

An Examination of the Evolution of the Green Lantern

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Introduction - "Beware My Power, Green Lantern's Light!"

Despite the "hokey, lame ass" oath as described by Corps Member John Stewart in *Green Lantern: Mosaic*¹, the Green Lantern oath, "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might beware my power... Green Lantern's light!" reflects the tremendous power and responsibility shouldered by its bearers. Yet, the original hero to bear the mantle of Green Lantern was vastly different from the modern iterations most fans recognize. Alan Scott, a railroad engineer, miraculously survived a train crash caused by sabotage thanks to a mysterious green flame contained in an old lantern that had been brought to Earth in ancient times. Fashioning a ring from the material of the lantern, Scott could channel the flame's magic to fly, manipulate energy, shield himself from physical harm, and create solid constructs, abilities only limited by his willpower and imagination, with the notable exception that the flame's magic could not affect wood.²

Despite mostly working independently, Scott's Green Lantern was a founding member of the Justice Society of America, the first iteration of the more commonly known Justice League, during what is now known as the Golden Age of Comics (1938-1956). The Golden Age was a period defined by colorful heroes who embodied clear moral values and offered escapism during wartime and postwar uncertainty, captivating the collective imagination with their extraordinary powers and *Tales to Astonish* (hello, Marvel).³

¹ *Green Lantern: Mosaic*, no.1 (June 1992).

² *All-American Comics*, no. 1 (July 1940).

³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 5-7.

As interest in the pulp-style heroes declined and the public's fascination with science, space travel, and technology grew, comic book publishers responded with the reinvention of their heroes with mid-level popularity. In 1959, *Showcase #22* introduced Hal Jordan, a daring test pilot chosen to inherit the power ring of the dying alien, Abin Sur, and join the Green Lantern Corps as Earth's first representative among the ranks. Tasked with keeping the peace of the whole universe, the Green Lanterns harness the power of their own will in their fight against "those who worship evil's might," as the oath states.⁴ Though the powers granted by this newly imagined power ring resembled those of Alan Scott, the tone had shifted. Mysticism gave way to pseudo-science logic: rings required recharging via lantern-shaped batteries, and wielders recited an oath tied to their role in a structured intergalactic organization.

Throughout the new Silver Age, DC Comics changed its heroes to appeal to a more scientifically curious and socially engaged audience. Where Golden Age stories focused on simple morality and heroic ideals, Silver Age narratives began to reflect increasingly complex cultural anxieties, mirroring shifts in the real world. This paper examines the evolution of Green Lantern from Alan Scott to Hal Jordan and explores how DC Comics used Hal Jordan to address real-world issues during one of the most tumultuous periods in modern American history.

Silver and Gold - Cultural Context Behind the Reimaging of the Green Lantern

In 1938, the world was introduced to the concept of a superhero as Superman made his debut in Detective Comics, Inc.'s (later known as DC

⁴ *Showcase*, no. 22 (September 1959)

Comics) *Action Comics #1*, swooping in just in time to save a child from a car falling from an overpass. This fictional savior from a distant world kicked off what would become known as the Golden Age of Comics.⁵ Superman's debut inspired a wave of new heroes, including the original Green Lantern, Alan Scott, who first appeared in *All-American Comics #16*, published in July 1940.⁶

Alan Scott's power derived from a mystical green flame that fell from the stars in ancient China. His early stories involved battling gangsters, saboteurs, and petty criminals, and even his eventual supervillains would be considered more grounded and plain when compared to the cosmic and often apocalyptic threats that modern heroes face.⁷ While well-liked, the character never achieved the same popularity as heroes such as Superman or Batman. Additionally, the fanbase for comics was aging. The same campy stories and black-and-white morality of the heroes were losing their luster with the more casual fans as they shifted to more mature content in horror, science fiction, and westerns. Alan Scott, rooted in pulp fantasy, failed to adapt to this changing landscape.

In 1956, DC Comics reimaged The Flash with the publication of *Showcase #4*, introducing Barry Allen as the successor of Jay Garrick launching what became known as the Silver Age of Comics.⁸ Whereas Garrick's powers operated on vague logic, such as phasing through walls with no explanation, Barry Allen's super-speed was portrayed with scientific reasoning. He calculated how to vibrate his atomic structure to pass through solid objects, focusing on

⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*.

⁶ *All-American Comic*, no. 16 (July 1940).

⁷ Duncan, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, 94.

