the imperfect Bizarro. Their imperfection places them on equal footing in the exchange economy. Without a need to resist mythic consumption and return for successive adventures in a perpetual publication model, Bizarro Superman and Bizarro Lois are free to wed and enjoy domesticity, something that their perfect originals cannot do but must desire given that the narrative implies their desires are identical. Furthermore, even though the original Superman is unwilling to wed the original Lois himself, superprostitution dictates that he must defend her from being claimed by Bizarro or any other lesser man.

In this way, the combat between Bizarro and Superman, is in effect a sexual act between Lois and Superman in a more direct manner than Bukatman’s sexual displacement theory implies. Superman physically consummates his love for Lois by using his impossible body in proxy combat, not because of the physiological dangers Niven suggests but rather because within the superhero monomyth the pair bonding between a superhero and his sweetheart through the sex/violence exchange is an intimate act in and of itself. The exchange cements Superman and Lois as a couple; with each rescue the sweetheart’s love for the hero grows and the superhero becomes more devoted to the sweetheart. Lois Lane’s status as “Superman’s Girlfriend” in her eponymous title was not established by a vow of commitment, a token piece of jewelry, or even their relatively frequent dates. It was established instead by his constant fighting supervillains on her behalf. Thus, the rescue became as intimate a connection between superhero and sweetheart as coitus. Supersex might or might not be presumed within the reader’s head canon, but the commitment inherent in the sweetheart rescue was undeniable. In fact, as early as the Golden Age, continuous rescue from amorous villains could be the sole foundation of a superhero and sweetheart’s relationship — as was the case with Flash Gordon and Dale Arden, who were
established as a couple purely through his continuous rescuing of her despite extremely limited face-to-face interaction throughout the first year of his comic strip.  

The pseudo-sexual foreplay of the rescue was so codified into the superhero genre that it functioned to reify the superhero and sweetheart gender roles as dominant male and submissive female sexual partners respectively. In the case of the relative few female protagonists of the Golden Age their male sweethearts took on a more passive and submissive role that challenged gender norms; but CCA-enforced gender restrictions counteracted such challenges. The cancellation of titles featuring sexpot characters such as Sheena and Phantom Lady left the Silver Age with no heroic female characters with sexual agency. Most superheroine comics were cancelled as well, and the sole notable survivor, Wonder Woman, always presented her male sweetheart as the dominant partner in their relationship, and presented herself as resenting that her powers and responsibilities as superheroine prevented her from settling down as a housewife. Since kid sisters like Supergirl and Mary Marvel were demure and chaste, often to the point of total asexuality, only the seductresses, like Catwoman and Poison Ivy, possessed sexual desires of their own, and Silver Age superhero narratives necessarily presented those urges as evil. With supersex banned and sweetheart rescue the only acceptable sexual action within the genre, female sexual agency would not be presented as a desirable trait again until a sexual revolution could occur in superhero comics. This would not occur until outside cultural forces compelled the genre to mature beyond the constraints of children’s literature that the Comic’s Code presumed.

**Emma Peel and the Pill: The SuperSexual Revolution Was Televised**

“Good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go everywhere!”

---

298 See Chapter 3.
Just as superhero comics came late to the civil rights movement and teen drug crisis, they were slow to embrace issues related to mid-twentieth century feminism and the sexual revolution. However, outside of comics, mid-twentieth century cultural changes challenged gender status quo and led to a shift in the portrayal of women and sexuality in mass media. American television and film companies attempted to adapt their decency standards governing bodies to remain current with modern sensibilities. Magazines and other print media sharing newsstand shelf space with comics prominently featured sexual headlines and cover photos. Superhero comics however, remained under the guidance of the CCA, and adhered to increasingly dated 1950s gender standards well into the 1970s. Consequently, the superhero monomyth only gradually and nigh imperceptibly began drawing inspiration from non-comic book media, where more mature themes could develop.

Attempts to normalize discussion of sexuality in public discourse had been ongoing throughout the twentieth century. Though Marston’s defense of sexual taboos and homosexuality in *Emotions of Normal People* was alternatively ignored and derided in 1928, by mid-century, biologist Alfred Kinsey’s academic studies, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), collectively known as *The Kinsey Reports*, were renowned for destigmatizing sexual behavior. Kinsey’s work, followed by the work of other sexologists like William Masters and Virginia Johnson, argued that sexual desire and enjoyment was normal and healthy among both men and women. Although Kinsey, et al. began a public dialogue about the potentiality of premarital sex it was controversial. The sexologists were frequently interviewed in publications like *Time, Life*, and *McCall’s*, but many readers viewed

---

See Chapter 3.
their work as aberrant, and the greatest acceptance came in sexual media targeted at men — most notably Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* magazine.

Most 1950s popular media continued to ignore premarital sex, and to present the consequences of sex outside of wedlock as disastrous, particularly for young women. Such depictions were largely an ephebiphobic attempt to control the behavior of the burgeoning youth culture.\(^{300}\) American television was regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) which had similar standards to the CCA Code. While TV teens were shown to date, their relationships were predominantly chaste, and affection was limited to sharing sodas and hand holding with even kissing extremely rare. Sex on 1950s television was unheard of. Even married couples on TV slept in separate twin beds. Hollywood film studios, which like Golden Age comics, had spent much of the beginning of the twentieth century pursuing sexually salacious stories, were now governed by the Motion Pictures Production Code, or Hays Code, which similarly sought to regulate morality in film. The 1950s saw an explosion of teen focused films which dealt with their romantic lives, however the Hays Code restricted premarital sex from being presented as desirable. As such, the few films of the era that depict teen girls as possessing sexual desires, such as *Gidget* (1959) or *Where the Boys Are* (1960), warn that acting on those desire will inevitably lead to rape or unwanted pregnancy.

In May of 1960, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Enovid, the first birth control pill, for public use. This approval was the watershed moment for the American sexual revolution. Premarital sex among youth had never been quite as uncommon as early twentieth century media implied. In an analysis of census data and survey information from the United States Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) National Survey on Family Growth (NSFG),

\(^{300}\) See Chapter 2.
Lawrence B. Finer and Jesse M. Philbin found that the average age of virginity loss for women in the 1940s was nineteen and the average age of marriage was twenty. By 1950, the average age of a bride had risen to twenty-one with the age of virginity loss from women falling to eighteen. After the Pill’s introduction the two statistics diverged even further. In 1960 the average age of female virginity loss fell to eighteen while the marriage age rose to nearly twenty-three. By 1970 the virginity age fell to seventeen and a half with the marriage age rising to over twenty-five (see Figure 84). Women were able to use the Pill to explore their sexuality with less fear of consequence.

Though the stigma of premarital sex did not vanish from popular media, some feminists pushed for women to take advantage of this new reproductive freedom. In 1962 Helen Gurley Brown published the bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*, encouraging women to delay marriage and enjoy the sexual pleasures single life could provide free of shame, arguing that only through experimentation would a woman be able to find a partner she truly loved rather than one for which she was simply willing to settle. In 1965, Brown became editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, a position she held for thirty-two years. Debuting in 1886, *Cosmopolitan* was originally a family magazine publishing fiction and news, but soon evolved to targeting
housewives with articles on family rearing, social propriety, and household management. By the mid-twentieth century, it had evolved into a struggling women’s magazine offering tips on dieting, beauty regimens, proper manners and finding and keeping wealthy husbands. Under Brown’s leadership, *Cosmopolitan* — or *Cosmo* as it became affectionately nicknamed — transformed into what Brown saw as the women’s counterpart to Hefner’s *Playboy*. She targeted the contemporary career woman. Articles focused on women’s health, feminism, career advancement and — continuing Brown’s earlier work on *Sex and the Single Girl* — sexual fulfillment. Whereas even mentioning sex had been forbidden in its pages only months earlier, the new *Cosmo* spoke frankly about birth control, masturbation, abortion, extramarital affairs, lesbians, and tips and techniques to increase sexual pleasure for both the reader and her lovers. Additionally, under Brown, *Cosmopolitan* focused heavily on fashion. Covers and pictorial spreads featured the latest trends, often skin revealing outfits that the previous incarnation of the magazine would have labeled obscene. This meant promoting 60s mod fashion including miniskirts, sheath dresses, and jumpsuits. Cleavage became a focal point of the photography for the covers. Throughout Brown’s tenure, *Cosmo* consistently implied a link between sexual freedom and beauty through performative femininity. For the Cosmo girl, gender freedom meant sexual freedom.

However, the magazine’s shift resulted in criticism. *Cosmo’s* promotion of sex-positive feminism appeared to imply that feminism was only acceptable if packaged in a specific aesthetic. While the magazine advanced women’s independence from men, it did so by linking her to the male gaze. *Cosmo’s* brand of feminism seemed targeted at women who wanted to be conventionally heteronormatively attractive, regardless of their reasons for wanting to appear that way. In many ways, by the 1970s, Brown’s *Cosmo* and Hefner’s *Playboy* (which began
publication in 1953, a year before the Comics Code went into effect) became complete analogues of each other; selling the same brand of consumer-based sex-positive capitalist feminism for beautiful people — one targeted at men and the other at women. But for the logo, the covers were often virtually indistinguishable: adorned with beautiful women in states of near undress, with headlines promising sexual freedom and mastery. Although both were targeted at adult readers, they were carried by the same retailers as Code approved comics, often sitting on the same shelves. By 1970, Cosmo and Playboy were routinely selling more than 4 million copies a month each, and the notion of indecent sexuality being kept from the newsstand — for which the Code was designed for — was a lost cause.

The introduction of the birth control pill also coincided with a rapid increase in American women in the workforce over the next few decades. Women’s employment outside of the home saw a steep incline during World War II as many men were deployed overseas. This phenomenon leveled off for the bulk of the 1950s but then began to rapidly climb again between the 1960s and 1990s. In 1950, only 33.9% of American women were employed outside of their home. By the Pill’s introduction in 1960, this had risen to 38.1%. Over the next several decades this figure rose quickly, reaching 43.3% in 1970 and 51.5% by 1980. It began to level off in 1990
at 57.5% before reaching its all-time high of 60% in the year 2000, nearly double of what it had been half a century before. In her own bestseller from 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan acknowledges the sexual freedom that came with the Pill but predicts that its greater significance was that it would allow future women to realize their natural career aspirations by putting the timing and circumstances of pregnancy under their direct control. With reproductive freedom came financial freedom — freedom from reliance on men for survival. Friedan’s argument seems prescient as US Census data shows a decline in marriage rate as more women entered the workforce (see Figure 85).

The most popular television programs of the 1950s presented marriage and motherhood as the goal to which a woman could aspire, with Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951), Harriet Nelson in *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952), Barbara Billingsley in *Leave it to Beaver* (1957), and Donna Reed in *the Donna Reed Show* (1958) all playing characters defined by their roles as wives and mothers. None of the many police procedurals and westerns dominating American television airwaves in the 1950s featured women in lead roles. The relative few female characters that existed on action and crimefighting drama programs typically filled the roles of sweetheart to the
protagonist hero\textsuperscript{301} or specifically feminine gendered support roles such as secretary or barmaid.\textsuperscript{302} In each case, the women were presented as dependent on the men for support and submissive to male judgement.

However, by the 1960s, television saw the introduction of women in multiple roles outside of the home. While there certainly were fewer leading women than leading men, several programs premiered starring actresses as unmarried women trying to navigate the professional world including Rose Marie on \textit{The Dick van Dyke Show} (1961), Marlo Thomas in \textit{That Girl} (1966), and Diahann Carroll in \textit{Julia} (1968). Even Lucille Ball, who had become a television darling as a housewife on her 50s sitcom, reinvented herself as a widow rejoining the workforce in her follow-up shows \textit{The Lucy Show} (1962) and \textit{Here’s Lucy} (1968). In addition to depicting the leading women’s career aspirations, these shows also portrayed their romantic lives. While not overtly sexualized, the women were presented as capable of supporting themselves independently from men. Thus, romantic relationships in which the women were involved challenged the patriarchal power dynamic of their 1950s television predecessors. Though actual sexual activity was never depicted and rarely hinted at, the women often dated, and as Helen Gurley Brown suggested, they did so for their own pleasure or desire rather than security and survival.

\textsuperscript{301} Often in these support roles, even if the female character was not officially the girlfriend of the male protagonist, she had unrequited romantic feelings for him. This caused her pine away for him, in hopes that he would one day join her in marital domesticity and allowed her to function as a damsel-in-distress in the way any archetypal sweetheart would.

