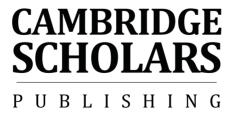# Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men

Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men:
Superheroes and the American Experience

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In past two decades, an increasing number of scholars have examined the reflective power and influence of comic books and comics culture in U.S. society. These scholars have approached comic books and comic book characters, including superheroes, as cultural markers for post-war U.S. culture, acknowledging that these products offer a distinct lens through which to understand the state and evolution of contemporary society. Scholarship in this area has postulated that comics and the characters contained therein are operative metaphors for American identity, acting as secular myths in an industrial, and then post-industrial, society. This anthology is designed to help readers – whether studying comic books in an academic context of American history, sociology, or critical media studies classes, or pursuing an independent interest – understand how the broad cultural, social, and political transformations in the past century have informed the superhero genre.

The study of comic books superheroes is becoming as multifaceted as that of other genres (such as detective fiction or romance) and media (such as television or film), with rich debates about the representation of class, race, gender, and national identities emerging. Simultaneously affecting and being affected by society, the superhero genre highlights the struggle between American ideals and shifting social, political, and economic realities. Of the works examining comic book superheroes, few are critical anthologies that allow the reader to see the full scope and complexities of the comic book medium throughout the twentieth century. Early ground-breakers such as Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965) and Lupoff & Thompson's *All in Color for a Dime* (1970) asserted that comic book texts and history are worthy of intellectual attention, but offer a primarily celebratory examination of them. More recent works such as David Hajdu's *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* (2008) and Marc DiPaolo's *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (2012) use comics as a medium to examine specific socio-political concerns, while works using characters as gateways to cultural critiques and analysis such as Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* (2001) or Joseph J. Darowski's *The Ages of Superman* (2012) are limited by their reliance on a single character and analytical focus. As this book was in progress, Matthew Pustz's

Comic books and American cultural history: an anthology saw publication; it offers a variety of perspectives on comic books, but does not focus specifically on superheroes and gives emphasis to consideration of comic books as tools for classroom instruction.

This collection is intended to offer a single volume that will group scholarly examination of comic book superheroes from historical, sociological, and cultural perspective into one volume. As a result, this book will offer foundational analysis similar to recent work such as *Superhero: The Origins of a Genre* (2007) while giving the broad historical scope and subject depth found in books such as *Comic Book Nation* (2001). As an anthology, our collection draws on multiple analytical frameworks and from a variety of scholarly disciplines. The contributors demonstrate the latest methods and theories in their analysis of the interaction between the superhero genre, broader society, and the institutions and practices shaping both. The common feature binding together the articles is the decision by all of the contributors to make superhero stories the primary locus of textual analysis. Superheroes have transcended comic books. The genre has demonstrated broad applicability to a variety of media over the years and such adaptations have been hungrily consumed by American audiences of all ages. The genre's multimedia success suggests that superhero stories have cultural value unto themselves. Thus, this volume seeks to examine the genre as a distinct cultural institution.

In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology,* one of the earliest scholarly works to focus solely on the genre published by the University Press of Mississippi, author Richard Reynolds examined the transcendent nature of these stories. Reynolds demonstrated that comics became the vehicle communicating longstanding storylines—themes and values that have been repeated again and again through time and across cultures to a modern, secularized audience. In essence, a key to the success of the genre, according to Reynolds, is that it is energized by the power of myth, as described by Joseph Campbell, that superheroes are the latest guises for the hero of one thousand faces. While it is true that the stories that have been handed down the generations through religion and literature communicate certain cultural universals, it is also true that each specific occurrence of a story or legend relates values that were current within the time and place in which it was articulated. While *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* examined the transcendent nature of superhero stories, *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men* looks at the parochial aspects of the genre. Thus, it is a natural complement to Reynolds work. It also is an effort to address some of the questions raised by Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret*

