HOW SUPERHEROES REALLY INFLUENCED THE WORLD

Are superheroes simply the products of imaginative minds, or are they a reflection of the societies in which they are created? Are superheroes just fictional characters which provide nothing more than a few action sequences and interesting stories? Is their sole purpose of existing just entertainment? No, superheroes are much more than that. A common notion amongst people is that comic books are a collection of images which contain fictional and fantastical stories for children. It is believed that comic books are meant for the juvenile eyes. I believe that superheroes and their stories are relevant to all ages, because there is much more to superheroes than action and adventure.

Why do people like superheroes? What is so appealing about superheroes? Many would say that it is the gadgets and contraptions they make and possess, the costumes they wear, the villains they fight or even the alliances they create. Others might believe that the sense of action and adventure the superheroes provide is the reasons behind their popularity and acceptance. The universe in which these characters exist has become so detailed and intricate that it seems almost realistic. The meticulousness of the multi-verse has increased our curiosity. But are these the only reasons why we like superheroes?

I believe that there is a much more profound meaning behind the stories of these superheroes. I believe that they had a deep seated moral which many of us failed to realise. Since the very origin of these superheroes, they had a purpose. Their intent was not necessarily to provide action or adventure, but to provide patronage to the teeming fragments of society. They were created in order to cope with the contrast of demeanour in our growing society. The essence of a superhero was to uphold the benevolence and increase tolerance.

Many people view superheroes as the main characters in an ongoing modern mythology. Myths are stories told by cultures that often feature larger than life individuals who teach us something about ourselves and our place in the world. Myths span the globe and arise in dozens and dozens of cultures over multiple ages in human history. They have been a staple of human society for as long as we've been around. And though the early superhero stories found most of their inspiration from Greek, Roman and Norse mythology, it needs to be acknowledged that these popular mythologies are but a fraction of the cultural myths that have dominated the world.

The stories that come out of these global mythologies are rich and varied. Many of them discuss the origins of the universe and the natural phenomena we see around us. Others offer keen insights into human nature and lend themselves as lessons in morality. Still others seek to establish what binds a people together. Scholars debate what myths are really trying to do. Some view them as failed attempts at doing science: astronomy, sociology, and so forth. Other scholars think that this totally misses the point. Myths were never intended to be taken as literally true, but as metaphorically true. These debates will unlikely ever be resolved.

To bring it back to superheroes, why do we need a story where a teenager has the power to crawl on walls like a spider to reflect upon issues of power and responsibility? Why do we need a story about a guy who dresses up as a bat to fight crime in order to reflect upon what justice demands and what responsibility the government versus individual citizens have in ensuring that justice is done?

These stories help us to think about such matters in a simple yet meaningful manner. The fantastical elements of early myths helped us share these stories. In cultures dominated by oral traditions, it's easier to remember and pass along the details of larger-than-life narratives than ordinary ones. For us, communication isn't the problem. But engagement is. If we want young people to think about power and responsibility, we can sit them down and give them a lecture, or we can hand them Spider-Man. Do you want to guess which one is more effective?

It's not just about kids, either. As adults, we're disposed not to tackle deep, emotionally challenging issues directly. We are often at our best when we can approach a problem at a distance. It's no accident that Godzilla came out of Japan post World War II. Was it because the Japanese were just itching for a fantastical story about the destruction of their cities? Certainly not. They were traumatized by what the United States had done to them with the dropping of the atom bomb and what they had done to bring on such attacks. That trauma, and the reflection that comes along with it, is easier to think about metaphorically at first, and so a giant city-destroying, radiation-breathing monster is created, something fantastical to fight. Superman is a myth about the immigrant experience. Batman emerged as a way to address dissatisfaction with crime and government complicity. The Silver Age focused a tremendous amount of attention on America coming to terms with the unfathomable power it had acquired through the atomic bomb.

Wonder Woman, Princess Diana of Themyscira, the most famous female superhero of all time. She is an emissary from the Amazonians for all of humanity. She was created by a Harvard trained psychologist, William Moulton Marston. In consultation with his wife, Marston, developed a character to be used as means of positive propaganda. Marston's work in psychology had let him to believe that woman were morally superior to men and ought to be the ones in charge. Thus, Wonder Woman was created as a tool to empower woman. It was created to create an empowering image of women. She plays an important role even now to promote the constant efforts to establish gender equality.

Captain America was created initially to fight the Nazis and the Japanese in the 1940s. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby gave us one of the most iconic superheroes from the golden age of comics. The character was created to symbolise the core principles which America stands for. He was showcased as a true patriot. Steve Rogers a frail and flaccid young man volunteered to be experimented on with a "super serum" which would increase his strength, agility, endurance and most importantly patriotism to superhuman levels.
In many ways, the 1960s was the Age of Marvel as much as it was the Silver Age. In a few short years Lee and company introduced the world to Spider-Man, Iron Man, Hulk, the Avengers, X-Men and more, characters who, needless to say, dominate pop culture today as much as Superman, Wonder Woman and

Batman do. The advent of these characters helped comic books reclaim a central place in American culture, and reinvigorated superhero stories in a way that hasn't stalled since.

