

Unmasking the Mask:

Mythological and Psychological Interpretations of the Super-Hero.

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The Athenaeum Society

September 6, 2012

As we approach the fall, citizens around the country are looking for a strong, charismatic leader. Everyone has his choice, but I bet we could all get behind someone with the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles, and the speed of Mercury. Of course, only one person possesses all of these attributes. I refer to the one and only Billy Batson, after he utters the magic word "Shazam" and becomes the great Captain Marvel. See The Great Comic Book Heroes. Bonanza Books, New York, 1965 at 68.

While not the first super hero, Captain Marvel, the World's Mightiest Mortal, Powerful Champion of Justice, Relentless Enemy of Evil, is perhaps the most relatable. He is not an alien, like Superman. He is not a billionaire with a tortured soul, like Batman. He even came from the perfectl and childishly named "Whiz Comics" (think Gee-Whiz, not bodily waste). And, in a shrewd move, the Captain is actually the target audience of the comic book. A boy of indeterminate age-who could not identify with the powerless youngster who just has to say one word and the power to right wrongs, fly, and beat up the neighborhood bully come instantly to his grasp.

What child doesn't try to use his voice, really his only power, to negotiate the adult world? He can say the magic words "stop", "no", and "leave me alone", but their efficacy is weak and, at best, temporary, to halt the onslaught of parental demands or sibling taunts (or worse).

But perhaps that is the appeal of the super hero. Whatever his or her origin, whether other-worldly, magical, or through hard work and a large inheritance he represents what we can never be, but what we want to be. He is the ideal.

In reviewing their appeal, I have title this paper “Unmasking the Mask: Mythological and Psychological Interpretations of the Super-Hero.”

And where did it start? Many would say the superhero is our culture’s version of ancient mythology. The acronym “Shazam” rather explicitly reveals the debt the humble comic book hero owes to his more respected mythological or ancient forebears. A child is given up by its parents to avoid disaster, placed in a container and sent away, to be raised as a foundling. Do I refer to Moses, or do I refer to Superman? Wonder Woman also explicitly makes the connection; she is the daughter of Amazon Queen, Hippolyta. And the wild man capable of great feats of strength, are we talking about the Incredible Hulk or Hercules, Samson or Enkidu from the Epic of Gilgamesh?

As we can see, the stories I like, and grew up on, as I bet many of you did, share common themes. Since we are talking about super heroes, we can discuss what has been described by Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank as the “hero’s journey”:

The journey can be summarized as follows: “The hero is 1) a child of privilege, born to distinguished parents; 2) the parents are somehow threatened. The child is abandoned 3) the

child is saved by a surrogate caregiver; 4) the hero, now grown, rediscovers his origins and finds his purpose.” Seth Stevenson, “Why Batman is More Popular than Superman Right Now,” <http://slate.com/articles/life/dispatches/features/2012/comic-con-2012/comic-con-2>.

I referred to Moses earlier. His story fits the bill (1) although not exactly – in Exodus his father is never named except he is of the House of Levi – not the first Hebrew prophet of somewhat mysterious parentage but I digress (2) the parents are threatened in the sense their son will be killed if they don't give him up (3) the child is saved by a surrogate-pharaoh's daughter (4) he discovers his purpose in a most dramatic way, called by Yahweh via a burning bush.

Now Otto Rank, who distilled this journey, was born in 1884 in Vienna and died in New York on October 31, 1939. He was a close colleague of Freud. He published the “Myth of the Birth of the Hero” in 1909 (In German “Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden” (in 1912 he wrote “The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend” – not something we see too much in comics thank heavens).

Just a few months before Rank's death, a very important event in comics' history occurred. Introduced in the May 1939 issue of Detective Comics #27 came the Batman. His creator, Bob Kane, nee Robert Kahn, who was born in New York., may have read Rank's work but I doubt it. But he tapped into the hero myth perfectly:

- 1) Bruce Wayne is a child of privilege and has wealthy parents
- 2) They are murdered (right before his eyes)
- 3) He is saved by a surrogate parent – the butler Alfred Pennyworth
- 4) He discovers his purpose with a vengeance

The hero story is apparent in episodes both true and mythological. Moses; Cyrus the Great, who was supposedly left by his royal parents in the care of a cattle herder; and even Luke Skywalker of Star Wars was famously abandoned, raised by an uncle, and mentored in the Force by another surrogate.