⁸ *Showcase*, no. 4 (1956).

cause and effect over instinct. This science-based revision resonated with the postwar fascination with atomic energy.

Encouraged by the Flash's success, Julius Schwartz led the effort to reimagine Green Lantern. The result was Hal Jordan's debut in *Showcase #22* (1959). Like Scott, Jordan received a ring and lantern from a celestial source, but now his powers were embedded in a broader mythology rooted in science fiction. Jordan's abilities came from an alien race known as the Guardians of the Universe, who oversaw the Green Lantern Corps. The ring translated willpower into "hard light" constructs, with function and form governed by the user's concentration and imagination.

Schwartz later recalled, "Magic was out, science was in. Kids wanted rockets and ray guns, not old wizards and magic lanterns. We needed Green Lantern to be something the new generation could believe in."⁹ Writer John Broome echoed this sentiment in *The Amazing World of DC Comic #3* (1974): "We saw Green Lantern as a cosmic adventure story. The ring was still miraculous, but now it was technology-not sorcery."¹⁰

The reimagining of the Green Lantern character from Alan Scott to Hal Jordan and the Green Lantern Corps marked more than a shift in powers; it reflected a broader shift of superhero storytelling from mythic fantasy to science-driven modernism. As DC Comics adapted to the new cultural landscapes, it redefined heroism to align with evolving public interests in law, order, and cosmic responsibility. Yet, while the mechanics of their power may

⁹ Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*, 315.

¹⁰ *The Amazing World of DC Comics* no. 3 (1974).

have come together, the thematic groundworks of Alan Scott and Hal Jordan's stories remained deeply rooted in the eras that shaped them. The next section will explore how each character's narrative reflected the cultural values of their time and how their different origins shaped the moral and symbolic roles they played in American comics.

Mysticism and Order: Contrasting Narrative Themes and Cultural Reflections

Although Alan Scott and Hal Jordan possess similar powers, their stories come from differing narratives and cultural ideals. During Scott's time, readers embraced the escapist nature of the fantastical adventures and magical powers that he used to combat the forces of evil. While he occasionally fought against the Axis powers in World War II, most of his adventures focused on protecting everyday citizens from gangsters, saboteurs, and petty criminals.¹¹ In contrast, Hal Jordan's early years reflected a world increasingly preoccupied with institutional authority, Cold War anxieties, and moral uncertainty. From the outset of his titular series, Jordan confronts internal corruption within the Green Lantern Corps and frequently clashes with the Guardians of the Universe, whose decisions often conflict with his personal moral compass.¹²

As Scott grew into his role as the Green Lantern, he gradually uncovered the origins of his power, the mystical flames housed in his lantern. According to its prophecy, the flame would burn three times: first to bring death, second to bring life, and third to empower a hero.¹³ The first man to touch the flame was

¹¹ Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*.

¹² *Green Lantern*, no. 1 (August 1960).

¹³ *Green Lantern* vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1941).

killed by its untamed magical energy. Years later, the flame was discovered by a patient of a mental asylum who claimed it "spoke" to him, restoring his sanity and guiding him to fashion it into a lantern. The prophecy was completed when Alan Scott discovered the lantern in the wreckage of a sabotaged train and was instructed to craft a ring from its metal, granting him the power to become Green Lantern.¹⁴

Scott used these powers to track down the saboteur responsible for the train crash, marking the beginning of his career as a crime fighter. Many of his early adventures relied on detective-style investigation, aligning with his publisher's branding, Detective Comics, Inc., and emphasized personal justice and moral clarity. The grounded nature of his adversaries, combined with the mystical origins of his powers, offered readers both accessibility and escapism; readers could reasonably become and act as The Green Lantern if they could only get their hands on their own magical flame-powered lantern. Scott was never affiliated with government or law enforcement agencies, except in wartime propaganda stories. Even as a founding member of the Justice Society of America (JSA), he operated within a collective of heroes that remained independent from any governing body, reflecting a strong belief in individual conscience over institutional oversight.¹⁵

Hal Jordan's experience was markedly different. As a member of the Green Lantern Corps, Jordan became part of a highly structured and hierarchical law enforcement organization. While rings were programmed to seek out worthy

¹⁴ *All-American Comic*, no. 16 (July 1940).