It's difficult to exaggerate the profound cultural shifts that occurred in America during the 1960s. In many ways it was a bloody, terrible time. The United States saw itself become mired in the Vietnam War, an ugly Cold War conflict that lasted until the mid-1970s and totalled well over a million deaths, more than 58,000 of which were Americans. Many of them were drafted into the conflict. The result was an American public that completely lost its appetite for war. At least for a while.

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963. His brother Robert Kennedy was then assassinated in Los Angeles on June 6th, 1968. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated just a few months earlier in Memphis on April 4, 1968. These three deaths left a deep scar on the American psyche that in more recent times has been matched only by the national trauma brought about by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

But these dark days were also a time of hope and optimism. The 1960s saw women and minorities make significant progress in pressing for their rightful claim to be treated as political equals. The decade brought the second wave of feminism to America, with a focus on increased work opportunities, reproductive rights and sexual freedom. African-Americans pressed their case all the way to Washington DC, eventually scoring huge victories with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

If all of this weren't enough, the spectre of nuclear annihilation loomed larger in the 1960s than it ever had or would again. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 put the world on the brink of a full-scale nuclear war, and the thirteen days in October over which the crisis unfolded were among the most tense in modern history.

Science gave us the bomb and with it the fear of a radioactive death to the planet. But it also gave us computers and sent America to the moon in 1969, a major accomplishment for the advancement of the human race and a realization of the dream John F. Kennedy put in motion in May of 1961.

The heroes of the Silver Age, in particular the first wave of Marvel superheroes, reflect this fundamental duality to science. Radiation is responsible for bestowing powers on so many early Marvel characters—the radioactive cosmic rays that create the Fantastic Four, the radioactive spider bite that turns Peter Parker into Spider-Man, the radioactive blast that transforms quiet Bruce Banner into the raging Hulk, the radioactive accident that blinds Matt Murdock but gives him heightened senses to become Daredevil, and many others like them. Not every Marvel superhero is birthed this way, of course, but enough of them are to make it improbable that it's coincidence. In many ways, the science of the 1960s, with its extensive potential for nuclear annihilation and its equally awesome creative potential for technological advancement here on Earth and beyond, is channelled by the Marvel superheroes of the Silver Age and is the likely inspiration of the most famous line in all of comic books.

The Bronze Age of Comic Books is recognized as extending from the early 1970s into the mid-1980s. There's no agreed-upon start to it, but most point to Crisis on Infinite Earths, Watchmen, The Dark Knight Returns and Marvel Secret Wars as the end of it and the beginning of the Modern Age.

The Bronze Age is characterized by a kind of "growing up" that happened with comic books, where superheroes were finally allowed to deal with problems that weren't just about another bad guy coming into town or escaping imprisonment. It gave comic books a new relevance for fans.

Some of the more famous stories and arcs in comic books during the Bronze Age reflect the sobering attitude of the times. In the case of Tony Stark, the sobering was literal. The "Demon in a Bottle" Iron Man storyline from 1979 bravely confronts Tony Stark wrestling with his alcoholism. Stan Lee made waves by rejecting the Comics Code Authority's ban on showing any use of drugs in comics. At the urging of the government he wrote a 1971 storyline in Amazing Spider-Man #96-98 that showed Harry Osborn's substance abuse. Green Lantern/Green Arrow #85 also wrestled with drug addiction when it was revealed that Green Lantern's sidekick, Speedy, abuses heroin.

But perhaps the most important event in the Bronze Age is the death of Gwen Stacy. Thrown off a bridge by the Green Goblin, Spider-Man accidently breaks her neck as he uses his webbing to stop her fall. Here, in a way, is the mood of the 70s in a nutshell: even when trying to do good, you may fail and cause harm. That the fun and light-hearted comic The Amazing Spider-Man confronted this head-on made huge waves in fandom. It was a game changer. The innocence of superheroes was gone. Some were alcoholics, some of their friends and allies were drug addicts, and sometimes their exploits ended up killing the ones they loved.

The Modern Age of Comics begins roughly in the mid-1980s and continues to this day. It is characterized by a grimmer turn in comic book narratives, with more anti-heroes, more grittiness, more ethical ambiguities and more complexities in the lives of superheroes. If the Bronze Age is when comic books grew up, the Modern Age is when they grew self-reflective.

