Comic Books Through the Ages: Society's Connection with Comic Books

James E. Thomas

Stories define us. Since ancient times people have told stories of gods, demi-gods, monsters, villains, and heroes; some real some imaginary. It is through these stories that we better define our morals, struggles, society, culture, and even ourselves. Just as our experiences, fears, desires, and thoughts help shape the stories we tell those tales can helpshape us.

The first tablets, scrolls, and books were all stories of one sort or another. However, it wasn't until the early 20th century that stories took on a new form that would become a globe-spanning phenomenonwhich would inspire innumerable people, and make astonishing amounts of money. Since the birth of comic books in the early 20th century they have had an influence on the culture, media, and marketing of the times.

In the middle of the Great Depression perhaps when hopes in America were at their lowest the people needed a hero, and one rose to bring hope; that hero was Superman. It all began in 1938 when Joe Schuster and Jerry Segal first sold the idea for Superman to National Comics as a 13-page comic for just $130. At that time a comic book only cost 10 cents, and up until that point they were about classical heroes like Robin Hood, fantasy heroes like Prince Valiant, western outlaws like Billy the Kid, or noir detectives like Dick Tracy. However, after the introduction of the world's first superhero things would never be the same.

From the very first issue readers related with Superman. He was a powerful symbol of immigration that connected with people across many cultures. He was an all-American guy that was anti-crime in an era run by the mobs, but he was also an alien from somewhere else who had come to the United States, adopted a new name, and become a part of society. This sentiment

resounded through the culture of America's immigrants and their descendants, but as the Great Depression ended more problems were just beginning.

As America entered the war superheroes entered the war with us. The conflict with the Axis powers appeared on every comic book shelf with the heroes fighting along-side the Allied troops. Superheroes were used as a part of the propaganda of the time, leading to the birth of characters like Captain America, who can be seen punching out Hitler on the cover of the first issue. Superheroines also began to emerge during this time as women began to take on new roles in society. As the war loomed ever closer women began to join the work force to aid in the war effort. For many women working in the factories was empowering, and these women would inspire many young girls; Lynda Carter, who would grow up to play Wonder Woman, was one of these girls (Truth…, 2013). On December 21, 1941 Wonder Woman made her first debut in All-American All-Star Comics issue number 8, and not too long later she got her own comic. Before Wonder Woman, women were portrayed as the damsel in distress or the annoying girlfriend, but Princess Diana of Themiscyra was powerful, intelligent, and independent (Truth…, 2013).

However, superheroes had farther reaching effects than just in the culture of the United States, and soon enough their influence would spread from the dime stores novels to nearly every branch of media. The documentary Superheroes: A Never-ending Battle – Truth, Justice, and the American Way found that in 1939 there were only seven publishing houses making roughly 50 various titles of comic books, but only a year later there were two-dozen different firms putting out over 150 different comic books. By the early 1940's ninety-percent of boys in America between the ages of seven and seventeen were reading comics, and almost 90% of girls were reading as well (Truth…, 2013).

It was also during this Golden Age of comics when superheroes began to appear in other media. Superman appeared on an after-school radio show, in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, the World's Fair, cartoon shorts, even the big screen, and as radio gave way to TV he even got his own television show (Truth…, 2013). Superman wasn't the only one to get attention though as superheroes like Batman got their own serials in theaters as well.

With the spread of media coverage, it didn't take long for other people to begin wanting in on some of the profits superheroes were providing, and merchandise began to appear. Puzzles, toys, and even the some of the first action figures of Superman began to appear as he took America by storm, but just like todays heroes' things didn't stop there. Soon enough Superman was appearing on his own breakfast foods, clothes, and other accessories like bicycle ornaments, so you could ride the neighborhood in style.

However, with the end of the war and the beginning of the 50's things began to change for comic books as the world changed. After World War II it seemed that people didn't need superheroes anymore for a time as crime and horror novels became more popular during the McCarthy years. A decrease in sales and government censorship almost killed superheroes off. This was far from the end for superheroes though as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Space Race, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Atomic Age would give birth to a new kind of superhero and a new age of comic books; the Silver Age.

Advancements in science gave birth to more scientific heroes. This all began when a desperate Stan Lee decided to give one, final attempt at comics and came up with The Fantastic Four; people given their powers by strange cosmic radiation as they raced to be the first to land on the moon. More superheroes born by radiation began to appear like Spiderman, the Hulk, and

others. It was also during this point that another change happened in superheroes, they began to have real life problems (With Great…, 2013).

Peter Parker was a nervous, emotional teenager who had all the problems that came with, and he connected with young readers; even Stan Lee liked to call him "…the superhero that could be you." (With Great…, 2013). Superheroes began to deal with society's problems and even become a reflection of society itself. Green Arrow and Green Lantern travelled across the country examining the fallout from things like the crime culture in the U.S., the backlash from the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Kennedy. In one comic Green Arrow even found his own sidekick, Speedy, shooting up heroine and he had to deal with that problem. Antiheroes also appeared during this time in response to the public outrage and an increase in crime. The Punisher was one of them; a man come home from the war to feel hated, only to watch his family die because of a gang shooting.

The Civil rights movement also had a huge impact on the world of comic books. It all started small when readers would find out that characters like Spiderman went to an integrated high-school (With Great…, 2013). In 1966 the world's first black superhero appeared in his own comic book, Black Panther; a warrior prince from Africa with a scientific mind. Soon after characters like Luke Cage followed as a response to the era of Blaxploitation films. But they weren't the only superheroes making a statement about civil rights. Daredevil connected with the handicapped, Wonder Woman connected with feminists, and the X-men connected with people across all walks of life.