¹⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*.

successors upon their bearers' deaths, the Corps was ultimately governed by the Guardians of the Universe-ancient beings who oversaw regulations, discipline, and access to the Central Power Battery on the planet Oa. This battery powered all the Corps members' portable power batteries, which in turn charged their power rings while in the field, creating a finite amount of power that the Corps members could carry before needing to return to Oa.¹⁶

Initially, Jordan is depicted as an idealistic and dutiful recruit, faithfully enforcing peace across the cosmos. His stories emphasize the vastness of the universe and the importance of protecting the innocent and those without the means to protect themselves. Over time, however, tensions build between Jordan and the Guardians and occasionally between Jordan and his fellow Lanterns. These conflicts often stem from his refusal to follow orders he deems unjust, portrayed as both a disregard for authority and a deep moral conviction, to the point where, by the end of most of the stories, his unwavering sense of justice proves the strength of his will and in later issues leads to Jordan being regarded as the most powerful Lantern the Corps has had in its ranks.¹⁷ One of the earliest and most defining examples appears in *Green Lantern #7* (1961), where Jordan uncovers that his mentor, Sinestro, has used his power ring to enslave his home world under the pretense of maintaining order.¹⁸ Disturbed by this abuse of power, Jordan exposes Sinestro and turns him over to the Guardians for punishment.

¹⁶ *Showcase*, no. 22 (September 1959).

¹⁷ Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*.

¹⁸ *Green Lantern*, no. 7 (August 1961).

Sinestro's eventual return as Jordan's nemesis further develops this theme. Now, using a yellow ring fueled by fear, Sinestro's power stands in direct contrast to the Green Lanterns' willpower-based abilities. This narrative shift occurred at a time when the Cold War anxieties, domestic protest movements, and public distrust in authority were at their peak. In many ways, Jordan's resistance to authoritarianism, both within the Corps and against villains like Sinestro, reflects the era's cultural tensions surrounding law enforcement, institutional accountability, and civic morality.¹⁹

The contrasting narratives of Alan Scott and Hal Jordan illustrate how superhero stories adapt to the cultural demands of their times. Alan Scott's stories included a sense of personal justice and moral certainty, drawing from mythic roots and offering readers an escape into a world where good triumphs over evil through will and destiny. Hal Jordan, on the other hand, navigated the complexities of intergalactic law, institutional authority, and moral conflict within a more structured and politically charged universe. His ongoing struggles with power, hierarchy, and corrupt authority reflected a society increasingly skeptical of centralized control. These shifting themes marked the progression from the Golden to the Silver Age and laid the groundwork for a deeper engagement with social realities. As the cultural landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s became more turbulent, Green Lantern evolved once again, this time into the area of civil rights, war, and systemic injustice.

Wielding Willpower in a World of Change: Hal Jordan and the Rise of Social Commentary in Comics

¹⁹ Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*, 320-323.

Throughout the duration of the Golden Age, Alan Scott and his Super-Friends leaned on moral simplicity. Right and wrong were well defined by the heroes' values, and the villains had straightforward goals that were clearly immoral, such as robbing banks, seeking world domination, or subjugation of innocents through nefarious means. When the Silver Age launched, it was clear that the shift from mysticism to science fiction alone would not be enough to sustain reader interest. As a result, Hal Jordan became a vehicle for addressing complex social issues, reflecting the growing societal unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the most reductionist sense, the aging fan base was developing a more complex sense of morality than what the Golden Age heroes offered. Observing the shift using Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, we see that Golden Age narratives aligned with Kohlberg's conventional stages, particularly Stages 3 and 4, where morality is shaped by social approval and adherence to law and order.²⁰ These themes matched the target audience of the time: studies from the 1940s show that comic books were primarily read by children and adolescents, with over 90% of youth aged 7 to 17 identified as regular readers.²¹

As this audience matured into young adulthood, particularly during the politically turbulent 1960s, readers began to demand stories that reflected the post-conventional stages of moral development. Stages where ethical reasoning is guided by individual principles and critical evaluation of institutional norms. Hal Jordan's growing frustration with the Green Lantern Corps and the Guardians of

²⁰ "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," Simply Psychology, March 12, 2025.

²¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 57.

the Universe mirrored this developmental shift. His transformation from obedient cosmic officer to the morally conflicted challenger of authority is aligned with Kohlberg's Stage 5 and even Stage 6, where justice is determined by universal ethical principles rather than blind allegiance to rules.²² In essence, *Green Lantern* began to grow up with its readers.