Many consider the start of the Modern Age to be DC's Crisis on Infinite Earths and Marvel's Secret Wars, both of which came out in 1985. In an effort to address many of its continuity issues, DC's Crisis on Infinite Earths killed, most notably, Barry Allen, the Flash, and Supergirl. And that was almost unheard of before then. Secret Wars, for its part, gave Spider-Man a black costume that would eventually lead to the emergence of the supervillain Venom. Visually, to have one of the more colourfully clad characters now sporting all black, only to see his new costume try to kill him and his loved ones, was definitely an edgier turn for everyone's friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man.

But Crisis on Infinite Earths and Secret Wars were just the start. Arguably, the Modern Age came into its own in 1986 with Frank Miller and Klaus Janson's The Dark Knight Returns, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbbon's Watchmen. 'The Dark Knight Returns' tells the story of an older Bruce Wayne coming out of retirement to battle the rising tide of crime gripping a nearly anarchic Gotham City. It's brutal, and includes a bloody throw-down between Batman and Superman that stands in stark contrast to the sort of

fun superhero-vs.-superhero battles that would often show up in DC or Marvel stories. The Dark Knight Returns is deadly serious from start to finish, to put it mildly.

And it was immediately followed by other deadly-serious Batman stories. Miller's Batman: Year One, Starlin's Batman: A Death in the Family, and Moore's Batman: The Killing Joke all came out within a few years of TDKR, and they respectively depict the ugly early days of the Caped Crusader, the brutal death of Jason Todd, the Boy Wonder, and the paralyzing assault of Barbara Gordon, Batgirl. That's all by the end of 1989.

Batman wasn't the only hero to take a turn toward the dark. The Modern Age isn't considered to be the age of the antihero for nothing. Wolverine came into his own during this time as well, starring in a regular series starting in 1988 and continuing all the way until 2003.

The Punisher also saw a huge explosion of interest. He was introduced in 1974 in Amazing Spider-Man #129 as the villain, but soon emerged as an antihero. Frank Castle, the Punisher, is a determined vigilante who, contrary to most heroes, has no problem killing the bad guys. He found himself appearing in many Marvel series after his introduction with Spidey, perhaps most famously in Frank Miller's Daredevil run. By the mid-80s the Punisher got his own series that lasted until 1995 and spawned two other comics, Punisher War Journal and Punisher War Zone.

DC, for its part, introduced a new line of comic books during this time, Vertigo. It was meant for more mature audiences. While not giving us superheroes in the traditional sense, it's the Vertigo line that brought to us complicated, powerful protagonists like Swamp Thing (Alan Moore's take on the character, anyway), John Constantine—Hellblazer, Preacher, and of course Sandman, to name a few.

The Modern Age is also a time when independent comic book publishers emerged with their own heroes. Among the most notable is Spawn, Todd McFarlane's creation for Image. Spawn is another antihero, notable for the bleak origin of his supernatural powers and his willingness, like the Punisher's, to kill villains rather than merely apprehend them.

Arguably, though, if one book captures the essence of the Modern Age, it's Watchmen. Originally released as a twelve-issue series and later collected into the now-familiar single volume, Watchmen made Time magazine's list of the one-hundred best novels from 1923-2005. It is, in the estimation of many fans and critics alike, a masterpiece of the genre.

Presented as an investigation surrounding the mysterious death of Edward Blake—the Comedian—a hero in the employ of the United States government at a time when costumed vigilantes have been outlawed, Watchmen uses a complicated narrative to tell a multigenerational story of the rise, fall, and re-emergence of superheroes in an alternate timeline to ours. The technique is postmodern, but the point

couldn't be clearer. The story details a man who becomes a monster trying to do good. And that in a sense is what Watchmen is all about.

One thing which has remained constant throughout history is the disposition of the heroes. Constantly struggling on moral grounds. Having to choose between right and wrong. Their ability to see the light in the darkest of villains inspires me till this date. They struggle to determine to which extents they should be allowed to use their superhuman powers. These superheroes both inspire us and give us hope. Regardless of the form of media they appear in, they continue to instigate righteous and hopeful thoughts in our minds.

They continue to teach us the importance of all life and the prominence of the justice system. Even when they can choose the easier path, they choose the harder one, just for the greater good. They help even for the malevolent and unrighteous people because they are willing to overlook the vices of an individual and focus on the flicker or kindness if it would help the individual realise his mistakes. They have an extremely forgiving and conciliatory nature. They understand that no matter how much power they have, they cannot proclaim themselves above everyone else. They understand that the powers which they have been gifted with must only be used to help other people and for the benefit of our world. They understand that it is not up to them to decide who lives and who dies.

Superheroes can even teach us the way to live our lives. They teach us some of the most important moral lessons in life. They teach us how to differ between good and evil. They teach us that even the darkest of all people has a bright side, which at times is lost, but can be found once looked for. They teach us how power does not make you superior. I believe that these lessons are extremely important. I believe that these lessons can inspire individuals and thus make a better world. Superheroes aren't just the products of imaginative minds, but also the role models who we can look up to and relate with.