\textsuperscript{302} One notable exception is Miss Kitty, portrayed by Amanda Blake, on the long-running western \textit{Gunsmoke} which premiered on television in 1955 after beginning as a radio drama in 1952. As a saloon proprietor, Miss Kitty was a rare example of a single woman on 1950s television with her own career. Though never explicitly stated, it is heavily implied that Kitty is a prostitute and madame of a brothel run out of the saloon. While she shares some tropes with the sexpot archetype, she pines away for Marshall Matt Dillon, the show’s protagonist, and essentially serves in the role of his sweetheart.
To capitalize on the trend of the single working woman, 1960s television began introducing female action heroes and crimefighters in more fantastic adventures. Where the previous decade’s action women were primarily damsels-in-distress, the 60s saw women starring in a succession of detective and espionage serials including Anne Francis in *Honey West* (1965), Barbara Bain in *Mission Impossible* (1966), Peggy Lipton in *The Mod Squad* (1968), and most notably Diana Rigg in *The Avengers* (1961).\(^{303}\) While these programs were not part of the superhero genre proper, they descended from the same pulp heroes and shared much of their DNA with the superhero monomyth and its archetypes. Action heroes and heroines, like their superhero counterparts, worked to ensure the social good by fighting evil with performative displays of masculine violence. However, the women featured in lead roles in 1960s television action serials were typically written to be as dynamic and powerful as men. They could utilize violence power. Whether action heroines worked alone or as part of a team, they often fought and bested men in combat. Diana Rigg’s Emma Peel character was written as a gifted detective, brilliant scientist, and martial arts expert. She was rarely a damsel-in-distress and was just as likely to rescue her male partner, John Steed, as the other way around. In fact, while the series did not escape patriarchal gender roles entirely — Steed was written as Peel’s superior and mentor — it clearly depicts Peel as the deadlier hand-to-hand combatant.

That said, Peel and the other 60s television action heroines played far more into the male gaze than their non-action, working woman counterparts. In accordance with Cristina Lucia Stasia’s hypothesis,\(^{304}\) beauty was integral to the character; she was allowed physical strength only if she was conventionally heterosexually attractive. In part, this enhanced the effect of the

\(^{303}\) Not to be confused with the unrelated Marvel Comics superhero comic of the same name.

\(^{304}\) See Chapter 3.
impossible body. Much of the appeal of the fight scenes in *The Avengers* was seeing the lithe and willowy Rigg, at 119 pounds, body slamming men twice her size. In some respects, this validates Stasia’s claim that the female action hero must be infantilized for the male viewer to accept her as possessing violence power. Despite Rigg being an imposing 5’9 woman, she appeared slight when fighting her male co-stars. More than infantile, as Stasia surmises, her fighting prowess seemed impossible; that is, she became a spectacle of the impossible body. This was essential for getting the male viewers of the action audience to accept Peel and her fellow action heroines. In Laura Mulvey’s original analysis of the male gaze, she argues that

> An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (20)

> Since, as R.W. Connell notes, performative violence is always coded as masculine, the audience is inclined to view women engaged in violence as performing masculinity. Like the sexpots of the Golden Age, Rigg and the other action heroines were able to counter this with exaggerated hyperfemininity. While FCC television broadcast standards would not allow the action heroine to behave as sexually aggressively as the Golden Age sexpots and seductresses, the action heroine was certainly sexually aware and plausibly sexually active. Emma Peel frequently flirted with her partner Steed, and the series heavily implied that they were engaged in

---

305 See Chapter 2.
306 See Chapter 3.
an extramarital affair. Furthermore, Peel and the other action heroines often used seduction to manipulate and gather information from enemies. Finally, while not attired in the cleavage exposing necklines utilized by the likes of Sheena and Phantom Lady, Emma Peel wore exclusively form-fitting mod fashion evocative of the contemporary covers of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (see Figure 86). This extended to other 1960s action heroines as well. Peggy Lipton’s series, *The Mod Squad*, was named in direct reference to the fashion trends she and the other characters follow. They fought crime in tight sweaters, miniskirts, and bodysuits. The more sex appeal the action heroine displayed, the more violent and powerful she was allowed to become.

In contrast, the 1954 Code and its restrictions on the depiction of the female body in comics encouraged creative teams to maintain the early 1950s — or even 1940s — visual aesthetic well into the late 1960s. Superhero costumes remained modest and civilians and secret identities were almost never shown in casual clothing. Men in Silver Age comics always wore suits and ties while women wore circle dresses, pearls, and gloves, long after those styles had ceased being popular. Denim blue jeans, which became popular clothing with youth around the same time as the CCA was established, were virtually non-existent on the comics page until the

---

307 *The Avengers* presented Emma Peel as a married woman with a husband that was missing in action. The existence of the never seen husband allowed the program plausible deniability as to a sexual relationship existing between Peel and Steed, however the two certainly implied a relationship with frequent sexual innuendo, playful flirtation, and occasional kisses.
Bronze Age. While the Silver Age writers flirted with sexual innuendo, any clear reference to supersex remained the domain of underground comix and fanfic. It would take until the late 1960s before these tropes started gradually dying out. Superheroes comics remained boyhood power fantasies, to remain even remotely relevant and current, a makeover was needed. Thus, as the 1960s ended, comics began to adopt some of fashion tropes of the 60s youth culture.

**Feminism From Fashion to Fornication: The Supermakeover and the Sexual Revolution**

“Wow! I-I’m gorgeous! I should have done this ages ago!”

-Diana Prince, *Wonder Woman* vol. 1 #178

Though superheroines had existed in comics since the Golden Age, because of the presumed young boy readership, male protagonists had always greatly outnumbered female ones. With superhero comics declining in popularity after World War II, many of the lower selling superhero comics were cancelled, including most of the superheroine led titles. This disparity increased after the Code caused the cancellation of the Golden Age sexpot comics. By the time the Silver Age began, DC Comics’ *Wonder Woman* was the only notable female-led superhero title remaining, and as detailed previously, her depowering and transformation into a mod-styled action heroine made her a functionally different character. Wonder Woman’s transformation was more than aesthetic. The Bronze Age brought about a makeover for female superhero comic characters that brought them in line with the 1960s post-Gurley *Cosmopolitan* woman in both appearance and attitude. Furthermore, the Bronze Age cemented a connection between feminine appearance and sexual agency.

---

308 See Chapter 2.
309 See Chapter 3.
The vast majority of other superheroic female characters during this period were in supporting roles, either as the girl sidekick to a more established male superhero, or as the sole female character in an otherwise male team. While not truly a separate archetype, the solo superheroine on a team had a special role. Her job was to be the girl. The Silver Age saw an explosion of superteam comics. Superteams had been a staple of comics since the Golden Age, but Early superteams were loose knit. DC Comics’ *Justice Society of America* comics featured a team with little reason to associate with each other beyond the fact that the characters’ individual comic titles happened to be published by the same company. There was limited interaction between the superheroes on the team; their joint adventures typically featured each member having a short story investigating their own case which would happen tenuously to dovetail into a group narrative in the final pages of the story. Other Golden Age superteams like Marvel Comics’ All-Winners Squad\(^\text{310}\) worked in much the same way. In truth, the Golden Age superteams served primarily as an advertisement to encourage readers to buy the comics featuring individual heroes with whom they might be less familiar. In contrast, Silver Age superteam comics were more cohesive. While some like DC’s Justice League of America\(^\text{311}\) and Marvel’s Avengers\(^\text{312}\) and the aforementioned Teen Titans began with the same formula as the Golden Age superteams, many such as the Fantastic Four,\(^\text{313}\) the X-Men,\(^\text{314}\) and the Legion of

---

\(^{310}\) While Marvel considers the All-Winners Squad their first superhero team, there were actually only two appearances of the group as a team. Marvel Comics (then called Timely Comics) began publishing *All Winners Comics* in June of 1941 as an anthology series featuring solo adventures of several heroes. However, it was not until issue #19, published in September of 1946, that the characters would team up as the All-Winners Squad. The team would have a second appearance in issue #21, the final issue of the series. There was no issue #20 due to peculiarities of the publishing and shipping systems of the 1940s.

\(^{311}\) First appearing in *The Brave and the Bold* vol. 1 #28, cover dated March 1960, by Gardner Fox with art by Mike Sekowsky.

\(^{312}\) First appearing in *Avengers* vol. 1 #1, cover dated September 1963, by Stan Lee with art by Jack Kirby.

\(^{313}\) First appearing in *Fantastic Four* vol. 1 #1, cover dated November 1961 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

\(^{314}\) First appearing in *The X-Men* vol. 1 #1, cover dated September 1963 by Stan Lee with art by Jack Kirby.
Super-Heroes\textsuperscript{315} were conceived of as characters who exclusively worked together without independent solo careers. Under the Silver Age superteam formula, four to six members would have powers and personalities that complemented each other, and narrative tension was derived from the ways in which the teammates interacted. For instance, a team might consist of some subset of a calculating leader, an intellectual scientist and inventor, a brash fighter, a melancholy and dimwitted but superhumanly strong giant, and a carefree super speed scout. Like most superheroes of the era most of the team members were male, however they were typically joined by a single female member whose primary function was to establish a feminine presence for the team.

While the popularity of superteams allowed a greater quantity of female characters to be introduced, the token nature of having only one woman per team further highlighted the gender disparity of Silver Age comics. Unlike the male members, the girl did not need to provide a specific combat function to the superteam; In fact, she often lacked visual offensive combat superpowers altogether. Data visualization journalist Amanda Shendruk analyzed 34,476 comic book characters profiled on the website Comicvine and found that while male characters are significantly more likely to exhibit visually spectacular superpowers like super strength or energy projection. Female characters tend to lead only in superpowers based on stereotypically feminine coded traits such as controlling emotions or manipulation through mind control or pheromones. These gendered powers were likely also a result of CCA regulation. The original Comics Code discouraged depictions of men and women involved in violence against each other and instead encouraged adherence to stereotypical gender norms. The Fantastic Four’s Invisible Girl and the X-men’s Marvel Girl, both introduced in the Silver Age as the sole female members

\textsuperscript{315} First appearing in \textit{Adventure Comics} vol. 1 #247, cover dated April 1958 by Otto Binder with art by Al Plastino.
of otherwise male teams both had the primary combat ability to project invisible shields, allowing them to remain safely distant from the combat while their male teammates directly engaged their foes. Their female subservience to the male characters was further underscored by the frequent choice to use the diminutive suffix “girl” as a part of many superheroine names. Shendruk notes that of the nearly 3000 characters with gendered superhero names in the Comicvine database, 30.9% of the male characters use the suffix “man” compared to only 5.7% of the female characters identified by monikers ending in “woman”. Conversely, 12.6% of the female characters have superhero names ending in “girl” more than doubling the 5.1% of male characters’ names ending in “boy”.316

The superteam’s token girl is not a true monomythic archetype but rather a role which one of other archetypes adopted in the presence of other superheroes. In the Golden and Silver Ages, she was sometimes the girl sidekick or kid sister of a male superteam member but could just as easily be superheroine in her own right. Regardless of her original archetype, in the Silver Age the token girl typically served as the de facto girl sidekick to all male members of the superteam. She was coded in feminine stereotypes. Like the classic monomythic goddess from which she is derived, she represented a male view of the feminine ideal and was a stand-in for all women.317 The token girl’s primary function was to serve as a maternal conscience. She tended to be more nurturing and less brash than her male counterparts. Since the superhero thematic paradigm requires the male superheroes attempt to solve every problem through visually performative masculine violence, the girl was able to contrast herself by pleading for

316 It must be noted that Shendruk’s analysis was performed in 2017, years after characters like Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl had updated their names to Invisible Woman and Phoenix during the Bronze Age. In the Golden and Silver Ages, the disparity between man and girl was even more pronounced.
317 See Chapters 1 and 3.
compassionate solutions. She was the most likely to take pity on the villains the superteam faced. When Silver Age creators needed to add narrative drama, this often took the form of romance between the token girl and one of her teammates. Often several of the teammates would vie for her, resulting in tension within the team. Despite being a hero in her own right, she was often more important as a love interest. Thus, in the adolescent male focused narratives of the Silver Age, the token girl in many ways was more a plot device than a character.