As if the maturing Hal Jordan's stories alongside the maturing fanbase was not enough of a challenge for Schwartz and Broome, the 1960s was also center stage for the most polarizing cultural movements that American readers had seen in their recent memory. Mistrust of law enforcement and government institutions had reached a boiling point between the budding civil rights movement and the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. Protests were a regular occurrence, and police intervention often led to brutal encounters between officers and the public, all being publicized on a global scale thanks to journalism's expansion into television and radio as mediums to reach larger audiences. For the first time, every American could see practically firsthand the graphic, violent interactions between police and protestors, as well as combat and civilian casualties in Vietnam, and the true horrors that were occurring right outside their homes could no longer be ignored.

Television, in particular, emerged as the most powerful storytelling medium of the decade. Images of Black marchers being assaulted with dogs and fire hoses in Selma or napalm victims fleeing airstrikes in Vietnam were broadcast directly into American living rooms, challenging official narratives and demanding emotional reckoning. National newspapers and magazines like *The New York*

²² "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," Simply Psychology, March 12, 2025.

Times, *Time*, and *Life* published unflinching photography and hard-hitting editorials that amplified the urgency of these situations. Radio broadcasts of speeches by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., as well as protest music from artists like Bob Dylan and Marvin Gaye, gave voice to a generation disillusioned with the status quo. Even grassroots publications, underground zines, and college radio stations provided platforms for dissenting perspectives that mainstream outlets often ignored. These expanding media networks played a critical role in shaping public opinion, fueling activism, and ensuring that social injustice and political unrest were no longer issues confined to the margins; they were center stage in the national conversation. It was within this environment that *Green Lantern's* narratives began shifting, aligning with the readers' growing demand for heroes who questioned power, acknowledged moral complexity, and acted as agents of social conscience. The most prominent example of this transformation came with the 1970 launch of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow #76*, written by Dennis O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams. This new series redefined Hal Jordan by pairing him with the socially conscious and radically outspoken Oliver Queen, aka Green Arrow. The contrast between the two heroes, Jordan's law-and-order conservatism and Queen's street-level progressivism, served as a narrative lens through which DC Comics explored racism, poverty, political corruption, and generational tension.

In the very first issue of the run, Jordan intervenes in a dispute between a white landlord and a black tenant, only to be publicly confronted by an elderly black man who asks, "I been readin' about you... how you work for the blue

skins... and on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins... and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with-the Black skins! I want to know... how come?"²³ This direct critique of Jordan's detachment from Earth's social struggles forces both the character and the reader to confront the uncomfortable truth that heroism requires more than abstract ideals; it demands engagement with real human suffering.

Subsequent issues addressed drug addiction (*Green Lantern* #85-86), where Green Arrow's sidekick Speedy is shown to be using heroin, breaking the myth of the clean-cut teenage hero.²⁴ Other stories depicted environmental issues, labor laws, and political authoritarianism. These topics, once unthinkable in superhero comics, became central to Hal Jordan's evolving arc. He was no longer simply a galactic police officer; he had become a moral agent navigating a fractured world. These stories did not offer easy answers; they reflected the internal conflicts of a society grappling with its conscience and a readership increasingly unwilling to accept tidy endings.

Conclusion - Light of Their Times: Green Lantern as a Cultural Mirror

The Green Lantern legacy, shaped first by Alan Scott and later by Hal Jordan, offers more than a tale of two superheroes; it reveals the transformation of American cultural identity across generations. Alan Scott, with his mystical origins and clear-cut morality, emerged during an era that prized optimism, simplicity, and individual heroism. His stories aligned with a nation seeking reassurance during global conflict and economic uncertainty. In contrast, Hal

²³ *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* no. 76 (April 1970).

²⁴ *Green Lantern* no. 85-86 (August-November 1971).

Jordan's journey reflected the upheaval of the Cold War, the public skepticism of authority, and the pressing social issues of a rapidly changing society. As both comics and readers matured, Jordan evolved from a loyal enforcer of order into a hero forced to confront institutional failure and cultural unrest.

This evolution echoes Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, as superhero narratives, like the readers themselves, moved from externally imposed morality to internally defined ethical principles. Jordan's increasing resistance to blind obedience and his engagement with complex real-world issues marked a shift in storytelling and in what audiences expected from their heroes. Through these changes, *Green Lantern* became a lens through which readers could explore justice, morality, and identity, not in a distant galaxy but here on Earth.

Ultimately, the evolution of Green Lantern reveals the genre's enduring power: not simply to entertain but to reflect, challenge, and illuminate the values of the times in which its stories are told.

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