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**Comic Books as Modern Mythology:  
An Anthropological View of (Popular) Cultural Evolution**

In the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, there were innumerable stories about gods and heroes and monsters, all of whom exhibited some trait or another that was shared with either the common citizen of the time or reflective of some situation in which they might find themselves. These were the most popular stories, the ones passed on by word of mouth and at large gatherings. The classical myths have some resonance even today. The planets are named after the gods of Rome, and even words we hear and use on a regular basis, like “echo,” “erotic,” “chaos” and “volcano” have their origins in Greek myth. Our very conception of the 'hero' – a person who triumphs over seemingly impossible odds at great personal sacrifice over an epic journey – comes from the Greeks and Romans. Indeed, without the ancients, the word “epic” would not exist.

The Norsemen of ancient Scandinavia had their own extensive catalog of developed traditional stories featuring their own versions of gods and heroes, monsters and cataclysms. These stories and characters are enduring enough that contemporary weather patterns and the days of the week are named after them; few people realize that the primary god of the Norse was called Woden as well as Odin, and that the fourth day of the week is actually Woden's Day. (If you've always thought Wednesday was spelled strangely, now you know why.) It precedes Thor's Day, and that is followed in turn by Freya's Day, as Freya was the wife of Odin and mother to Thor, the God of the thunders.

As the world progressed, was organized, shrunk (relatively) and conquered, re-organized, went to war periodically, colonized, re-conquered, and explored further, the developed myths of the Far East would share with the world dragons and mind-over-matter inscrutable mystics,

invisible monsters and unstoppable warriors. From the Middle East, religion - particularly that of the Judeo-Christian school - would spread stories of miracles and mad kings, amazing stories of betrayal and murder and resurrection and people with powers beyond those of regular mortals. As these stories spread, they cross-pollinated, so the traditions of one group would conflate and contribute to the traditions of another, what many think of as the evolution of storytelling, or more accurately, the evolution of civilization *as reflected* in storytelling. Jesus and Odin both spent days nailed to wood (a cross and the World Ash, respectively) before dying and being reborn as a more powerful entity, and they both sacrificed their lives for others. Samson and Hercules were both more powerful than the normal people around them, and they both brought down the house in an act of violence mirrored less dramatically by Christ's ejection of the moneylenders from the temple.

As stories evolve, so too does the human race, growing as a people and needing folktales that have more direct relevance to our lives and the situations in which we find ourselves. Our stories change in form and in content, and as the world becomes more complex, our stories find more depth and distribution to match that complexity. Many scholars of ancient myth would tell you that it – classic myth – is here to stay, and that is an acceptable notion, as long as those scholars are not speaking literally. The argument is that the *spirit* of the myth is here to stay, but that the forms and stories will change so drastically as to completely obscure their antecedents. This has already happened with our modern interpretation of the hero.

Joseph Campbell makes the point most famously in The Hero with a Thousand Faces that *all* of the human race's powerful traditional hero stories share something called a “monomyth,” a common structure that ties them together, something abstract that draws from our shared

psychology and uses nebulous concepts like the “shared human experience” to create a story with broad appeal, either to entertain or teach, or both. The most enduring ones do both, and as we acquire experience, evolve our knowledge and it becomes harder to entertain us, it can be argued that ancient myths will lose currency or be forgotten entirely (as their common unifying elements become less common and identifiable), to be replaced with new myths, ones that have contemporary commonality and entertain us effectively in the now, and that have something to say that's relevant to contemporary times. Nothing is better positioned right now to replace ancient myth than the comic book superhero.

Starting in 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster gave us Superman, and as the first comic book super-powered adventurer (preceded only by relatively non-powered two-gun detectives like the mysterious Shadow, the purple-clad Phantom, square-jawed Dick Tracy and brutal Doc Savage) “the strange visitor from another planet” ushered in the age of the Superhero (Nobleman 19).