Origin of a Genre. In that work, Coogan poses the following question: "The superhero figure and genre can clearly be used to embody metaphoric meaning. But metaphor is slippery and can be read from varying ideological viewpoints. How has the superhero been read?" Along with this question, this anthology seeks to answer another question about the metaphoric nature of the superhero implied by Coogan. He suggests that the superhero can be used as a metaphor for American foreign relations--a suggestion validated by works that appear in this volume--but as such, it has tended to be a less potent metaphor than the Western. This raises the question: is the superhero a leading metaphor for any aspect of the American experience, as the Western is for U.S. foreign policy, and if so, what? Along with implying this question, Coogan's comparison of these genres' metaphoric power suggests its own answer. If the Western is about the projection of U.S. power abroad, then the superhero embodies the concern for the maintenance of domestic order--defending the "American way" at home.

Superheroes have been traditionally committed to being the literary champions of "Truth, Justice and the American Way." In protecting the "American Way," the superhero is empowered to promote all that is best about the United States and thus can be a champion of a liberal/ progressive vision of American society. This victory, however, serves to protect the status quo, be it racial, ethnic, gender, or class, perpetuating many of the objectionable features of American society, and in this way the superhero embodies conservative values. The ambiguities contained within the notion of the "American Way" raises questions of how it is defined and what it means to various sectors of American society.

These are the basic questions that the authors included in this volume seek to answer. Together, they demonstrate that issues of class, race, and gender have significant impact on the historical definition of the "American Way" and thus on the meaning of superheroes to American society. By assembling this collection, we will assess the effect of the narrative metaphor offered by the American superhero genre in its pure form and how the genre's established tropes have been infused into the broader society to create a popular culture that reflect "comic book values" in ways that reinforce Americans' cultural understanding.

Section I

Defending the American Way:
The Golden Age of Comics, American Identity, and the Search for Order

The Golden Age (1939-1950?) marked the popular explosion of the modern superhero comic. At this time, the framework of the superhero was created and defined, the nature of superhero story form was established, major superheroes were created and many elements of the superhero story form were introduced. The chapters in this section explore the origins of the superhero genre, considering issues of race, class, and gender during the Golden Age, and relating the foundational occurrences associated with superhero to the social, political, and economic issues of the Progressive Era, Great Depression, and World War II.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGIN OF THE SUPERHERO:
CULTURE, RACE, AND IDENTITY
IN US POPULAR CULTURE, 1890-1940

JULIAN C. CHAMBLISS
AND WILLIAM L. SVITAVSKY

Adventure characters in the pulp magazines and comic books of the early twentieth century reflected development in the ongoing American fascination with heroic figures.[1] As the United States declared the frontier closed, established icons such as the cowboy became disconnected from everyday American experience and were supplanted by new popular adventure fantasies with heroes whose adventures stylized the struggle of the American everyman with a modern industrialized, heterogeneous world. The challenges posed by an urbanizing society to traditional masculinity threatened to weaken men's physical and mental form and to disrupt the United States' vigorous transformation from uncivilized frontier to modern society.[2] Many middle-class social commentators embraced modern industrialization while warning against "sexless" reformers who sought to constrain modern society's excesses through regulations designed to prevent social exploitation, environmental spoilage, and urban disorder.[3] Amidst the growth of urban space, popular adventure characters perpetuated the individualistic archetype Americans had long associated with the frontier and the struggle of Manifest Destiny in a world that increasingly denied them real life opportunities to pursue these ideas.

A perception of modernity defined the US experience in the aftermath of the Civil War. This perception helped to explain the country's success in the Gilded Age and emphasized that unique circumstances in the United States allowed for the creation of a superior society. As *The Galaxy* editor Titus Munson Coan noted in 1870, "the rapid expansion of our [US] commerce, the vast strives of our manufacturing industry, and perhaps, more than all else, the continued expansion of our national territory have

greatly modified, if they have not completely moulded, American civilization."[4]

In the late nineteenth century, the transformation from a nation self-identified by small agrarian communities to one defined by industrialization, technological innovation, corporatism, and an urban public culture placed a strain on society. This perception of modernity shaped popular culture beyond the literary endeavors consciously influenced by emerging traditions of modernism.[5] In light of modern stresses, the popularity of American adventure heroes can be explained by their ability to personify and reassert the racial and civil superiority of the United States as it had been understood in the frontier ethos. This chapter explores the racial and communal ideas white middle-class Americans embraced and how those ideas were repackaged and promoted by popular adventure fiction in the early twentieth century.

