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Kang Across Time

Superheroes have captured the imagination of readers since their debut in comic books in the early 1930's. However, it wasn't until the introduction of Superman towards the end of the decade that the industry truly realized the opportunity sitting on their desks. For the remainder of the century comic books would be subject to scrutiny, praised for their creativity, and forced to adapt to the state of the world at any given moment. In today's day and age the heroes from comic pages now appear in major motion pictures, yet still exhibit the same characteristics that they were originally drawn with. Through the analysis of comic books from two distinct eras it becomes possible to dissect the differences and similarities between character types, themes, and visual conventions across time.

Throughout the entirety of superheroes existence in comic books, one trope has remained constant, which is the established character types. Each issue of a comic book would feature a heroic individual seemingly selfless to the highest degree who would defend the innocent and pursue the evil which of course was similarly constant in their desire for personal gain or mass harm. The first comic book being analyzed in this paper is the eighth issue of the first volume of *The Avengers*, released in 1964. The comic depicted the story of 'Earth's mightiest heroes' facing off against a new enemy by the name of Kang the Conqueror. Kang hails from the future and has come back in time to conquer the 'primitive' past as he desires for total control. This confirms the stereotypical character types of the antagonist and protagonists for the genre as the colorfully clad villain threatens the world, and the heroes must risk their safety for those of others. The Avengers team consists of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Giant Man, and the Wasp, which once again played into another trope of the genre which featured a male dominated

cast of superheroes. The character type of women in the genre is reinforced through the lone female superhero, who was subsequently captured by Kang on the 10th page of the comic, only to be heroically rescued from his grasps by Iron Man, ultimately referred to as simply a “courageous girl” by the conclusion of the page. The theme of having women in the minority and must be rescued by their male counterparts is still prevalent in the other comic analyzed; however improvements can be seen. The second comic in this comparison is the eighth installment of the Avengers Forever series from 1999. The Avengers are still in pursuit of Kang, who is now known as Immortus, and the heroes of the story have captured one of his henchmen in the form of a space phantom. Women in the superhero group has clearly progressed by this time as they now have two in the group. This can be viewed as the bare minimum, but it is nonetheless an improvement. It is also evident that their roles in terms of storytelling have grown to be notable agents in progression of the plot rather than simple objects of desire or damsels in distress. This can be identified due to their costumes, which although still skin tight and leaving little to the imagination, are noticeably less revealing than those of the past, such as Wonder Woman’s metallic lingerie. Now the use of their costume design adds more to their character’s identity other than an unrealistic figure.

Marvel has always been viewed as a progressive comic book company, as it strayed from traditional norms of the industry. In terms of the superhero genre, thanks to Stan Lee, the company was the first to introduce superheroes that were made with the audience in mind. He created characters that battled with personal problems as often as the forces of evil. The heroes would also be known to the public, many not even having secret identities such as the Fantastic Four, allowing for them to become identifiable to the readers and forming a large following. All of these successful innovations to the genre came in the silver age of comic books. According to

Coogan, “The conventions reach “equilibrium” and are mutually understood by artist and audience” (Coogan 193). This is evident in the instances stated above, however Stan Lee was always looking for the next step to take, challenging the themes of the genre. In Avengers 008 the common theme of the superheroes saving the day is achieved by the end of the comic, however before they can do so they must first be saved themselves. And it is none other than a teenage group of heroes that do so, once again providing a branch for the fans to connect and cling to. The themes of the superhero genre have essentially remained constant throughout the years. However, these constants have been pushed farther with recent adaptations of characters. In the Avengers Forever comic, both the traditional outlook on themes are present as well as the introduction of an ulterior outlook on themes. Both of which are evident within the first two pages. From the opening panel the common theme of superheroes being extraordinarily strong is established with the character Hawkeye struggling to access the secrets of a synchro staff. This is notable simply due to the fact that Hawkeye is one of the few superheroes that is not endowed with any special powers other than his innate ability to shoot and aim a bow and arrow. Never the less his muscles are illustrated fully flexed for the readers, showcasing that even the superheroes of human decent are wielding immense power. He is also the source of one of the first oppositions to common themes in the genre, that being the abuse of said power. On page two of the comic he is depicted threatening and for lack of better terminology, manhandling, the space phantom for information. This contradicts the commonly held belief that superheroes only combat evil with violence and only doing so when necessary. This act is in complete defiance of the popular saying surrounding superheroes, “With great power there must also come great responsibility” (Marvel presents Amazing Fantasy #15). Furthermore, the theme can be extended to the abuse of power, which is typically a role held by the villains of the story and the task of

ending their abuse of power falling on the superheroes. However in this scene the roles have clearly been reversed, leaving the lines of good and evil blurred. This is not the first occurrence of this, as the violence showcased in comics were the main drive behind the formation of the Comics Code Authority. The fact that both of the comics being analyzed were approved by the CCA shows that the length Hawkeye went to did not exceed their limit, and the pursuit of justice outweighed the acts committed. Within two years from this comic's publishing, Marvel would exit from the CCA as the renaissance age of comic books was in full bloom.

Illustration is perhaps the most important component of any given comic book, none more so than the superhero genre which consistently implements abilities and otherworldly exponents that the reader would have difficulty imagining without. The first instance of comic book style illustration appeared in the Tarzan comic strip in 1936 from the pen of Burne Hogarth. The rippling muscles, commonly referred to as frayed look, of the jungle boy captivated audiences as they awaited some enormous feat or action. The next innovator of illustration was Jack Kirby, the artist of the first comic analyzed for this paper. The style of art he is known for is the use of motion for his characters. While the characters themselves weren't the cleanest finish in the industry, the suspense created in the reader as they watch their favorite heroes spring or fall across the page made up for it tenfold. This is evident throughout the eighth issue of the Avengers, however on the tenth page the words capture the essence of the image to perfection, "Then, a speeding, spinning, skimming circular steel shield..." This style of artwork would garnish Kirby a fifty-year career, but perhaps most important was the influence he had on the industry as a whole, as comic creators would forever copy his style of action. The Avengers Forever comic series was published after Kirby's death, but still made use of his stances and movement lines. But illustrators Carlos Pacheco and Jesus Merino approached the series in a

modern sense. The characters were often times left standing, as the plot of the comic revolved around the stories being told, something rarely done by Kirby. Another factor different from the earlier comics are the emphasis on the facial features of the characters and their emotions. These illustrations served as a proper medium, depicting scenarios accurately enough that the narrative and text would not have to acknowledge the image at all and could instead focus on the progression of the story. The change in visual conventions allowed for a wider range of storytelling to take place, and maintained Marvel's dominance in the industry.

Comic books have always been forced to adapt to the times, evolving with the world around them. The superhero genre has been the dominant force in the industry as it has survived the test of time, now finding unprecedented success at box offices. The two comic books selected for this analysis have been able to highlight the similarities that still reside in the industry even after 35 years. However it is the differences that set the comics apart and made Marvel the company it is today. And if it weren't for their takes on character typing, challenging common themes of the time, and progressing the visual conventions it is likely the superhero genre would have faded into history.

Work Cited

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