“Superhero,” a new coinage for this new phenomenon, has come to be defined as a heroic protagonist with explainable and consistent abilities that make him something more than human, but still immensely relevant to readers. Drawing from the Jewish mythology of their upbringing, Siegel and Shuster gave Superman a Hebraic name (Kal-El, which roughly means “voice of God”), an origin like Moses (being placed in a vessel and sent to a faraway land) and the strength of strongman Samson. Brightly clad in red and blue and with his distinctive symbol emblazoned upon his chest, it's not hard to make the argument that in an age of visual entertainment, Superman gets a lot more recognition than say, Perseus or Oedipus. There are no T-shirts, contemporary dances or tattoos featuring Greek heroes these days, and indeed,

Superman and his symbol rival major corporations and ancient symbols for recognition the world over.

Superman and *all* comic heroes are more adaptive than the heroes of old. Most of Superman's power set with which the reader is familiar – heat vision, super speed, flight and so on – have been “retconned” in. A “retcon” in comics is something that is **retroactively** added into **continuity** – just written in after the fact by a writer who follows the original. The additions are not a new phenomenon; oral traditions of Africa and the Native Americans used to “improve” their stories all the time by adding new dramatic elements as they went, but the characters never really changed very much; not much of a character arc. When this practice of “retconning” is used poorly, it can become a ham-handed *deus ex machina* for a writer, but used well, it vastly increases the flexibility and adaptability of the hero over time. This quality is central to what I believe will make these characters outlast their spiritual predecessors, and also define qualities missing from the ancient myths, another reason the classics are destined to be obscured by the shadow of their children.

After Superman quickly came Batman, Wonder Woman & Captain America. As Joy Clough puts it, “the 1940s became the decade of the comic strip superhero.” (550) Batman, especially, has an adapted and updated origin story straight out of old mythology; wronged and orphaned as a child, he embraces an impossible quest to fight monsters his whole life. There is arguably no more recognized hero than Batman (other than possibly Superman), who again, has an iconography that precedes him, worldwide appeal, and some of the highest-grossing movies in Hollywood history. We can, as readers, put ourselves in the place of Batman, struggling against hate and fear and trying our best to be our best selves. Batman defines struggle for many

people, and carries not only the banner of the adventure hero in the tradition of someone like H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermaine books, but also the detective story, the intellectual and literary child of stories like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales.

Wonder Woman was created by doctor of psychology William Moulton Marston, the inventor of the lie detector, so it's no surprise that her "magic" lasso compels those bound within it to always tell the truth and nothing but. Marston's fascination with truth-telling clearly dominated many of his creative pursuits. Marston has Wonder Woman, in her origin story, actually created out of clay and given life on the Greek island of Themyscira, home of the Amazons. Her gods are the gods of the Greeks; she prays to Athena for wisdom, has conflict with Ares, and her mother is Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. She is steeped in Greek mythos, but one not need be familiar with Bullfinch to grasp it. Indeed, in a kind of "backwards acquisition," one can learn Greek myth from Wonder Woman comics.

The examples of DC Comics' "Big Three" demonstrate pretty clearly the slow adaptation and incorporation of Greek and Hebrew myths into comic book storytelling, but there was a kind of great leap forward in 1942 when Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America for use by the American Army during WWII. As Athena was the goddess of Athens, and representative of Athenian ideals, so was Captain America representative of things Americans entrenched in a war for freedom needed to believe they stood for. Strong, brave, and equipped with a defensive shield instead of sword, gun, or other offensive weapon, Cap represents the American ideal, what many Americans wish they were more of the time.

Over the years, Cap has also been the best barometer for American political and social

change, reflecting the Red Scare paranoia of the 50s (Dini 47), the social and political upheaval of the 60s, the relative apathy of the 70s, the disenchantment of the 80s, the cynicism of the 90s, and the sharp rhetoric of the post 9/11 years. He has appeared to die or retire more than once – usually as a statement about where America is headed. Captain America always comes back, though, in the messianic tradition of the Titans, the Phoenix, Odin or Christ (Knowles 133). Always written as a careful balancing act, Captain America retains relevance to his fans because he's an example of what we *could* and *should* be – not what we are but what we strive for; the best of us, not the worst. As such, he serves as enduring exemplar and escapist fantasy – a potent combination.