At the close of the nineteenth century, middle-class Americans were concerned that urban congestion posed a danger to the nation's welfare. As the historian Carl Smith explained, urban residents saw industrial centers such as Chicago as marvels of economic success, but they were also "constantly prey to disruption and disaster."[6] Middle-class Americans feared that the immigration fueling industrialization was also creating a generation of people with no allegiance to the country's institutions and no understanding of American values.[7] Drawing on a Jeffersonian tradition that emphasized the independence and integrity inherent in the rural lifestyle, middle-class Americans sought ways to bolster traditional principles and civilize urban spaces to reflect communal values.[8] Popular culture reflected the desire to process the demands of identity and promote cultural cohesion in many different ways.

Part I: Individualism, Adventure, and Masculinity

As the publishing industry exploded, the dime novel emerged. The dime novel became a publishing success during the Civil War as soldiers found the melodramatic stories a diversion from wartime fears. Cheaply produced and economically priced, these novels often combined fictionalized elements with real events to create popular heroes out of their subjects.[9] As concerns about the city displaced the agrarian-oriented view of daily life, the dime novels reflected these concerns by including the urban detective as protagonist. The detective characters that appeared in the 1880s and 1890s are primarily male, brave, skilled at disguises, and ready to battle evils characteristic of the city life. As skyscrapers and slums came to symbolize the United States' economic power, the city that was their

home became the focus of middle-class efforts to manage society.[10] Thus, the city influenced popular fiction as the dangers posed by the modern grew in the public's mind. Such fears were clearly articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in his frontier thesis. Turner argued that the loss of the frontier robbed Americans of the framework they used to create their economic, social, and political traditions. Moreover, he suggested the new urban spaces replacing the frontier did not provide the opportunity to nurture an "American" character.[11] Civilizing the frontier provided Americans with a common cultural experience that purged false values and created a shared experience that overcame the otherness of our immigrant past.[12]

Concerns about community preservation were a primary topic for the public and were promoted by leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt's advocacy for an active lifestyle was one very visible cornerstone of his popular appeal. His calls for conservation and return to nature reflected concern about the need to create a physical and moral space in modern society for the forging of a civil identity.[13] Without the challenges associated with an untamed frontier to strengthen body and spirits, new generations faced the possibility of weakness from cosmopolitan excess.[14] Magazines such as *Outlook* celebrated nature and outdoor life while pulps such as Frank Munsey's *Argosy Magazine* (1896), the first all-fiction pulp magazine, used the established ethos of the frontier to feed the public's demand for frontier-themed adventure. Pulps provided a variety of genres; science fiction, romance, and horror stories joined specialty pulps that featured pirates, railroads, and other unique content. The term "pulp" came from the cheap wood pulp paper used to print the magazines. By the late nineteenth century, the magazines printed on better paper offering more serious content were known as "glossies" or "slicks," while the pulps were known for their fast-paced, lurid, and sensational stories.

Pulps offered greater variety than dime novels, reflecting a complex anxiety about modern society that reflects concerns about crime, alienation, and strife associated with urban life. In the pulps, the gentleman detective was recast as a "hard-boiled" loner possessed of a modern cynicism that questioned the fairness found in urban life. The pulp detective became the equivalent of a cowboy: a tough individual, possessing skill and courage, testing himself against the environment and the dangers created by this new type of living. Mirroring modern fears, the city replaced the frontier and was portrayed as a dangerous and unhealthy place. Though the hard-boiled detective encounters enemies in the city, these battles are not revitalizing struggles with a primitive other, but rather the soul-diminishing conflict that grows from living in "an ugly city of