Whereas the male members of the Silver Age superteam often had one-dimensional personalities that reflected their team functions, the token girl needed to embody every feminine stereotype to serve as a generic ideal everywoman. In the original incarnation of the Teen Titans, Robin, the leader, tended to be the most serious and devoted to the superheroic mission, while the showboating speedster Kid Flash, bombastic merman Aqualad, and arrogant bowman Speedy were depicted as mischievous pranksters, teasing each other with a “boys will be boys” attitude. Wonder Girl was far more devoted to whimsical teenage stereotypes than her male counterparts. She was fascinated by dancing, fashion, and makeup. These seemingly frivolous pursuits coded her as more feminine and passive than her colleagues, despite being acknowledged as the team’s physically strongest member. Token girls on other super teams — for instance the Avengers’ Wasp and Fantastic Four’s Invisible Girl — had the same preoccupations. In Wonder Girl’s case, this was even more important because she also served as the Teen Titan’s muscle.
The powerhouse strongmen of most superteams—like the Fantastic Four’s Thing or the Avenger’s Hulk—were often tortured by their monstrous appearance, stunted intelligence, or loneliness, but this was not the case for the beautiful and free-spirited Wonder Girl. This distinction became even more apparent as the comics moved into the Bronze Age. The Bronze Age is not demarcated by a specific event like the Silver Age, but rather by a gradual shift in tone and style. One of the clearest visual markers of the Bronze Age for the female characters was the supermakeover. Fashion was an obsession for the Silver Age female characters, marking them as modern women. When Wonder Girl updated her costume in 1969, she took delight in her sewing craft and excitedly changed her hairstyle (see Figure 87).³¹⁸ Donna also became consumed by fashion in her civilian life. At the same time, her storylines focused more on her romantic entanglements. As Teen Titans comics continued into the Bronze and Modern Ages, Donna’s dated, fell in loved, married, and eventually became a mother. In this way she represented a sort of roadmap for the proper female gendered behavior the Comics Code was designed to encourage. Throughout the series, at least through the Bronze Age, Donna’s role on the team as token girl, was increasingly defined by her performative femininity.

³¹⁸ Teen Titans vol. 1 #22, cover dated August 1969 by Neal Adams and Marv Wolfman with art by Gil Kane and Nick Cardy.
The few superheroines with their own solo titles similarly trended towards the supermakeover trope, particularly as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s. Wonder Woman’s civilian alter-ego Diana Prince traded in her military secretary clothing for mod fashion even before she was depowered in 1968. While Wonder Woman’s superhero costume had always been inspired by a combination of pinup and fetish artwork, her original Diana Prince identity was fashioned to desexualize her. Much like Lois Lane’s preference for the masculine Superman over the emasculated Clark Kent, Wonder Woman’s male sweetheart Steve Trevor was enamored by her superhero glamour, while constantly ignoring his secretary, the dowdy Diana Prince. When Steve was framed for murder by a gang of criminal hippies, Diana decided to go undercover within the gang, necessitating a makeover for her civilian identity (see Figure 88). Naturally, Wonder Woman defeats the gang and proves Steve’s innocence. However, because she appreciates the beauty of her new appearance and the added attention it brings her, she decides to retain the new look.

Furthermore, because Steve Trevor was killed soon after Wonder Woman’s makeover and subsequent depowering, suddenly leaving her without a primary male sweetheart, the newly mortal Diana had the freedom to explore romantic feelings with various men that she

---

319 Wonder Woman vol. 1 #179 cover dated December 1968 by Dennis O’Neil with art by Mike Sekowsky.
320 Wonder Woman vol. 1 #178 cover dated October 1968 by Dennis O’Neil with art by Mike Sekowsky.
321 Wonder Woman vol. 1 #180 cover dated January 1969 by Dennis O’Neil with art by Mike Sekowsky.
encountered in her now espionage focused stories. While not progressing to the blatant explicit sexuality of the Golden Age sexpot, this new Diana Prince often flirted with, dated, and even kissed the male spies, secret agents, detectives, noblemen, and other adventurers she encountered. These men, while not superhuman, were generally of extraordinary social class or masculine prowess. Even though Diana was now diegetically non-super, the value system of the sex/violence exchange remained in effect. A male sweetheart had to be worthy of her supersexuality. However, since Diana lacked powers and did not appear in costume during this era, her placement in the superhero genre seemed increasingly tenuous. Her commitment to high fashion, and the male gaze focused artwork that accompanied it, was crucial to maintaining her status as an impossible body. Diana’s supermakeover and increasing sexual freedom were accompanied by frequent highlighting of her toned legs, buttocks, and breasts while she was engaged in martial arts combat. Comics frequently featured Diana trying on new outfits, delighting in the aesthetic value of her new appearance, and gleefully noting how short her miniskirts were getting as she modeled them for the reader.

At the same time, Diana often thought to herself how much harder it was to control her emotions as a mortal woman. She became hotheaded, brash, and susceptible to giving into the sexual charms of men (see Figure 89). Without violating the CCA guidelines, Wonder Woman comics seemed to be attempting to portray the increased sexual agency available to women on the 1960s. However, while not
demonized to the extent that would have occurred with the seductresses of earlier ages, Diana’s lustfulness was still depicted as a weakness. Furthermore, her increased libido was depicted as tied directly to her physical appearance. She became more insatiable because men desired her. In keeping with Stasia’s argument pertaining to action heroine’s beauty and physical strength, the mortal Diana was allowed sexual agency only if she appeared heterosexually attractive to men.

Like the Teen Titans, Supergirl was allowed to age gradually over the years. Her adventures became less tied to Superman, and she developed her own storylines. By the 1970s she graduated from high school and entered college. This newly adult Supergirl began to have romantic liaisons as she tried to balance a social life with her superheroic mission and her academic studies. While she certainly was not ruled by her libido, her relationships with boys and her desire to find romantic happiness became a focal point in her narrative and she began having more serious and intimate relationships with the men that she dated both as Supergirl and as Linda. Romance was in many ways Supergirl’s weakness. She was often rendered breathless by a kiss, with the narration of the comic explaining that even the world’s strongest woman enjoys feeling “helpless” in a kiss (see Figure 90). Often, Supergirl was so manipulated by her romantic feelings that she could be duped by a physically weaker villain. One romantic dalliance allowed a villain to be poison her in such a way that she would temporarily lose her superpowers at inopportune moments for several years that followed. Thus, Supergirl’s comics presented a hint

322 See Chapter 3.
of a more liberated woman while maintaining an idea of male superiority in line with the ideal that the CCA espoused.

At the same time, like Wonder Girl and Wonder Woman, Supergirl took an increased interest in fashion and underwent a supermakeover. In fact, Supergirl updated her costume frequently. In fourth-wall-breaking interludes between stories, she invited readers to design new outfits for her that would be featured in upcoming issues (see Figure 91). If the costume was featured, it would be credited to the reader who designed it. This was a trope borrowed from teen romance comics like *Archie, Betty & Veronica*, *Patsy Walker*, and *Katy Keene* that were popular with teen girls of the time. Supergirl’s new costumes were thus often inspired by disco or bohemian clothing that appeared in women’s fashion magazines of the day with trendy minidresses, hotpants, and thigh-high boots. Supergirl would wear different variations for special occasions: an evening gown costume for a date and a bathing suit for the beach. Her clothing as Linda Danvers was similarly updated. Gone were the conservative collection of high-collared blouses, long skirts, and shirtwaist dresses that Linda
had worn since her 1959 introduction. She now wore a stylish collection of 1970s hippie inspired miniskirts, tights, and jumpsuits.

Similarly, Lois Lane — whose wardrobe had consisted almost entirely of modest pastel pencil skirt suits, shirtwaist dresses, pillbox hats and sensible heels since 1938 — suddenly began experimenting with hot pants, fishnet stockings and go-go boots in 1968. This also brought about an updated outlook on her love lives. After decades of superdickery abuse at the hands of Superman, Lois broke up with him. In a metatextual fourth-wall breaking moment on the cover of *Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* #80, Lois, suddenly sporting a modern hairdo, minidress, and leather go-go boots, proclaims her independence to Superman by ripping the “Girl Friend” portion of the title off of her logo and throwing it to the ground while ordering him to “Get out of my magazine” (see Figure 92) and vowing to start a new life that does not include him. However, the actual story is somewhat less final or feminist than the cover implies. When Superman absentmindedly forgets Lois’s birthday and misses her party, Lois, fed up with Superman’s refusal to commit to her, decides to leave Metropolis, change her name and career, and begin a fresh life.

Figure 92: *Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* vol. 1 #80, 1968

Problematically, the narrative does not allow Lois to escape defining herself in relationship to Superman. Instead, her singular motivation shifts from trying to convince him to propose marriage to trying to build a life that specifically excludes him. The opening pages of
the story note that she has become so successful as a reporter for the Daily Planet by this time that she has won a Pulitzer Prize (2). Nonetheless, to dissociate herself from Superman, she quits her job as a journalist and after her requisite makeover, moves to a randomly chosen city and applies for a stereotypically feminine-coded job as a nurse. She soon begins dating Rand, a local astronaut, and in less than a month, accepts Rand’s marriage proposal despite still being in love with Superman. Even in renouncing her relationship with Superman, Lois is still defined by her relationship with him. Lois recognizes the power differential between Superman and herself; she broke-up with him, not because she does not love him but because she recognizes his superheroic responsibilities place her at a lower priority level than she desires. She would rather marry Rand, whom she does not love, than pine away for Superman who cannot commit to her.

Effectively, Lois is accepting the transactional nature of the superhero sex/violence exchange and taking steps to raise her market value within it. Throughout the two-issue story, Lois continuously reminds herself, and thus exposit to the reader, that as a handsome and world-famous astronaut, Rand is a hero “even if he isn’t super” (*Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* vol. 1 #81, 5). Despite giving up on Superman as a mate, Lois is unwilling to devalue her feminine sexual power by trading it to someone of low masculine value. Rand must prove his masculinity to be exceptional — which he does through several heroic rescues, even though he is unpowered, as well as through his extraordinary profession — in order to deserve Lois. Only once Lois is convinced of Rand’s masculine value, does she agree to marry him. This, in turn, raises her own value and a now jealous Superman actively pursues her and pleads for her to return on multiple occasions. This positions Lois to repeatedly reject Superman and thus establish her feminine value as greater than his masculine value in the sex/violence exchange. Eventually, Lois develops temporary superpowers by chance and reads Superman’s mind. Once she discovers
Superman genuinely loves and values her, she breaks off her engagement to Rand and rekindles her relationship with Superman.

While the Bronze Age did not allow Lois to completely reject the sweetheart’s desire for marital domesticity, as time progressed, she did gain some agency and independence. Though her breakup with Superman was not permanent, from this point on their relationship was on more equal footing; instances of superdickery as a driving plot point began to gradually decline and eventually disappear. After years of essentially serving as the supporting character to what were still functionally Superman stories, Lois truly became the protagonist of the comic that bore her name. While Superman did still rescue her on many occasions, their relationship became more of a partnership. The Bronze Age Lois was self-sufficient, often solving problems and escaping danger with her own wits or physicality rather than requiring a damsel-in-distress rescue and she even sometimes saved Superman from danger. Furthermore, she developed interests beyond marrying Superman. Her career became her top priority; eventually she was as likely to stand Superman up to follow a scoop as he was at saving the world. Most importantly, Lois was no longer slavishly devoted to Superman. On several occasions after this point she would break off their relationship if she felt like it was not working, it was interfering with her career, or if she felt neglected. Along with Lois’s newfound confidence and agency, her updated fashion sense remained. Rather than returning to her outdated 1930s appearance, from the 1970s onward artists depicted Lois as a stylish career woman in contemporary professional fashion.

Nearly all female characters of any archetype followed this pattern throughout 1970s. The Wasp, as token girl in Marvel Comics’ The Avengers, changed her costume in nearly every adventure while Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl took delight in designing and sewing new costumes for themselves and teammates in the Fantastic Four and X-men. Sweethearts like
Spiderman’s Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson or Batman’s Silver St. Cloud had frequent multiple page spreads trying on different outfits. As comics were still primarily produced by men for a male audience these spreads gradually dispensed with any pretense of attracting female readers and played to the male gaze with more frequent glimpses of superheroines in lingerie between outfits or sweethearts answering phone calls from superhero boyfriends wrapped in discretely placed towels after a shower or lounging on silk sheets in a lacy nightgown.