During the 1950s, the DC Universe started the process of slow conversion meant to keep pace with a changing world. Their magic-based heroes, Starman, Green Lantern and the Flash, among others, began to become science-based heroes, with chemical accidents and alien artifacts replacing magical items and mystical energy in origin stories. Throughout the decade, this went on – keeping in step with the times and acknowledging the advances in society and technology – until Marvel Comics took the reins from them in 1961.

Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (along with Steve Ditko) went through a creative whirlwind between 1961 and 1963 during which they created the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Hulk, Iron Man, the X-Men, Daredevil, Dr. Strange, Nick Fury, and the Avengers. In all of these creations, there is a heavy influence of older myth, but also a consistent distance being placed between the old and new while also exemplifying a more adaptable story structure, capable of changing with the times and the increased sophistication of the observer. New (for the time) understandings of molecular structure, atomic theory, and dimensional overlay were used to

explain and enhance storytelling while still incorporating traditional myth.

Thor of the Avengers is meant to be the actual thunder god of Norse mythology. The Hulk and the Thing both evoke the Jewish Golem stories, and the Thing is actually Jewish (Weinstein 77). Spider-Man carries a bit of Anansi, the African spider god, along with him in his attitude of the merry prankster, and Dr. Strange is the master of the mystic arts, educated in the Far East at the feet of a mystic shaman in a mountain. However, what really sets these heroes apart, and what I believe heralds a new age of storytelling with these characters, are the origin stories. The Fantastic Four are bombarded by cosmic rays on a space mission. Daredevil, blinded and given heightened senses by a radioactive isotope. Spider-Man was bitten by an irradiated spider (which later became a genetically altered spider in the film versions). Dr. Strange is a surgeon. Bruce Banner, exposed to gamma radiation, becomes the Hulk. In a world that had seen the detonation of the first atomic weapons and was in the grip of the Cold War, radiation and technology were the random forces lurking around every corner, and these stories were a response and reinterpretation of the feared unknown.

Iron Man, possibly the most popular of these characters right now, is an excellent example of a new avatar demanded by new contemporary circumstances. Though arguably evolving out of the chivalric tradition of knights in armor, Tony Stark uses bleeding edge technology and builds himself a suit to keep himself alive while incorporating a defensive solution to free himself from those who have taken him captive. This scientifically advanced suit of armor changes to meet the demands of advancing technology, and the story itself is based on first world technological conflict. Iron Man is not the first new mythos created to deal with new circumstance, but he's the best example of the increased relevance of the comic book superhero

over the classic myths.

The biggest departure from classical mythological structure to come out of the 1960s, though, would have to be the X-Men. Even though the X-Men draw from Jewish, European, and far Eastern myth and traditions, their reason for being marks an evolutionary point in civilization inasmuch as they are an allegory for the civil rights struggle here in America. They were originally created to deal with and discuss issues surrounding the struggle of African-Americans for rights in 1963 (Professor X and Magneto were originally meant to evoke Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, respectively), but have come to symbolize any group kept under the thumb of any other simply for being born (Lee vi). The original film franchise adapts this even further and updates it with heavy gay rights overtones. Their whole reason for existing – this idea that maybe people everywhere are just people and deserve the same rights, accordingly – is a relatively recent idea when mapped against the whole of human history.

In Japan, the 1954 filmic response to having a nuclear weapon detonated in two cities came in the form of Godzilla (Toho), a giant, irradiated monster from out of nowhere. Manga, a Japanese form of comic art, caught up with American comics and got Godzilla into comics in the late 1960s. Since then, Godzilla has spawned a wave of giant monsters and several comic book series. Other Manga from Japan are also responses to Japanese culture, like fears about technology, alienation, government influence, and the invasion of other cultures. Sexual repression breaking through is also a big theme in Manga and its animated film progeny, Anime. The most widespread Anime, things like Akira, Ghost in the Shell (MangaEden) and Crying Freeman were all Manga before they were Anime.