forty thousand people set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains."[15] The urban detective represented a return to the Jeffersonian critique that city life undercut republican virtue by subverting independent will and creating dependent individuals unable to support themselves and by extension the republic. For urban dwellers, there were no rites of passage that helped to define oneself or an untamed frontier to strengthen body and enliven the spirit, thus new generations reared in urban places were made weaker.[16] The detective story emphasized urbanism's seemingly destructive nature, showing individuals (men as well as women) too weak to defend themselves from physical danger and/or moral vices. Yet, the detective also emphasized the importance of individual values and striving for self worth. While society may falter, the hard-boiled detective remains true to "traditional" honor and justice. The Continental Op, Philip Marlowe, and Sam Spade share a knight-errant quality that prevents them from abandoning the case and forces them to reach some sort of equilibrium for their client. In a morally murky environment, the detective's values might be no more than a stubborn professionalism and wistful personal loyalty, simultaneously expressing resentment against social failure and obligations to societal norms.

Highlighting the moral confusion in urban life did not mean the pulp genre abandoned the cultural fantasy of the frontier adventure. As the nineteen century came to a close, the Western remained important in the pulps, but it was not as dominant as it had been in the dime novel. It is clear Americans still valued stories that focused on the moral and physical gratification associated with the wilderness. National leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt advocated an active lifestyle to build character in children and adults and thus support the creation of good citizens.[17] The emphasis on promoting manliness helped push middle-class American support for greater US expansion as proof of US values and societal development.[18] The outcome of the 1899 Spanish-American War left the United States with a newfound degree of global power and influence.

At the turn of the century, middle-class Americans perceived racial minorities in primitive nations that needed the support and civilizing control offered by a superior western culture, of which the United States was the supreme example. Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* defended this thinking, urging "send forth the best ye breed" to assist "your new-caught sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child."[19] Indeed, the belief that childlike races needed US guidance was expressed by US Senator Albert Beveridge, who defended imperialism saying,

> Mr. President, this question is deeper than any question of party politics
> …It is elemental. It is racial. [authors' emphasis] God has not been

preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers…He has given us the spirit of progress…made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people [authors' emphasis]… This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man.[20]

The themes of adventure stories in pulp magazines emphasized these assumptions, providing heroes who faced fantastic situations in exotic locales armed with their innate Anglo-Saxon values facing aggressive primitive people around the world.

Natural Heroes

Beginning in 1911, Edgar Rice Burroughs's work provided a mix of frontier adventure and science fiction that melded the established lexicon of race logic to adventure stories. Burroughs had a quintessential middle-class background complete with a father he could never completely impress, frustrated attempts at a military career, and a well-documented disdain for a career path that never allowed him to realize his own sense of self.[21] Burroughs's early character, Captain John (Jack) Carter, reflected his own desire for realizing individual achievement and adventure. First introduced in *Under the Moon of Mars* (1911), Carter is a member of the Virginia elite who served in the American Civil War. In his *Mars* stories, Burroughs provides a seemly white, aristocratic hero placed in the midst of an alien civilization. Carter leads the red Martians in frequent conflicts with other Martian races. Within these stories, racism and sexism abound, mirroring contemporary beliefs and affirming accepted values.[22] Carter's earthly origins allow him greater physical power than the Martians. His presence marks the beginning of a new civilizing push as he will eventually marry a red Martian princess, and the reader is led to infer that their offspring will provide new vigor to Martian society.

For all the fantastic elements of the *Mars* stories, it was with Tarzan, one of the most popular characters ever created, that the racial assumptions underlying Burroughs's writing articulated the interrelationship between heredity and civilization and reached their widest audience. By abandoning science fiction and bringing his narrative to a quasi-contemporary context, Burroughs's narrative mirrored the broader scope of the American world view in the early twentieth century while reassuring readers about the