Just as superheroes began to dominate the culture of the times, they began to spread throughout much of the media of the time as well. Superheroes began to appear all over the small screen in the 1960's and 70's. Every Saturday Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and others

would appear on Super Friends, or in some cases guest star on other cartoons like Scooby Doo. Throughout this time more heroes began to get their own live action TV shows like Batman, Wonder Woman, and The Incredible Hulk. Even Captain America appeared on television with a few made-for-television movies. However, it wasn't until Christopher Reeve brought Superman to life in 1978 that comic books hit the big screen with their own full-length movies.

In the world of art comic books and superheroes were also beginning to make waves thanks to a new art form called pop art. Pop art began to appear on the scene in the 1960's, and artists like Andy Warhol drew inspiration from comic books, and even portrayed superheroes like Batman and Superman in his artwork. Even the artwork of the comic books was changed and adapted to mirror the times thanks to artists like Jim Steranko and others by making use of psychedelic patterns and colors, and even made interactive pages (With Great…, 2013).

Movies, television shows, and professional artwork only added to the appeal of superheroes. As appeal grew so did the market for superhero merchandising. Toy companies like Kenner, Mego, and Ideal began to put out actions figures or dolls for lots of different superheroes. These weren't the only toys put out though; water guns, projectors, utility belts and many other kinds of toys began to appear and turn the toy world in to a booming enterprise. Toys weren't enough though and soon images of comic book characters began to appear on clothing, stamps, watches, blankets, even boxes of tissues. Nothing was out of bounds; even the adult entertainment industry tried to get in on the action with "Wonder Wanda" blow up dolls.

Now two generations of Americans had grown up with comic books. This was leading to more adults reading comic books and staying interested in them, but as the readers grew, matured, and changed the comics needed to change too. A new generation, Generation X, was just getting started and they would push the limits of comic books further than ever before.

As the millennium slowly came to a close in the 80's and 90's a new age of comic books was beginning. The Bronze Age of comics was known for its gritty realism, its graphic stories, and its realistic portrayals as the heroes grew up, lived, and in some cases died. Not only that but during the Bronze Age of comics many movie adaptations of comic books would begin to appear as comic books began to be acknowledged for what they were, art.

A new generation was coming up during the 80's and 90's, Generation X. Comic books like the X-Men, Punisher, Batman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and others captured their imaginations and inspired them while also reflecting the grittiness of a society they saw around them every day. A lot of time had passed since the birth of superheroes in the Golden Age to where they were now in the Bronze Age. Society had changed and, in many cases, the old heroes weren't popular anymore. The readers had grown up and the characters needed to grow up too.

Though comics were becoming more serious it wasn't until 1986 that things really changed. DC comics released a graphic novel called *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller and it was an immediate success (A hero…, 2013). The story portrays Batman as an old man in a dystopian future who had either out-lived or outlasted all his old villains, but now there was a new threat to Gotham that he had to stop no matter the cost. This set the new tone for comic books of the era. Comic books like The Watchmen, The Crow, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Spawn began to fill comic book bins everywhere.

New characters began to appear and old ones began to change and grow, or even die off during the Bronze Age. In 1983 Marvel introduced Northstar, the first gay superhero, in 1987 Spiderman finally got married to Mary Jane Watson, the X-men began to be portrayed as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural team, and even DC got in on the action with the Death of Superman during the 90's.

7

The increased attention that comic books were getting in the late 80's and early 90's peaked the interested of people in Hollywood, as well as others who were looking to cash in on the trends of the time. Movies like Batman starring Michael Keaton, The Punisher starring Dolph Lundgren, and others began to appear on the big screen. As time passed by more superhero movies began to appear, especially during the 90's when a steady wave of superhero movies swept across the world. Movies like Blade, The Rocketeer, The Phantom, Darkman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Crow and many others began to dominate the big screen with some of them even getting their own series of movies.

The small screen was also dominated by superheroes, especially Saturday mornings cartoons. However, these cartoons that began to pop up were different than ones that had come before like Super Friends. Cartoons like X-Men, Spawn, and Batman the Animated Series had great animation, wonderful voice acting, and even better writing, and this showed as they began to get nominated for Emmy's or other awards, and even won a few.

The increased appeal of comic books opened up a wider interest in them and began to increase their sales numbers, not only that but Marvel, DC, and McFarlane began to appeal to adult and others with anever-broadening amount of merchandise for people to buy, though these comics and toys were no longer just for kids. Comics began to hit record numbers of sales. It's no wonder that during the Bronze Age of comics the X-Men were the most popular, and this wasproven beyond a shadow of a doubt in 1991 when a rerelease of X-Men number 1 sold over 8 million copies (A hero…, 2013). The X-Men weren't the only comic to hit record sales during this time though. DC also had their own success with comics like The Death of Superman which sold over 2.5 million copies at the time, and people were buying it thinking it would be an investment for

the future, whichpeople hoped could be worth as much as an Action Comics Number 1 someday (A hero…, 2013).

Trading cards, action figures, and other merchandise began to hit the shelves. Fans bought droves of X-Men trading cards in the early 90's, and companies began to put out extraordinarily detailed and life-like toys of various heroes. The detailed and sometimes grotesque action figures of McFarlane Toys disappeared off shelves almost as fast as they were stocked, and everywhere posters were sold with art from the newest and hottest artists of the day. Comic books had finally made it.

The influence comic books have had on society since their birth in the early 20th century is apparent all around us in our society, media, and merchandise. Comic book heroes had lived with us, fought with us, loved, and lost with us. They are a reflection of ourselves; both our worst and best qualities and this is why so many people are drawn to them. Stories have been a part of us since they first began to be told around campfires or written down on stone tablets or temple walls. As we move forward in to a new century a new age of comic books comes with it; one where the fans can see the heroes they love in new ways, read or listen to them on-line, and even become them.

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