British comics, having debuted in the 1950s and largely influenced by their American

counterparts, went into a long decline that was reversed in the 1970s by original British creations Captain Britain, Dan Dare and Judge Dredd (AD 2000). Doctor Who, popular on the BBC since 1963, made his way into comics during this period as well. The stories featuring these characters were responses to contemporary events in British society, like a shift in British government to conservatism, the rise of additional laws and unrest between the UK and Northern Ireland. The fight against fascism was a major theme in British comics throughout Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's term, for example. Captain Britain has since been incorporated into the Marvel Universe, and Judge Dredd has been continuously published in two countries for 40 years, inspiring two Hollywood movies.

The rest of the world embraced comic books and published for wide audiences their own comics traditions, and the popular cultural stories blended into one another as they had during the classical period. Comics from the Middle East and Africa slowly made their way into the larger world (Peppercorn) and the Mexican luchadores starred in “Tijuana Bibles,” micro-comics that were also used to publish pornography and other kinds of stories outside of the mainstream media.

Like with any new culture embraced primarily by young people, comic books initially had their vocal and narrow-minded opponents – the most vocal of whom appeared in the early 1950s in Canada in the person of Dr. Fredric Wertham. Dr. Wertham wrote a book called The Seduction of the Innocent and eventually appeared before the US Congress arguing that comic book superheroes would make children sexually deviant, exhort them to criminality and drugs, and teach girls to behave in an unladylike fashion. Wonder Woman's strength was “emasculating” for men, while Batman and Robin were “living the wish dream of the

homosexual.(Wertham190)” Dr. Wertham fiercely denied that comic books would make any kind of a dent in American culture and predicted their quick decline (395).

In the ensuing decades, comic books, their creators and their fans have proved Dr. Wertham decidedly wrong as they have supplanted classical myth and become an enduring part of mainstream and popular culture. Multiple societies promoting comic books have come into being, serving all kinds of functions including stamping out censorship and protecting the rights of publishers and retailers (CBLDF), retirement funds for creators, writers and artists, and pro-literacy programs for children and adults. In two recent instances, Superman and Batman have been used to help children in war-torn countries be aware of landmines, and Captain America has long been a part of US Army publications.

Comic books have been used to examine historical events like the Jack the Ripper killings (*From Hell*) or World War II (*Maus*, *Sgt. Rock*, *The Unknown Soldier*). They have dealt with the origins and problems of America (*Uncle Sam*, *Birth of a Nation*, *Give Me Liberty*, *Elektra: Assassin*), wars in other countries (*Fax from Sarajevo*, *Palestine*, *Pride of Baghdad*) law and crime (*Red*, *Criminal*, *Sin City*, *Global Frequency*, *Iron Man: Extremis*), and the “simple” lives of ordinary people (*Persepolis*, *American Splendor*, *Fun Home*). They deconstruct themselves (*Watchmen*, *Planetary*, *Badger*) and take on religion (*JLA: Heaven's Ladder*, *Preacher*), philosophy (*Promethea*, *Flaming Carrot*), politics (*Transmetropolitan*, *V for Vendetta*) and human relationships (*Identity Crisis*, *Marvels*, *Berlin*).

They are also used to tell fantastic stories that people can relate to while escaping into, often while still managing to hold up a mirror to things happening in the real world. The top grossing movies today are based on Batman or the Avengers. The CW's new show, “Arrow,” is

based on Green Arrow, the superhero archer from comics. Merchandise, from jewelry to clothing to shoes to accessories, abounds. People use language like “hulking out” or “faster than a speeding bullet” without knowing or caring where they come from. “Iron Man” is an American heavy metal music classic and a global marathon event as well as a comic book superhero. As classical mythology fades, the new mythos of superheroes is here to take its place, now and for the foreseeable future.

This “Supermyth” is woven into the fabric of our lives and language and we are affected by its tradition without trying, and that is the mark of a dominant, evolving cultural force.

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