If super – heroes are modern myths, and it appears they are, what is it we can learn about them and ourselves from enjoying these stories.?

Let's start with one of the most famous superheroes, The Batman. As has often been noted, his is different from most superheroes because he is well, not super at all. He has no powers inherited through alien DNA, no magical abilities, no heat vision or super strength.

In the mythological world of super heroes he is a “Man Amongst Gods.” “Modern Mythology: What Superheroes Can Show Us about Humanity”, <http://winessing101.hubpages.com>”. He is both frightening and awe-inspiring. We all know his origin story having witnessed his parents murdered, and how he used that to dedicate himself to fighting crime. He is driven to attack evil and protect the weak. He fights monsters, but always

wins. He helps himself with a wonderful array of gadgets . In this vein he is like Perseus using a shield shined to mirror -like perfection to defeat snake-headed Medusa. Batman is superior in the use of his wits to combat his enemies. In this respect he is like the wily and crafty Odysseus. He was a warrior but also celebrated for his wits, like in his encounter with the Cyclops when he had his men cling under the sheep to escape the blinded giant. Or when their ship sailed past the island of the sirens, he plugged the ears of his crew so they could avoid their song.

But remember when Odysseus had his men stop their ears, what did he do? He had his men strap him to the mast of their ship, so he could both hear the beautiful songs, and still be protected from jumping from the ship in what would have been a doomed, drowning effort to swim to the sound of the siren. Does Batman walk near the line like this? After all, he is a vigilante, and works outside the law. He maims individuals in his numerous fights. He does not kill but has come close.

In researching this, it became pretty clear that superhero stories have connection to mythological tales. Whether these were consciously done in the beginnings of these stories in the 1930's, I don't know. But an evaluation of the stories, the research seems to veer into the psychological. And that makes sense, because what are mythologies but efforts to explain ourselves to ourselves. Sounds kind of like psychology.

My starting point emphasizes this quite clearly. I referred to a Freudian, Otto Rank. Perhaps not surprisingly, he summarized the myth of the birth of Cyrus the Great as follows: “This complicated myth with its promiscuous array of personages is thus simplified and reduced to three actors- the hero and his parents”. “The Myth of the Birth of the Hero,” Part III, p.89, (Remember Cyrus was given up to a cattle hand to protect him). Rank then goes on to state the “explanation of the psychological significance of the myth of the birth of the hero would not be complete without emphasizing its relations to certain mental diseases.” Id at 92.

I doubt any superhero has been psychoanalyzed as much as the Batman. There has even been a book written about that very issue. What’s the Matter with Batman? An Unauthorized Clinical Look under the Mask of the Caped Crusader. Robin Rosenberg, Ph.D., 2012

She uses the DSM-IV-TR, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Ed. Text Revision in her evaluation. She identifies four candidates for a diagnosis:

- Dissociative identity disorder
- Depression
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- PTSD
- Antisocial personality disorder

She looks at some of the obvious things. He dresses like a bat in public. But this is a conscious choice. He does not for instance, think he's a bat. Dr. Rosenberg analogizes this to wearing a uniform, like a policeman or soldier. I have recently seen pictures of Special Operations soldiers wearing ski masks with a skull motif. It really looks like they are angels of death. How would you like to be a terrorist seeing those guys? That would "strike terror into the hearts" of wrong doers, the reason Batman wears a costume.

It is troubling that he takes his wards, like Robin, and exposes them to danger. (Rosenberg disagrees thank goodness that there is a sexual component there.) But Rosenberg thinks he is doing this in a misguided but fatherly way.

These undertones have caused comic to come under significant attack. In 1954, Dr. Frederic Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent. This book helped launch U.S. Senate subcommittee hearings on juvenile delinquency. Comix: A History of Comic Books in America, Bonanza Books, NY, 1971, pp. 83-84. As another political aside, Congress, wasting money on worthless investigation since at least 1954 – see Roger Clemons, Barry Bonds, etc. Dr. Wertham had been a senior psychiatrist for New York's Dept. of Hospitals from 1932 to 1956 and director of clinics at Bellevue and other places. Id at 85. He attacked the depictions of crime in comics and argued they led children to "crimes of lust, violence and anarchy." Id at 86. Batman and Robin and Wonder Woman were sexual deviants. Id at 87-88.