By the mid-1970s, comic companies began attempting to directly market to female readers by heavily promoting comics like *Supergirl, Wonder Woman*, and *Superman’s Girl Friend Lois Lane* as well as the addition of new superheroine led titles like *The Savage She-Hulk, Ms. Marvel*, and *Spider-Woman*. However despite the intended female audience, the male gaze focused artwork remained as much a staple of these series as in boy targeted comics. In many ways, the superhero monomyth almost requires such artwork, which provides the protagonists with impossible bodies for visual spectacle. Moreover, these bodies were being rendered by male artists raised in this visual tradition. Thus, while the 1950s ideal of femininity that had pervaded comics since the establishment of the CCA was fading, it was replaced with one equally as restrictive. As the Bronze Age progressed female characters within the superhero monomyth fell into a single template regardless of their archetype — an idealized template designed by men who had come of age in the mid-twentieth century while reading comics and

---

323 Stan Lee, then publisher of Marvel Comics, intentionally tried to target female teen readers during this era to bolster sales. However, he was also particularly concerned at this time with securing copyrights and trademarks to protect his most popular intellectual property, particularly after he had ordered the creation of *Captain Marvel* series to secure that trademark when the trademark of the now-defunct Fawcett Comics series had lapsed (see Chapter 1). Thus, many of the female characters Marvel created at this point were derivatives of popular male superheroes. She-Hulk was the cousin of the Hulk, Ms. Marvel was a girl sidekick of Marvel’s Captain Marvel and Spider-Woman, while she had no narrative connection to Spider-man, was created in his image. However, as Bronze Age creations, all three of these characters functioned more as superheroine archetypes in their own titles rather than kid sisters or girl sidekicks despite their origins.
had a specific vision of what needed to be presented to the teen readers of the 1970s. The Bronze Age woman was thus ambitious and fiercely independent. She desired her own career and was willing to speak her mind when confronted by a man. However, while increasingly sexually aware, she was still required to be conventionally heterosexually attractive and devoted to falling in love and getting married. Most importantly, her new freedom, such that it was, was increasingly marked by wearing the sexiest outfits the CCA would allow. Moving beyond these conventions would require a complete restructuring of the comic book industry — and thus the establishment of a Modern Age.


“It is an infantile superstition of the human spirit that virginity would be thought a virtue and not the barrier that separates ignorance from knowledge.”

- Voltaire

Comics were not the only pop culture medium to struggle with ephebiphobic restrictions throughout the twentieth century. American cinema faced similar restrictions with the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, first implemented in 1934, being the partial basis for the CCA Code of 1954. However, Hollywood retired the Hays Code in 1968, largely because of an acknowledgment of shifting cultural standards towards sex. In the aftermath, American cinemas saw a flood of coming-of-age films as direct responses to the burgeoning youth culture of mid-twentieth century America. Over the next two decades, the chaste and wholesome teen beach movies of the 1950s and early 1960s were rapidly replaced with a succession of films that directly explored teenaged sexuality including dramas like Last Summer (1969) and Little Darlings (1980), horror films like Halloween (1978) and A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984), romances like The Sure Thing (1985) and Dirty Dancing (1987), and sex farces like Porky’s
(1981) and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) as well as many others. Some of these films focused purely on the quest by the protagonist to lose their virginity, while others were more fully realized bildungsromans. In effect, the American film industry suggested that allowing teenage characters to sexually mature on screen was the only way the medium could mature as well. Comics were not as quick to abandon the CCA Code as the film industry was to drop the Hays Code. However, a gradual but sustained need to depict sexual activity along with other adult content eventually led to a restructuring of the primary distribution network that comics relied on and ultimately both the Modern Age of comics and the contemporary understanding of the concept of a superhero.

One of the key changes of the 1980s comics industry was the rise of independent publishers, or *indies*, and the focus on the direct market distribution system. During the 1970s Bronze Age, while the remaining members of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) — Marvel, DC, Harvey, and Archie Comics — fought to get the Code restructured to allow for more adult stories, several smaller independent publishers that did not yet exist when the Code was formed came into being. Unlike the Underground Comix, which were self-printed by their creators largely using photocopy machines, the indy publishers offered higher production quality that rivaled that of the CMAA members, but with smaller print runs. Furthermore, whereas the CMAA publishers assumed intellectual property rights over any characters or stories created as work-for-hire for them, many of the indies allowed the creators to

[324] Established in 1954, the CMAA was a trade association formed by the major publishers of the day to lobby for the industry during the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings (Hopkins 172-179). The CMAA led to the establishment of the CCA (see Chapter 2). However, by the 1970s most of the publisher members of the CMAA had folded into bankruptcy and the remaining members found themselves at odds with the regulating body they had formed in attempts to reform towards modern cultural norms (Nyberg 116-118, 144-156).
maintain copyright over their work. Consequently, there was a surge in indy published books by young creators hoping for the freedom of Underground Comix with greater distribution.

The distribution needs of the indy publishers were facilitated by the direct sales market. During the Golden, Silver, and early Bronze Ages, comics were primarily sold on newsstands and in drugstores and supermarkets along with other periodicals. However, beginning in the early 1970s, a network of comic specialty bookstores emerged. Whereas traditional newsstands stocked only the most recent issues of a limited selection of the best-selling comics, comic specialty shops devoted shelf-space to niche and indy titles alongside the better selling comics from the Big Two. Additionally, the direct market was attractive to publishers because it mitigated the risk of unsold inventory. Before the direct market distribution system, newsstands ordered comics from the publishers on speculation. Whatever the newsstand could not sell by the comic’s cover date was returned to the publisher insulating the newsstand from financial losses. Under the direct market system, the comic specialty shops purchase wholesale comics at a discount without the possibility for returns. Comic shops preordered the exact amount of product they desired, and publishers set their print-runs accordingly. To expedite this process, comic shops invited regular customers to subscribe to their favorite monthly comic book series, often with a store discount for pre-ordering. Thus, the stores and publishers were assured a base number of sales. Any unsold inventory remained the property of the comic shop and were held as back issues to sell later.

The availability of back issues allowed a break from the illusion of change that traditionally froze comics in narrative limbo. Because new readers now had the option to purchase installments of the ongoing narrative that they had missed, the status quo did not have to reset as often, and more serialized storytelling became possible. However, this did not break
mythic inconsumability. For most comic book superheroes, the perpetual publication model
remained in effect, so characters still needed to exist in an unending second stage of the classic
hero’s journey. However, they were now capable of character progression within that stage.
Ultimately, this allowed characters like the Teen Titans to grow up. Before the wide availability
of back issues, comics needed to continually rehash any status quo changing events and resolve
their storylines within a single issue to ensure that readers did not get lost. Now, however, if a
new or returning readers wanted to learn how Robin progressed from a preteen to a college
graduate, a trip to a comic bookstore made that reconstruction possible. Thus, the direct market
allowed for longform, multipart, continuing comic narratives to be created. Indeed, comics
increasingly moved from episodic to serialized stories.

Furthermore, comic specialty shops were free to ignore the lack of the Code seal of
approval. The primary purpose of the Code was to assure newsstand retailers, who would not
reasonably read each monthly publication that they sold, that the content displayed within was
child appropriate. Since comic specialty shops were willing to provide content to readers of
varying maturity levels and — as they were typically run by avid comic fans themselves — were
more familiar with the content of the individual titles and for whom they were appropriate, the
Code was far less necessary. As comic shops and direct market grew in popularity, few new
publishers joined the CMAA or abided by the CCA. Thus, while their distribution numbers were
still far lower, since they lacked the name recognition value of the Big Two, indy comics allowed
for the greater creative freedom of Underground Comix with nearly the same potential
distribution reach as the CMAA and with consistent access to retail outlets. This meant that
while Marvel and DC continued to dominate the comic market by volume, independent
publishers such as Eclipse, Capital, Fantagraphics, Eternity, and First were able to push the
boundaries of what comics and the superhero genre could be. CMAA titles continued to be sold on newsstands, but comic books shops increasingly became the dominant outlet for sales. Between 1979 and 1987 the direct market grew from 6% of Marvel’s gross sales to 70% (Rozanski). Indies soon began to abandon the newsstand market entirely and the majority of non-CMAA comics were sold exclusively in comic specialty shops by the 1980s.

While Marvel and DC had been utilizing the direct market since its inception, the Big Two’s first experimented with direct sales exclusive titles in 1981, when Marvel Comics released Dazzler, a comic featuring a roller-skating disco queen (see Figure 93). Dazzler was a fairly conventional, though reluctant, superheroine archetype. She had the ability to transmute sound into brilliant displays of light. Her main motivation was pursuing her music career and she actively resisted superheroics adventure in favor of show business. However, she was frequently drawn into physical combat by the superhero world she inhabits. Like many Bronze Age superheroines, she was wrapped in multiple romantic subplots. Despite not being a girl sidekick, she was frequently involved with established male superheroes, and just as often found herself dating men in the entertainment industry which complicated her career aspirations. While Dazzler was clearly connected to the superhero milieu, the series focused far more on investigating her love life.

Figure 93: Dazzler vol. 1 #1, 1981

---

325 Like many of the newer titles created in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the Big Two, Dazzler attempted to connect to youth culture at large by connecting to what creators assumed was a topical reference but was already somewhat dated. Therefore, she was heavily molded on disco stereotypes despite disco music era winding to a close by the time the comic was released.  
326 Dazzler vol. 1 #1, cover dated March 1981 by Tom DeFalco with art by John Romita Jr.
Dazzler’s relatively mild pushes against the Code primarily focused on presenting her as a more sexual woman than was common in mainstream comics of the time. However, in truth the initial changes were relatively subtle. Dazzler’s creative team could acknowledge her as a sexual being, but the presentation was naturalistic. The storylines simply acknowledged that she had physically intimate relationships. Dazzler was not promiscuous, but she was sexually active. She would be shown in bed, presumably post-coital, with male lovers. Her dialogue made it clear that she enjoyed and desired sex.

Dazzler played constantly to the male gaze. Beckoning back to 1940s sexpots and the good girl art aesthetic, her sexuality was constantly announced by her clothing with necklines plunging to her navel and frequent panels showing her in underwear, between outfit changes (see Figure 94). However, while cleavage-revealing, her clothing typically did not reach the level of exposure of the 1940s jungle girls. Beyond that, even though the direct sales market theoretically would have allowed Marvel Comics to publish any content they wished, Dazzler did not fundamentally challenge the Comics Code. In fact, many issues were still submitted to the CCA and received the seal of approval in the same manner as all of Marvel’s newsstand series of the time. However, Dazzler

Figure 94: Dazzler undressing for the male gaze in *Dazzler* vol. 1 #16, 1982

---

327 See Chapter 3.
did serve as a proof of concept to CMAA members as to the viability of the direct market. Marvel and DC both followed with additional direct market exclusive titles in the following years, many of which pushed beyond the boundaries of CCA and in some cases dispensed with the Code entirely.

It may be difficult pinpoint the exact moment that the Bronze Age of comics gave way to the Modern Age, but Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* is often seen as proof a transition took place. The text’s non-linear storytelling, experimental formatting, and blurring of structure and content brought a sense of literary postmodernism to comics. Moore’s narrative recontextualizes the concept of traditionally aspirational superheroes in terms of cynical 1980s Reaganomics and Cold War politics. *Watchmen* breaks with any semblance of conventional genre prescription; most of the characters lack superpowers, primarily appear out of costume, and rarely use codenames. Finally, *Watchmen* rejects Eco’s mythic inconsumability. Moore and Gibbons conceived of the narrative as finite, with a clear beginning and ending. There is no status quo reset; the diegetic world is fundamentally changed by the events of the narrative. If anything, the self-contained storyline structure of *Watchmen* is more indicative of Campbell’s full three phase structure of a monomythic narrative than any of the offshoots. In a sense, this *graphic novel* seems more concerned with being a *novel* than a *comic*.

However, despite *Watchmen*’s rejection of superhero conventions, it remains consistent with the thematic paradigm. It is above all else, a story about social justice, independent autonomy, and performative masculinity — even as it investigates the failings of each. While most of the characters only reluctantly engage in the superhero mission that makes up the narrative, they are ultimately forced to do so because the edict of independent autonomy means
that the pro-social mission is one that only they can accomplish. Doing so forces them to reinhabit a world of performative violence they believed they had left behind.

When *Watchmen* begins, Rorschach/Walter Kovacs is the sole costumed superhero operating independently from the federal government. He is established as a fugitive from justice, while his former partners Silk Spectre II/Laurie Juspeczyk and Nite Owl II/Dan Drieberg have been retired from superheroics for nearly a decade. While Rorschach continues his vigilante adventuring, he has largely abandoned his civilian identity. This decision, to be a full-time superhero rather than a full-time regular person, separates him from his colleagues; they see him as insane. As such, *Watchmen* dispenses with the notion of dual identity that had been a part of the superhero genre since *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. When Rorschach is investigating the murder that incites the plot, both Laurie and Dan initially deny his request for aid. However, they change their minds once they are randomly attacked by a gang of muggers after a dinner date. Forced to defend themselves, Laurie and Dan fight off the gang, brutally maiming several assailants. The performative nature of violence proves intoxicating for Dan and Laurie. They soon find themselves donning their old costumes and returning to adventuring.

Furthermore, the act of performing violence appears to function as an aphrodisiac. Dan and Laurie’s romantic attraction to each other grows as they return to superheroics. In *Watchmen*
#7, the couple first attempts sexual intercourse, but Dan is revealed to be impotent. However, after donning their costumes and saving several people from a burning building, they are overcome by their libidos and immediately strip their clothing and have sex (see Figure 95). The thrill of physicality has presumably cured Dan’s impotence, thus melding one type of masculine performance with another.

In their post-coital embrace, Dan and Laurie discuss the erotic appeal of their super heroic identities, with Laurie asking if the costumes were responsible for the passion of their lovemaking and Dan acknowledging that they were a turn-on and that “I feel so confident it’s like I’m on fire.” Laurie adds that “you sound passionate. I didn’t know you could smolder. I’d hoped tonight might wake something inside you, but it sounds like it’s awoken with an appetite” (28 emphasis in original) (see Figure 96). Only after embracing their fetishization of violence, both sexually and psychologically, are Laurie and Dan able to truly find happiness and accept their heroic mission. The couple then rejoins Rorschach on his mission of justice. While the supersex depicted in Watchmen certainly does not reach the level of explicitness as the Tijuana bibles, Braun’s porn parodies or other erotic
fanfic paratexts, it does present sex as an important and natural part of the lives of its superheroes. *Watchmen* is not a conventional superhero narrative; it resists the MPI framework. The majority of the characters lack superpowers and rarely use their dual identities. However, because Laurie and Dan live within the superhero monomyth, their sex must function as a spectacle of impossible bodies. Within the sex/violence exchange, performative violence of superhero adventure essentially functions as foreplay for a superheroic couple.

Comics historian Bradford Wright notes that *Watchmen* “stood as the most complex and ambitious superhero series ever published” and ultimately stood as “Moore’s obituary for the concept of heroes in general and superheroes in particular” (272). Wright’s belief is largely because of its frank depiction of sex and violence. Literary critic Joe Queenan claims that “the vindictive, sadistic tone of comics of the 1980's is best exemplified by” *Watchmen*. However, Sara J. Van Ness rejects Queenan’s argument noting that *Watchmen*’s “inclusion of violence or sexuality as a discrediting factor …. regardless of the complexity of the narrative” should not be seen as “automatically [denigrating] the work to a status below those that did not” (loc. 341). She does however acknowledge that “*Watchmen* certainly left an indelible mark on other comic-book and graphic-novel narratives that followed it” (loc. 320) and it “undeniably spawned a proliferation of copycat works with similar themes” (loc. 324). *Watchmen* is a complex narrative; it deconstructs the superhero genre and thematic paradigm on multiple levels. However, whatever Moore and Gibbons’ intentions, the depictions of sex and violence were the most obvious deviations from the status quo of comics of the Bronze age.

In truth, there is comparatively little sex or violence in *Watchmen*. Fight scenes, while visceral are relatively brief, typically concluding in a single page or two rather than taking the

---

328 See Chapter 1.
bulk of an issue as was typical of superhero comics of the day. Sex scenes are similarly brief, however given that they were entirely absent from mainstream superhero comics prior to Watchmen’s publication they seemed innovative and transgressive. The love scenes between Dan and Laurie are used as a means of character building to establish their burgeoning relationship and his erectile dysfunction. Both instances that depict the couple successfully engaged in intercourse, occur after they have been involved in a physical encounter of performative masculinity that has stimulated their libidos. By contrast, Laurie’s brief sexual encounter with her previous boyfriend, Doctor Manhattan, ends in an argument where she throws a glass jar at him and demonstrates the couple’s growing disillusionment with each other. In another instance, sex and violence are directly linked when Laurie’s mother, Sally, is sexually assaulted by Laurie’s father, Edward Blake. In each case, Watchmen cements the connection between sex and violence which superhero comics had spent decades implying but ignoring.

As other comics keyed into this connection it became a hallmark of the Modern Age. The transgressive but relatively sparing sex and violence of Watchmen was intensified in independent creator owned superhero comics like Spawn, Youngblood, WildCATs and Witchblade. The Modern Age embraced sexuality particularly in its portrayal of female characters who drifted away from the traditional superheroine and sweetheart roles and heavily into the seductress and sexpot archetypes. Similarly, male protagonists became more violent and hypermasculine with unrealistically bulging muscles and moral codes that allowed for the murder of evil enemies. For both genders, the performative nature of the impossible body was enhanced by their use of assault rifles and other paramilitary equipment. While Watchmen included sex and violence, they were far less prevalent than the copycats would imply. The characters were anything but

---

329 This will be expanded upon further in the next section.
impossible bodies; Dan, in fact, is slightly overweight. Most are not paramilitary; Laurie uses a pistol in one scene, as mark of desperation. The copycats that defined the early Modern Age were in fact responding to the opportunity the direct market gave to engage subject matter that the Code had long prohibited by overcorrecting against the taboos of the preceding years.

In more mainstream comics, the shift towards more explicit sexuality was more gradual. As the single character allowed to mature throughout essentially the entirety of the publication of superhero comics, it is perhaps appropriate that the true sexual awakening of superheroes in the Modern Age can be tied to Dick Grayson and his team, the Teen Titans. In 1984, the lucrative direct market success of comics like *Dazzler*, led DC Comics to relaunch *Teen Titans* as a direct market exclusive. Free from the Code’s edicts, the first issue of *The New Teen Titans* includes a scene where Dick and his girlfriend Starfire wake up in bed together (see Figure 97). The event is far from sexually explicit but implies that the couple regularly sleeps together in the nude. Despite the “teen” title, both are acknowledged as legal adults, with Dick having grown up on the comic page. However, they are unmarried, and the intimate nakedness implies sexual familiarity that was heretofore unknown in mainstream Marvel or DC comics.

![Figure 97: Starfire and Nightwing first appear nude in bed in *The New Teen Titans* vol. 2 #1, 1984](image)

---

330 *The New Teen Titans* vol. 2 #1, cover dated August 1984 by Marv Wolfman and George Perez with art by George Perez.
Just as Dick Grayson grew with the superhero genre, this scene implies that the genre had fully matured. *Teen Titans*, unlike other bildungsromans, does not dwell on Dick’s virginity loss. There is no story detailing his first awkward sexual encounter; there is no celebration with his surrogate father or friends of his coming of age. There is only this casual, understated acknowledgement that Dick, who first appeared as a virginal prepubescent in 1940, was now a sexually active young man. Since the character had been developed by Finger and Kane as a reader surrogate and had served as such throughout the entirety of the development of the superhero monomyth, it followed that superhero comics must no longer be targeted at eternally twelve-year-old boys, but now also at readers who had matured alongside Dick. For these readers, sexual intimacy could be not only present but natural. Perez would later note that he expected moral backlash over the scene, but very little occurred (MacDonald 24). From that point onward, Wolfman and Perez commonly depicted Nightwing and Starfire sharing a bed and having the same casual conversations that any normal young couple might have at the end of the day before drifting off to sleep (see Figure 98).

As the 1980s progressed subtle depictions of sexual activity gradually became more common in Code approved comics as well. Dick’s mentor Batman had been referred to as a billionaire playboy for decades, but this had always been innuendo. There had been little to no textual confirmation of Bruce Wayne, or any other superhero’s sexual activity since the end of the Golden Age. The lack of intimate sexual relationships rendered the term “playboy” portion of
the nickname somewhat meaningless. However, throughout the 1980s, Batman had clear sexual relationships with multiple sweethearts such as Vicki Vale, and Silver St. Cloud, as well, as seductresses such as Talia al Ghul and Catwoman. In 1989, the Comics Code was revised for the final time changing the language governing sexuality to simply read,

"Scenes and dialogue involving adult relationships will be presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience. Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted." (Nyberg 178)

Thus, shy of explicit nudity, depictions of sex were left to the discretion of the publishers after 1989 and the CCA began rapidly losing its power. In a 1980 *Uncanny X-men* comic, Scott Summers and Jean Grey — who like Dick Grayson had aged from teenagers to young adults over their publication run — are heavily implied to intimately consummate their relationship. However, as the actual conjugation takes place off panel, it could also be read as thought the couple only kisses without copulation (see Figure 99). In contrast, by the end of the 1980s, *X-men* comics, like *Teen Titans*, consistently acknowledged that the characters in romantic relationships regularly shared beds and engaged in sexual encounters. Other comics superheroes followed suit and gradually heteronormative sexual activity became a natural and organic part of the superhero’s personal life.

---

331 *The Uncanny X-men* vol. 1 #131, cover dated April 1980 by Chris Claremont with art by John Byrne.
The loosening of the ban on sexuality allowed for more sophisticated narratives which necessitated a shift in tone within typical superhero comics. Many characters saw a progression in the repetitive narratives that had relied on the illusion of change for decades to remain within the second act of the classic monomyth. Spider-man married his sweetheart Mary Jane Watson in 1987. Superman followed by wedding Lois Lane in 1996. The marriages of both characters allowed for explicit textual acknowledgement of the superheroes as sexual beings with active sex lives. Some comics even insinuated that the characters engaged in supersex aided by their powers. This acknowledgment made the characters appear older and more mature. A virginal Spider-man could be viewed as a teen or young adult, but the married version implied a middle-aged sensibility. In much the way as Stan Lee’s Silver Age comics had always taught that with great power came great responsibility, adult themes of the Modern Age increasing brought the adult problems that come with sexual awareness. Wonder Girl, like Dick Grayson, grew up in the pages of Teen Titans. Throughout the 1980s she fell in love with an older man, Terry Long, whom she married in 1985. She became pregnant and bore a child in 1992 but got divorced and entered a vicious child custody battle by 1995. At the same time she underwent a succession of codename changes from Wonder Girl, to Troia, to Darkstar, to a short stint replacing her older sister as Wonder Woman, and eventually simply forgoing a dual identity altogether and using her given name of Donna Troy. Throughout her development, she continuously updated her costume with supermakeovers to progressively sexier costumes as she

332 The Amazing Spider-Man Annual vol. 1 #21, cover dated September 1987 by David Micheline with art by Paul Ryan.
334 Tales of the Teen Titans vol. 1 #50, cover dated February 1985 by Marv Wolfman and George Perez with art by George Perez.
335 The New Titans vol. 1 #91, cover dated October 1992 by Marv Wolfman with art by Tom Grummett.
dated several other following her divorce. For Donna, growing from a Wonder Girl to a full-fledged woman meant accepting her sexuality. In this way, Donna became a template for the modern superheroine. If sex allowed Donna Troy to grow up from her kid sister archetype origins into a superheroine in her own right, it also meant that the superheroine was now defined by sex.

**Backs Don’t Bend That Way: Hyperviolent and Hypersexual Aesthetics of “the Dark Age”**

“How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing.”