As a result of this furor, comic publishers censored themselves by creating the Comics Code Authority. Ironically, Wertham himself later concluded this simply allowed comics to “disguise their actions in a hypocritical aura of good taste.” Id at 86. Remember the 1980’s campaign by Tipper Gore against heavy metal music? Hey always forget that that even if you can legislate morality, you can never legislate good taste.

I think a good argument FOR comics comes from Wertham himself. In Seduction of the Innocent he writes of trying to talk a girl out of reading comics (do girls read them at all?):

“To advise a child not to read a comic book works only if you can explain to him your reasons. For example a ten-year-old girl from a cultivated and literate home asked me why I thought it was harmful to read Wonder Woman (a crime comic which we have found to be one of the most harmful). She saw in her home many good books and I took that as a starting point, explaining to her what good stories and novels are. ‘Supposing’ I told her, ‘you get used to eating sandwiches made with very strong seasonings, with onions and peppers and highly spiced mustard. You will lose your taste for simple bread and butter and for finer food. The same is true for reading strong comic books. If later on you want to read a good novel it may describe how a young boy or girl sit together and watch the rain falling. They talk about themselves and the pages of the book describe what their innermost little thoughts are. This is what is called literature. But you will never be able to appreciate that if in comic-book fashion you expect that at any minute someone will appear and pitch both of them out of the window.’ In this case the

girl understood, and the advice worked.” I don’t know about you, but that makes me want to RUN to the nearest comic book store.

This is not a controversy that is a relic from the 1950’s or 1980’s. At the 118th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in 2010, Sharon Combs, Ph.D., professor of mental health at the University of Massachusetts-Boston noted that “There is a big difference in the movie superhero of today and the comic book superhero of yesterday. Today’s superhero is too much like an action hero who participates in non-stop violence, he’s aggressive, sarcastic and rarely speaks to the virtue of doing good for humanity. When not in superhero costume these men, like Ironman, exploit women, flaunt bling and connect their manhood with high powered guns.” Paging Dr. Wertham, Paging Dr. Wertham! “Boys seem better adjusted when they resist internalizing macho images” according to Carlos Santos, Ph.D. of Arizona State University. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/000815142118.htm>.

Well, those good doctors cannot be thinking of Superman. He’s been around since Action Comics #1 in June 1938 and has never been about exploiting women or wearing “bling” (although Lois probably wanted a little exploitation and who needs “bling” when you can fly in your long johns). See Comix at 9. In some ways he may be the most psychologically interesting. Not because he is bipolar or schizophrenic or suffering from paranoia. He is unique, as has often been pointed out, in the “concept of his alter ego”. The Great Comic Book Heroes at 18. “Superman only had to wake up in the morning to be Superman...Clark Kent [is] the put on.” Id

at 19. In his book *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Jules Feiffer speculates Superman is a “secret masochist.” He hides behind the façade of a weakling and accepts the abuse of the woman he loves. Like Billy Batson, though this also functions as a point of identification for us the reader. Says Feiffer: “His fake identity was our real one. That’s why we loved him so.” Id.

His real identity is that of a savior sent from the stars. A foundling raised by mortals, but who finds his heavenly (?) mission, to guide and save humanity. What a burden. That would sure make someone hide behind a pair of glasses and a tie, for a few hours a day.

Well, I cannot come up with a better conclusion than the words of Otto Rank himself from “The Myth of the Birth of the Hero”:

“For the present let us stop at the narrow boundary line where the contents of innocent infantile imaginings, suppressed and unconscious neurotic fantasies, poetical myth structures, and certain forms of mental disease and crime lie close together, although far apart as to their causes and dynamic forces. We resist the temptation to follow one of these divergent paths that lead to altogether different realms, but which are as yet unblazed trails in the wilderness.” Rank, “The Myth of the Birth of the Hero”, Part III at 96.