-ND Stevenson

One of the most frequent criticisms of the Modern Age has been its unrealistic portrayal of female characters as hypersexualized male gaze objects. Feminist comic websites like *The MarySue* often note that superheroines are drawn impractically to emphasize sexual attributes beyond other character traits. As the CCA lost its power and the Comics Code was revised, ignored, and ultimately retired towards the end of the twentieth century, prohibitions towards sexualized characters were dropped and the sexpot would seemingly become the dominant archetype for female comic book characters. In some respects, the dominance of the sexpot is in accordance with the superhero monomyth’s reliance on impossible bodies to signify power through performance. Hypersexualization exists amongst male superheroes characters as well; however, the imbalance between genders is perhaps best illustrated through the work of satirical websites like *The Hawkeye Initiative*. Launched in 2012 and inspired by online criticism from

---

337 See Chapter 3.
then amateur cartoonist ND Stevenson,\textsuperscript{338} *The Hawkeye Initiative* published fanart replicas of hypersexualized Modern Age covers in which the female characters were replaced with the male superhero, Hawkeye, while retaining the overexaggerated hyperfeminine poses and impractically revealing costumes (see Figure 100). Stevenson and *The Hawkeye Initiative*’s goal was to highlight the ridiculousness of playing to the male gaze and illustrate how common hypersexualization has become. In reality, hypersexualization was not an advent of the Modern Age; good girl art was a staple of the Golden Age. However, the sudden rise in popularity of the sexpot after a forced absence, combined with contemporary representations of hypermasculinity resulted in a sort of concurrent pseudo-Age that occurred within the Modern Age, and in some ways seemed to supplant it. While often viewed with disdain by comics fans and scholars, I would argue that this *Dark Age* of comics was indicative of the superhero monomyth maturing into its final form, one that has allowed it to become the dominant paradigm of contemporary fiction.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig100.png}
\caption{Fanart parodies on *The Hawkeye Initiative* from PrettyJeff (after Rob Liefeld) and Batwynn (after Mike DeBalfo)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{338} The quote, used as an epigraph on this section, was posted by Stevenson, then using his birth name of Noelle Stevenson in an ongoing Tumblr discussion about the lack of strong female characters in comics in 2012. After starting the Hawkeye Initiative, Stevenson, would later become one of the most successful and influential independent comic creators of all time with the publication of his award-winning graphic novel *Nimona*, young adult series *Lumberjanes*, and animated cartoon *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. In 2020, Stevenson came out as transgender, transitioning over the next two years and eventually changing his name to ND. For consistency, I use his current preferred name and pronouns here.
While the shift towards adult content of the Modern Age might have begun gradually, over the final decade of the 20th century it rapidly snowballed into the defining characteristic of the genre. Ultimately the superhero genre’s attempts to adapt to changing market forces while maintaining the thematic paradigm resulted in tropes of the superhero genre coalescing into what they are today. Though the thematic paradigm would retain its edicts of social justice and independent autonomy, the performative masculinity would increasingly overshadow them as the need for visual spectacle made hypersexuality and hyperviolence effectively indistinguishable or at least highly indicative of each other. As comics moved towards the twentieth-first century the Modern Age slowly began to mutate into another form.

While most American comics scholars acknowledge the “ages” terminology that I have used throughout this text — and agree roughly on time periods that the ages entail — the divisions get understandably hazier for comics of the current contemporary moment. There are questions as to whether we still exist within the Modern Age or if things have progressed into one or more additional ages. Some fans and scholars consider the Modern Age to be the period ranging from 1985 through the current day. Others have speculated that this period be further subdivided with various sources suggesting Copper, Iron, Diamond, Postmodern, Plastic and Dark Ages. Usage of these terms and the exact time periods they cover is far less consistent than the primary four that I have used up until this point. Often those who argue for these more granular subdivisions justify those changes according to specific tonal shifts in superhero storytelling during various points in time. I would counter that trying to definitively segregate the current period is an exercise in futility. I would further argue that designating an “Age” of comics requires sweeping industry wide changes rather than simple changes in narrative tone or trends in trope usage.
That said, during the period from the late 1980s through the 1990s, in the wake of comics like Moore and Gibbon’s *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* superhero comics increasingly turned towards “dark” and “gritty” storytelling. Whether it formally stands at as an Age of its own or not, this period at the conclusion the twentieth century marked a clear transformation in visual and storytelling tropes within the superhero genre that continue to be prevalent today. As a matter of convention, I will use the term “Dark Age” to refer to this theoretical sub-Age, acknowledging that it was more of a movement within the Modern Age than a distinct Age of its own. It was a movement defined by violence beyond what had been possible up until this point. In his retrospective of the era, pop culture journalist and historian Mark Voger recalls

> With conscience-deprived heroes indistinguishable from their adversaries, the Dark Age was typified by implausible, steroid-inspired physiques, outsized weapons (guns, knives, claws), generous blood-letting and vigilante justice. While heroes of the Golden and Silver Ages depended solely on their wits and powers to vanquish their adversaries, heroes of the Dark Age were not above flaunting a weapons advantage. Their guns got bigger and bigger. It seemed the bigger the guns, the smaller the heroes’ heads. (Voger 6)

Like many comic fans and scholars, Voger considers the Dark Age to be the industry’s direct attempt to capitalize on the success of *Watchmen*, and *Dark Knight Returns*. However, he considers most of the follow-ups to be markedly inferior. Whereas Moore and Miller present social satire and political commentary by using the superhero genre as a deconstructive framework, their copycats devolved into a rapid succession of unorthodox antihero protagonists reveling in the spectacle of killing. With the direct market free of the CCA, nothing forced characters to abide by the Code’s moral guidelines. In many ways, superheroes returned to their pulp fiction roots from half a century before, carrying guns and having few qualms about killing their foes in the name of dispensing justice. Blood, and visceral carnage became commonplace.
Key amongst the Dark Age superheroes was Marvel Comics’ Punisher. In 1974, Marvel Comics, debuted Frank Castle, the Punisher, a Vietnam veteran whose wife and children were killed in the crossfire of a gang war. Like Batman, Castle vowed vengeance against crime and became a vigilante. Unlike Batman, Castle is not content to help police apprehend criminals. Instead, using his special forces training, he ruthlessly hunts and executes criminals in cold blood. Initially, a Spider-man villain, in 1986 the Punisher was spun-off into his own series as an antihero (see Figure 101). The new series was an immediate success, rapidly becoming one of the industry’s top-selling comics. By 1987, sales of The Punisher regularly rivaled perennial favorite The Uncanny X-men and bested classic titles like Spider-man, Batman, and Superman. By 1992, the Punisher was one of Marvel’s most popular characters, starring in three separate monthly titles. Other publishers flooded the market with similar gritty, gun-toting, paramilitary vigilante superheroes who did not shy away from executing criminals. These Punisher clones included DC’s Vigilante, Wild Dog, and Hitman; Image’s Grifter, and Spawn; Marvel’s own Solo, and Foolkiller; and scores of independent comics including Grimjack, X, and Bloodshot and many others.

While the Punisher and his clones challenged the conventional superhero norms, they did not quite break them. Punisher possessed no true superpowers and as such seemed to resist the

---

339 *Amazing Spider-man* vol. 1 #129, cover dated February 1974 by Gerry Conway with art by Ross Andru.
340 *The Punisher* vol. 1 #1, cover dated January 1986 by Steven Grant with art by Mike Zeck
powers portion of the MPI structure. However, he clearly utilizes a superheroic identity with both a costume and a codename. Similarly, he is seemingly devoted to a prosocial mission, though he utilizes clearly illegal and antisocial methods to engage in that mission. This leads to some debate as to The Punisher’s placement in the superhero genre. Coogan himself seems to implicitly grant The Punisher a reprieve lumping the character together with clear superheroes the X-men as “the leading superheroes of the Iron Age” (216). However, he views these characters as demarcating the end of the superhero era, arguing that

The Punisher serves as a symbolic representative of the Iron Age. Created in the Bronze Age as an anti-hero, he became the quintessential “grim-and-gritty guy-with-a-gun.” Along with Wolverine, the other hit of the age, he is willing to kill his enemies, and his death’s head icon symbolizes the Iron Age’s focus on death. In the baroque stage a genre seems worn out. It appears to die. (Coogan 217)

Superhero comics author, editor and scholar Danny Fingeroth leans towards a broader and more permissive definition of superhero arguing that “superhero mythology comes from the same mythic impulse that spawned Paul Bunyan and John Henry” (18). However, like Coogan, Fingeroth sees a dramatic shift in the superhero genre in the late twentieth century, noting that “Dark Knight spawned a movement of ‘dark and gritty’ (i.e., the protagonists clench their teeth and kill people) superhero comics—exemplified, not incidentally, by The Punisher—that missed the point of [The Dark Knight Returns]” (131). He worries what the Punisher’s version of social justice means for the twenty-first century saying that

Batman’s rage isn’t the rage of the Punisher, who is, essentially, a psychotic criminal. The Punisher’s moment may come and go—there may be times when we need a psychotic

341 Coogan rejects the Modern Age term and instead splits it into two distinct but overlapping Ages. The Iron Age, which he argues begins in 1980 and lasts until 2000, and the Renaissance Age which he begins in 1987 and is currently ongoing (Coogan 214-221). His Iron Age is roughly analogous to what I call the Dark Age, but he overlaps it with his Renaissance Ages to deal with the ambiguities that make me reluctant to acknowledge the Dark Age as distinct from the Modern Age in the first place.

342 Created in 1974, Wolverine was one of the most popular members of the X-men, and like Punisher had become increasingly popular by the late 1990s, starring in several X-men titles as well as his own series.
criminal on our side—but his rage is not cathartic or benign. He creates a world in some ways more frightening than the world of mutants and killer-punks of Judge Dredd’s universe. The Punisher’s world is one with no hope. Things are bad. They will only get worse if the Punisher doesn’t kill a lot of people. (But also, we somehow feel, even if he does.) (Fingeroth 132-133)

In essence, both Coogan and Fingeroth lament that the Punisher represents a shift away from the superhero genre as they know it. The Dark Age signified a break from the aspirational parables of the Golden Age, the carefree entertainment of the Silver Age, and even the cumbersome social allegories of the Bronze Age. Dark Age comics even reject the thoughtful deconstruction of the genre for which the Modern Age is known. However, even though Coogan and Fingeroth hold divergent views on what should and should not be included within the superhero genre, both readily accept *The Punisher* as an example — if only to use him as indicative of the genre’s decline. I would argue that in fact, the rise of the Dark Age antihero was indicative of the maturation the superhero monomyth beyond the confines of simply being a comic book genre. While Miller and Moore were using *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* as biting indictments of 1980s Cold War politics, the Punisher clones that followed in their wake were not only mimicking Moore and Miller, as some critics might imply. Nor were they simply rejecting the Bronze and Silver Age simplicity. Instead, Dark Age comics were adapting to an entirely different social context: 1990s’ post-Cold War culture and the postmodern cynicism that came along with it.

I argue that the comic’s Ages are best understood by placing them within their real-world cultural context. The central narrative of *Watchmen* is predicated on a plot to stop nuclear

---

343 First appearing in 1977, Judge Dredd is the primary protagonist of an ongoing series of political and social satire comics. Although Dredd’s creator and primary writer John Wagner is an American, the publication is British and while related to the superhero monomyth, is enough outside of the American context of the superhero monomyth to be outside of the bounds of this project. That said, an argument could be made that the superhero monomyth also applies.
proliferation during the United States and Soviet Union arms race. There are further allusions to the Vietnam War, the split between East and West Germany, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during WWII. Similarly, *The Dark Knight Returns* uses Superman as an allegory for the nuclear bomb — including a scene where he causes a nuclear explosion with his powers — and again deals with the threat of nuclear escalation between the USA and USSR with Miller going so far as to use then United States President Ronald Reagan as a key supporting character throughout the story. Carl F. Miller argues that the Modern Age of comics is essentially a reaction to the Cold War, noting that DC Comics’ epic companywide relaunch *Crisis on Infinite Earths* ended and *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* began during “the height of U.S.-Soviet tensions in the late Cold War, in the wake of the nuclear arms escalation, the Geneva Summit, and the proposed Strategic Defense Initiative (better known popularly as ‘Star Wars’)” and that “with the tenuous balance of this political struggle in question, 1986 stands as a point in the future in the narratives of each of these graphic novels - a future whose very existence is threatened by the possibility of nuclear annihilation” (51).

However, *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* completed their publication runs in June of 1986 and September of 1987, respectively. In the summer of 1988, the Soviet Union began to break apart as the Baltic Republics began to declare independence from the USSR. In November of 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and reunified Germany. In December 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved as the last remaining Soviet republics declared sovereignty. The Cold War effectively ended with United States President George H. W. Bush declaring during his January

---

344 *Crisis on Infinite Earth* was an epic 12 issue limited series published by DC comics with the express purpose of modernizing and simplifying their convoluted then 50-year history. *Crisis* directly dealt with the Many Worlds Interpretation (see Chapter 1) of history within DC’s shared fictional continuity and attempted to reboot the universe to allow for more serious modern stories free of some of the outdated silliness of the Silver Age, such as Superman’s superdickery or more nonsensical powers or storylines.
1992 State of the Union address, “The biggest thing that has happened in the world in my life, in our lives, is this: By the grace of God, America won the Cold War” (Bush). While Carl F. Miller’s assessment of the world that birthed *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* is correct, in less than five years after their publication, that world no longer existed. In its place was a world where superhero comics were finally free to address the serious issues concerning its readership in a mature and adult fashion, but no longer had a clearly defined social issues to address. Golden, Silver Age and even Bronze Age superheroes had always relied on a black and white world of good and evil. The Dark Age was a world of moral grays.

While comic book fans and scholars are quick to point out the diversity and sophistication that the superhero genre offers, in truth it was always been primarily a boyhood wish-fulfillment power fantasy. Superheroes were born out of the boys’ pulp fiction magazines. They derive from the gods of myth, and share their narrative DNA with the cowboy, sci-fi hero, and hardboiled detective. For better or worse, the formative years of the genre were specifically designed to keep the medium juvenile and restrict it from engaging with mature topics in general and sexuality specifically. Furthermore, the thematic paradigm requires that the superhero be an individual driven to selflessly sacrifice to fight for social justice through constant displays of performative masculinity. In a Cold War world without a Cold War, the Punisher highlighted exactly what the idealized masculine Übermensch of 1938 had naturally evolved into fifty years later. He was a man in search of a war to fight.

The Punisher’s backstory as a disgruntled Vietnam veteran is key to understanding the appeal of the character for the Dark Age. In the same way in which many other comic vigilantes are copycats of the Punisher, the Punisher himself is a narrative clone of Mack Bolan, the protagonist of the *Executioner* series of novels first published by Don Pendleton in 1969. Bolan
has essentially the same origin as the Punisher — he is a Vietnam veteran whose family is murdered by the Mafia, and so he devotes his life to hunting and killing criminals. Similar parallels can be drawn to the Rambo series of films. In fact, Jewett and Lawrence envision the disgruntled Vietnam vet action hero as indicative of their American monomyth in general, linking him directly to the heroic cowboy. Furthermore, Jewett and Lawrence connect the post-Vietnam American hero to a "crisis of masculinity" (Myth of the American Superhero loc. 2012) where the dominant construction of masculinity was challenged by its sudden ineffectiveness caused by “failure to win the Vietnam War; the nation's diminished economic power following the Arab oil embargo of 1973; assertive gay and lesbian movements; and unemployment stresses when minorities and women appeared to advance while white men saw themselves languishing. Perhaps the most provocative factor for male heroic ideals was feminism, with its critiques of bloody masculinities in both war and in domestic violence.” (loc. 2012-2015). Thus, Jewett and Lawrence see late twentieth century action heroes like Rambo as a direct response to this crisis of masculinity. They are the attempt of the American monomyth to respond to a world where performative masculinity is increasingly not the answer and in fact is part of the problem.
I argue that the Dark Age of the superhero monomyth took this a step further; because the superhero monomyth is reliant on violence as currency, absent artificially imposed content restrictions, hyperviolent performative masculinity was able to flourish. Protests of characters like Punisher and his ilk by critics like Fingeroth and Coogan are predicated on the theory that the character is somehow inherently “not superheroic.” The Punisher challenges the MPI framework. He lacks any semblance of superpowers and while he started with a conventional superhero costume, as time went on, he traded his spandex for conventional t-shirts and combat fatigues, or utilitarian military body armor adorned with his skull logo (see Figure 102). Similarly, he abandons active usage of a secret identity and uses his given name, Frank Castle, as much if not more than the Punisher codename. His morality was far outside of the bounds the Code had previously imposed. After decades of the CCA morality, Punisher’s ambivalence towards murdering villains seemed villainous in and of itself.

However, since neither the superhero thematic paradigm nor any of its associated genre prescriptions specifies a moral code or blueprint for heroic behavior, the hyperviolent gritty superhero can instead be seen as the natural result of post-Cold War American masculinity. The Punisher does indeed have a specific pro-social mission; he is waging a one-man war on crime. That is to say that his sole motivation is to use his capacity for masculine violence power to seek social justice — a mission he believes he is uniquely suited for — regardless of the personal cost. In essence, he thus becomes a pure instantiation of the superhero thematic paradigm and nothing
else. Other superheroes followed. As the 1990s progressed, new characters increasingly became more violent and aggressive. Existing superheroes similarly followed suit with perennial heroes like Batman and Spider-man adopting more aggressive methods and increasingly being rendered with more muscular bodies and paramilitary costumes (see Figure 103).

Whereas the Bronze Age superhero struggled to use the thematic paradigm to address 1970s and 1980s problems while being locked into 1950s sensibilities, the Modern Age superhero, having shed the bonds of the CCA, found himself with no clear cause to champion. Instead, he simply stood for the thematic paradigm. The social problems that American comics now found themselves engaged with as the twentieth century came to an end — the AIDS epidemic, the fights for racial and gender equality, inflation and economic recession, the restructuring of the American workforce away from manufacturing towards digital industry— were increasingly issues that performative masculinity was seemingly unequipped to deal with. Even the Gulf War, a theoretically masculine pursuit, lasted only six months in 1990 and 1991 and failed to create the cultural zeitgeist of Vietnam or WWII. The perpetual publication model requires the characters to continue to evolve, within the bounds of their mythic gestalts, to maintain the illusion of change. This is traditionally done by tapping into the issue of the day: racism, drugs, or often war. Without a clear issue to adopt as

______________

345 Trade paperback reprinting stories that originally appeared in various Batman comics in 1999.
previous generations of comic superheroes had, the Dark Age superhero instead leaned into the hypermasculine excess.

Because the superhero was closely tied to the visual medium comic book, this excess had to be illustrated graphically. Thus, as more traditional markers of superheredom began to fade away with the Comics Code, the genre turned to emphasizing the one aspect of the superhero thematic paradigm most capable of being illustrated visually, performative masculinity as a signifier for the potential for violence power. Under artists like Rob Liefeld and Jim Lee the masculine body truly became impossible as physiology was exaggerated to an extreme. Superheroes became abstracted into impossible masses of rippling muscles carrying increasingly larger symbolically phallic guns and massive blades (see Figure 104). Proportion was abandoned to allow the characters to take up more physical space on the page. The superhero became purely a visual trope. He was a dynamic masculine figure designed simply to promote the idea that he was physically powerful beyond all other things.
The Dark Age’s hyperviolence was not limited to male characters; as Code restrictions were removed, the sexpot — the female archetype most capable of wielding violence power as capital\textsuperscript{346} — returned to prominence. As the paramilitary male superhero became impossibly musclebound, the sexpot became abstractly idealized as an impossible body optimized for male sex pleasure. Characters like Sarah Pezzini came into vogue. First appearing in *Witchblade* #1\textsuperscript{347}, Pezzini is a New York City police detective who comes into possession of a mystic gauntlet which bonds with her and can morph into magical armor and a variety of weapons. However, the Witchblade functions by shredding her clothing with its razor-sharp protrusions as it morphs into various bladed weaponry (see Figure 105). Thus, using her powers leaves Sara in a constant state of undress and as an inadvertent object of the male gaze.

\textbf{Figure 105: *Witchblade* vol. 1 #4, 1996}

\textsuperscript{346} See Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{347} *Witchblade* vol. 1, #1, cover dated November 1995, by David Wohl, Brian Haberlin, Christina Z, and Michael Turner with art by Michael Turner.
Witchblade epitomized the returning sexpot archetype. Despite the flesh exposing nature of her powers, Sara Pezzini never hesitates to take on a constant stream of enemies including both mystical foes and Mafia and Yakuza gangsters. She was capable of physically competing with any man. In fact, her origin story depicts her single-handedly confronting a gang of five drug dealers and easily defeating them before she even receives her powers with a near superhuman martial arts and expert marksmanship. She is an impossible body, able to dodge one opponent’s gun fire while karate kicking another and firing a pistol between her legs with pinpoint accuracy as she jumps over another, all while wearing impractically unstable heels (see Figure 106). However, accessing this level of violence power required her to give herself over to the male gaze. Sara is only able to gain access to the drug dealers safehouse by making a visual spectacle of her body. While allegedly Pezzini is undercover as a drug dealer herself, the imagery implies that she is a prostitute, approaching the criminals wearing a tight vinyl minidress with knee-high high-heeled boots. She gains entrance to the apartment by presenting her breasts to the peephole of the villains’ hideout. The particulars of her undercover identity are irrelevant, as the incident immediately devolves into a gun battle as soon as Pezzini enters the premises. The distraction of her beauty is fleeting, but it is
necessary to grant her access to her violence power. Once she has gained that access, the diegetic purpose of her attractiveness seems to lose its meaning.

In a callback to both the supermakeover and the good girl art aesthetic of 1940s sexpots, Sara is first introduced as she is getting dressed before her undercover mission. Michael Turner’s artwork clearly announces its intents to play to the male gaze. His style, and that of the similar Dark Age artists who followed in this mold would come to be known as bad girl art. Turner avoids giving readers a clear view of Sara’s face, instead focusing on closeups of her full lips, luscious hair, and toned butt in a skimpy thong as she slinks into her red minidress (see Figure 107). Meanwhile, Sara herself assures the reader of the importance of her ability to play to the male gaze by narrating her own story in a manner indicative of hardboiled detective fiction. As sexpot she serves as both hero and her own femme fatale, calling attention to her appearance as she dresses by saying that “I get to wear dresses that my mom would slap me for” (5, emphasis in original) and signaling that she enjoys the attention given to her body. She further acknowledges the power in being the object of the male gaze as she shows her breasts to the peephole of the villains’ lair by narrating “Starsky never had to do this to make a bust” but “then again, he couldn’t” (6-7, emphasis in original). As per the

\[\text{Figure 107: Sara Pezzini dressing for the male gaze in Witchblade vol. 1 #1, 1995}\]

---

\[\text{348 Here Sara is comparing herself to David Starsky of the Starsky & Hutch, an action-oriented police television serial that ran from 1975-1979.}\]
suggestions of Brown and Stasia, her heteronormative attractiveness seems to allow her to be accepted as action figure. However, it must be noted that unlike with previous instances of superprostitution, Sara is not purchasing masculine power from a male superhero. Her initial lingerie scenes and her internal monologue are never presented to any other characters. Her words exist only for the reader. Rather than buying masculine protection on the sex/violence exchange from a superhero, she is negotiating the right to perform violence with the reader.

For the Dark Age sexpot, feminine hypersexualization extended beyond her clothing choices. Like the Punisher, Witchblade rejects the conventional MPI framework of the superhero genre. While her book is titled *Witchblade*, and she is sometimes referred to as such by her fandom, that name actually refers to the weapon. In storyline, Sara does not use a codename and has no true costume beyond the amorphous spikes and blades her powers produce. But she is clearly a superhero. She undoubtedly inhabits the superhero milieu. Her impossible body as a sexual object supplants traditional superhero comic tropes and effectively stands in as her costume and identity. Her identity is defined by her capacity to wield violence power and sexual power at the same time. By positioning Sara provocatively, thrusting her breasts forward and her butt backwards as she fought, the comics signal her sexual availability in nearly every panel (see Figure 108). Her waist was impossibly small and breasts improbably large. Her constantly arched back and flowing mane of tousled hair

![Figure 108: for Sara Pezzini, aesthetics, sexuality, and power are all the same thing in *Witchblade vol. 1 #1*, 1995](image)
combined with her minimal tattered clothing to imply orgasmic pleasure as she fought. The more Sara reminded readers of her status as sexual object, the greater her propensity for violence. Inevitably, she became defined purely by her aesthetics, sexuality, and power. Increasingly, these three elements became one and the same.

This formula was copied by many other female characters of the Dark Era. Not only did most new female characters follow this formula, but previously established characters were also retrofitted to fit the sex pot mold. Wonder Woman, whose original purpose had been to promote the idea that feminine love could overcome masculine violence, became increasingly violent as her costume, already essentially a one-piece bathing suit, became increasingly smaller, with the bottoms now rendered as a buttock baring thong. Similarly, perennial kid sister characters Mary Marvel and Supergirl were given sexpot supermakeovers and more violent attitudes. Their classic demure schoolgirl uniform inspired outfits (see Figure 50 and 51) were modified with shorter skirts, bare midriffs, and exposed underwear (see Figure 109) and suddenly the kid sisters quickly became comfortable with the use of excessive force and even murder. Even sweethearts like Lois Lane and Mary Jane Watson trended towards the hypersexual. Because the sweethearts were not primarily

Figure 109: Justice Society of America vol. 3 #25, 2009 and Supergirl vol. 5 #1, 2005
combatants, they were allowed somewhat more modesty than their superpowered counterparts. Nonetheless, their outfits were updated to more modern fashion and they were portrayed as far more sex positive and with this change in attitude came a certain level of independence. They still functioned as damsels-in-distress and relied on their superheroes for rescue, but they were granted some level of violence power and with that autonomy. Sweethearts were increasingly shown to carry guns and be competent leaders despite their lack of superpowers. Effectively, as the twentieth century wrapped up, the female archetypes collapsed into one. The sexpot became the dominant trope for the female superhero comic characters.

As the direct market became the primary outlet for sales the CCA became increasingly irrelevant. In 2001, Marvel Comics abandoned the Code feeling as though it had outlived its usefulness. DC and Archie comics followed in 2011, rendering the Code defunct. As the twenty-first century was underway, the superhero genre finally matured into a form free to tell any sort of story it desired. While the Dark Age might have led to a homogenized presentation of impossible bodies towards a teen male gaze, it also freed female characters from assuming the submissive roles that the sex/violence exchange presumed they would embody. As Mary Marvel and Supergirl’s impossible bodies became increasingly hypersexual, their hyperviolent tendencies often marked them as deadlier than their big brother counterparts. As Brown and Stasia suggest, women are granted masculine agency so long as they are heteronormatively attractive. I suggest that taking this to an extreme began to decouple the idea of performative masculinity from character gender and sexuality altogether.

Throughout the 1990s, canonically queer characters slowly began to appear within superhero comics with Marvel Comics’ character Northstar — first introduced in 1979,349 and

---

349 Uncanny X-men vol. 1 #120, cover dated April 1979 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne with art by John Byrne.
subtly queer-coded since the beginning — finally openly acknowledging that he was gay in 1992. Other queer characters gradually followed, slowly bringing LGBTQ+ representation to a genre that for much of its existence had been intentionally heteronormative. While there have always been queer characters published in limited runs in indie comics, in the twenty-first century there has been a small but steady push to increase the visibility of queer characters from the mainstream Big Two publishers. Characters with longstanding heteronormative histories like Marvel’s Iceman, who had first appeared in 1963 and DC’s original Green Lantern Alan Scott, who had first appeared in 1940, were reimagined as gay in 2015 and 2012 respectively. Furthermore, a dedicated effort has been made to create new queer characters to further improve representation such as Marvel’s lesbian Latina teen superhero America Chavez in 2011 or DC’s Stitch, a non-binary superbeing who was added to the Teen Titans roster in 2021, continuing the groups long progressive history. With this greater diversity in gender and sexual representation superhero comics have also seen something of a toning down of explicitly hypersexualized artwork. While there is certainly no shortage of comics aimed at heterosexual teen male gaze, since the 2010s explicit attempts have been made to appeal to experiment with visual and storytelling styles that might appeal to female and queer readers as well.

However, as these changes were occurring, the comic book industry was quickly moving into its twilight phase. While the turn towards hyperviolent and hypersexual characters provided an initial boost in popularity for many comics titles, this boost in sales was somewhat fleeting. By the end of the twentieth century the comic book publishing industry — and the larger print magazine industry which contained it — began to retract. Many of the independent publishers went out of business. Sales on comics from the remaining publishers fell to a mere fraction of

---

their heyday. Newer media formats ranging from film and television to video games, to the internet supplanted venerable comics as popular media in the hands of youth. Where once the most popular titles had circulations in the millions, by the year 2000, only the best-selling titles could read 100,000 with most mainstream publishers’ titles circulating between 20,000 and 30,000 copies and independent comics far lower. Many long running titles were canceled, and several independent publishers went out of business. By the close of the twentieth century, the comic book industry had lost some 90% of its market share from only a decade prior. While Marvel and DC account for some 60% of the American comic book industry’s market share, both publishers use their comics primarily as intellectual property testing grounds for their far more financially lucrative film studios. Outside of the Big Two, the remaining independent publishers focus the bulk of their efforts on non-superhero content. Thus, as the superhero monomyth has reached its current mature form, its primary historic distribution channel for its century of existence is vanishing. If the superhero monomyth is to avoid consumption, it must be decoupled from its comic book origins.
Epilogue: What was the Superhero Monomyth?

Eco’s theory of the mythic nature of the superhero inherently assumed the perpetual publication model. His analysis of Superman postulates that the character is kept alive in the public eye because new comics were continuously being created. Without the continuous illusion of change, Eco feared that the superhero risked consumption — an ending that was contrary to the nature of myth. With the implosion of the comic industry towards the end of the twentieth century, it would stand to reason that the superhero monomyth would be consumed. Nothing is further from the truth. Instead, the mythic nature of the superheroes has allowed them to transcend their source media.

The comic book publishing market has been in a decline since the 1990s, along with the rest of the periodicals market. This coincides with a large decoupling of superheroes from their origin media. Beginning with the 1989 film Batman, superhero films and television series have increasingly dominated the American media landscape. Most notably the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) have dominated the top ten yearly box office grossers of American market since the franchise began in 2008. Four of the world’s all-time top ten grossing films are from this franchise. These films are often known in the popular parlance as comic book movies where “comic book” seems to be a substitution for “superhero” more so than the media format. Superhero franchises are likewise ubiquitous on American television with the MCU extending their shared continuity into TV shows like WandaVision, Ms. Marvel, and Daredevil and adaptations of DC properties like DC’s Doom Patrol, Titans, and Superman & Lois receiving critical acclaim. While the sales may be down for the traditional comic book industry, the multibillion-dollar annual comic book movie market, in addition to the merchandising profits generated from toys, video games, clothing, and other tie-ins implies that the superhero is more
popular than ever. The comic book medium in and of itself is therefore no more important to the superhero as myth than the stone tablet, scroll, or marble statue is to classic myth.

Extending into more mainstream media formats has given the superhero monomyth access to more diverse audiences as it works to expand its representation. Since 2012, the CW television network has adapted several DC Comics superheroes with shows like *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow* and *Batwoman* featuring multiple LGBTQ+ characters and storylines in lead roles. DC’s adult animated cartoon *Harley Quinn* features the titular character’s journey to come to terms with her bisexual love for her best friend Poison Ivy, a development started in various Batman related cartoons that has since been adapted back into the comic source material. Similar strides have been made with Marvel properties adding queer characters as protagonists in the MCU film *The Eternals* and television series *Loki*. Outside of the Big Two, Netflix’s children’s animated cartoon *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* features a cast of numerous gender fluid and sexuality fluid characters as does Nickelodeon’s *The Legend of Korra* and the Cartoon Network’s *Adventure Time*. Each of these shows explicitly seeks to use tropes standardized by the superhero genre to bring awareness to LGBTQ+ issues in popular media.

Furthermore, I would argue that the superhero monomyth has become the dominant mythic formula for heroic storytelling outside the superhero genre. Even outside of so-called comic book movies, the modern cinematic action hero and heroine are effectively indistinguishable from the superhero in any meaningful way. Characters like *Die Hard*’s John McClane, *The Matrix*’s Neo, *Fast & Furious*’s Dom Toretto, and James Bond of the 007 franchise certainly do not exhibit the collection of tropes commonly associated with the superhero genre; they do not fit the MPI framework. However, even without a costume, the action hero was functionally a superhero, indistinguishable from The Punisher, Batman,
Daredevil, and other more or less human superheroes. Similarly, cinematic action heroines — for instance, Resident Evil’s Alice Marcus, Alien’s Ellen Ripley, Terminator’s Linda Hamilton, The Hunger Games’ Katniss Everdeen, and Buffy Summers of Buffy the Vampire Slayer — are instantiations of the superhero monomyth’s female archetypes, with a heavy tendency towards the sexpot.

It would seem that the only distinguishing factor of a comic book movie is a derivation of the Jacobellis v. Ohio ruling, “I know it when I see it”. However, Jacobellis was argued because not all viewers had the same conception of pornography and did not necessarily “know it when they saw it”. Similarly, many action films are based on comic books without much of the film audience being aware of the source material. This includes Men in Black, Wanted, Kingsman: The Secret Service, The Crow, the aforementioned Barb Wire (see Figure 64), and the Oscar-winning Road to Perdition. At the same time, many popular films clearly starring superheroes such as Robocop, Chronicle, Super, Unbreakable, Hancock, Sky High, My Super Ex-Girlfriend, and The Incredibles (see Figure 110) are not originally based on comic books at all. Far from being able to “know it when we see it”, I would argue that we can no longer tell a comic book movie from a non-comic book movie, or a superhero from a regular hero at all!

Just as the mythic cowboy transcended his pulp origins to become the template for the American hero that birthed the superhero, the superhero monomyth has now transcended its own

\[351\] See Chapter 1.
genres. Superhero tropes pervade the action movie, modern horror story, romance, detective story, and even children’s literature. The *Fast & Furious* film franchise gradually transformed from the story of a policeman infiltrating a gang of petty criminals, into an epic tale of globetrotting nigh invulnerable superspies capable of performing unbelievable feats with their impossible bodies. The *Air Bud* franchise began in 1997 with a live action family film about a golden retriever who can play basketball with humans. By *Super Buddies*, the fourteenth installment released in 2013, the puppies of the original dog have developed superpowers that they use to fight crime. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (see Figure 10) owes as much of its DNA and tropes to the superhero monomyth as it does to its regency romance novel truth copy, if not more. The 2019 television adaptation of the long-running *Nancy Drew* young adult novels franchise reimagines the title character as a hardboiled sexpot detective fighting supernatural threats. The superhero thematic paradigm is at least as ingrained within Elsa and Anna, the sister protagonists of Disney’s *Frozen* and Frozen II, as it was within Superman’s first appearance in *Action Comics* #1.

At the same time, those comics, films, and other texts that purport to be of the superhero genre, such as the MCU films, are continuously attempting to branch out and become something more. *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Ring* is a superhero martial arts movie. *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* is a superhero horror movie. *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* and *Hancock* are superhero romcoms. The *Incredibles* is a superhero family film. *Raising Dion* is the dramatic story of a single African American mother doing her best to parent a superpowered child. Critically acclaimed TV series *WandaVision* and *Moon Knight* use superheroes to examine trauma and mental illness. Arguably, the term superhero is becoming redundant. The superhero thematic paradigm and its associated tropes are now simply the default tools used to tell
narratives of heroes. The question of what is and is not part of the superhero genre has become moot. Everything is.

In truth, the perpetual publication model of the comic industry was never necessary to the mythic nature of the superhero. Nor was the illusion of change ever a requirement. The heroes of ancient mythology certainly were allowed to have closed narratives. Their stories could be bounded and finite. They required no specific canon to be adhered to. In reality, the stages of Campbell’s monomyth show that a mythic character can in fact have a complete narrative arc. The power of the myth is in its ability to remain alive by adaptation. Each iteration mutates to work within its new cultural and narrative contexts while remaining true to its mythic gestalt. Thus, Superman can serve as an aspirational hero of impoverished Jewish teens in one decade, transform into patriotic propaganda in another. Captain America can stand for conservative American traditions or liberal progressiveness. Batman and Robin can be a blueprint for heteronormative masculinity or queer acceptance of nontraditional family units. So long as the thematic paradigm is maintained and the mythic gestalt is respected, the superhero is never consumed; he is ubiquitous.
Works Cited


338


--- “The Justice Society Joins the War on Japan.” *All-Star Comics*, vol. 1, no. 11, June 1942.


--- “Two New Members Win Their Spurs.”


--- “The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom.” *Detective Comics*, vol. 1, no. 33, Nov. 1939, pp. 1–12.


Kendal, Evie. “There's No One Perfect Girl: Third Wave Feminism and 'The Powerpuff Girls'.


--- *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. W.B. Saunders, 1953.


--- “This Monster Unmasked!” *Captain America*, vol. 1, no. 100, Apr. 1968.


--- “If This Be My Destiny.” *Amazing Spider-Man*, vol. 1, no. 31, 10 Dec. 1965.


--- “If a Hostage Should Die!” *Tales of Suspense*, vol. 1, no. 77, 10 May 1966.


--- “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics.” *The American Scholar*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1943, pp. 35–44.


Plato. *The Republic*. c. 380 BCE.


--- “You Can't Say No to the Angel of Death (or Can You?).” *Teen Titans*, vol. 1, no. 45, Dec. 1976.

Rozanski, Chuck. “Modifications to the Distribution System.” *Tales From the Database - Mile High Comics, Chuck Rozanski*, Mile High Comics, Mar. 2004,


353


--- “We Are Gathered Here Today...” *Tales of the Teen Titans*, vol. 1, no. 50, Feb. 1985.


Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: the Transformation of Youth Culture in America.*