soundness of traditional values and race assumptions. Jungle heroes such as Tarzan represented a massive subgenre, offering a consistent theme of heredity, environment, and race. Jungle lords from Ki-Gor to Ka-Zar all represented values of western civilization overcoming savage circumstances. Tarzan's origins, a white aristocratic child orphaned in the African jungle and raised by apes, reflected the ultimate challenge to innate racial traits. Imperiled by the savage environment, Tarzan is tested by being orphaned and raised by apes, but he is also hardened by his experience to emerge as a physically superior man. Tarzan becomes the "Lord of the Jungle," however; his physical prowess is coupled with the innate moral compass and social values that come from being a member of the Anglo-Saxon race. Thus Tarzan emphasizes that heredity gives whites the ability to overcome any deficit created by the environment in which they are raised. Tarzan stories offered an odyssey of the lone hero that re-imagined the frontier crucible in an exotic locale but maintained the essential reassurance of race-based thinking.

The stories' assertions about Tarzan's natural intelligence are linked to his aristocratic background and supposed inborn racial superiority. Yet, this simple race-based critique of social development had a problematic appeal, since Social Darwinism was challenged in the late nineteenth century by social activists eager to redefine the cause of social unrest beyond inescapable biological circumstances.[23] While many Americans in the 1920s embraced racist thinking, progressive reformers and advocates for civil rights challenged traditional racial assumption. In response, modern science provided important information about racial worth that supported race-based thinking. Eugenics, a quasi-science of racial genetics, allowed the modern society to measure racial fitness with greater accuracy —a desire spurred on in the United States by a massive influx of immigrants not easily classified as black but rejected as white. In response to the danger posed by these people to US society, voluntary organizations and government programs alike promoted efforts to civilize urban masses and impart values.[24]Yet Burroughs's Tarzan stories also highlight another aspect of Eugenic logic—degeneration. The fear that a civilized race could slip to a lower level was made clear in the Tarzan stories by white (and, therefore, presumably civilized) men who act as savages. Upon studying a group of white mutineers, the first white men he has ever seen, Tarzan is confused because their conduct shows they are "no different from the black men—no more civilized than the apes…"[25] Like many Americans, Burroughs's understanding of race and breeding reflected a belief that these two aspects worked in tandem to give white men like Tarzan a superior place in society. Nevertheless, breeding by its very nature opened

the door to the possibility that those races at the top hierarchy might slip. This fear of regression forced whites to be on guard and not allow their race to become uncivilized, lest lesser races of the world overwhelm them. In the Tarzan stories, the danger of racial degeneration is counterbalanced with an emphasis on the superiority that Tarzan represents.

If Burroughs's white men might degenerate, so too might black men excel within their limitations. Mugambi, Tarzan's principal ally in the *Beasts of Tarzan,* demonstrates limits of achievement for lesser races. Burroughs introduces Mugambi as an obstacle that Tarzan must overcome but, once vanquished, Mugambi becomes a friend to Tarzan. Mugambi possesses a "soul and judgment" similar to Tarzan. [26]Tarzan's behavior toward Mugambi demonstrates the traditional patronage whites expressed toward African-Americans—offering him limited education and a place of service within his household. As explained in *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar,* "Now Mugambi had been to London with his master. He was not the unsophisticated savage….He had mingled with the cosmopolitan hordes of the greatest city in the world; he had visited museums and inspected shop windows; and, besides, he was a shrewd and intelligent man."[27] Burroughs's portrayal of Mugambi emphasizes that lesser races could improve, but that improvement did not mean equality. Whatever the civilizing effort made by white masters, Mugambi remains a servant, outshone by white male power idealized in Tarzan. So while Mugambi may share with Tarzan an "easy familiarity which common interests and mutual respect breed between honest and intelligent men of any races," this relationship only serves to reassure the public about the dominant racial and cultural order.[28]

Whatever reassurance Tarzan's adventure provided readers about the fitness of the white race, the fear of degeneration created by modern urban society was a source of dramatic tension in pulp adventure stories. While Burroughs portrays a struggle between man, nature, and society couched in modern terms, Robert E. Howard examined the same ideas about race and civilization in his writing. Howard is acknowledged as one of the greatest writers of action and adventure stories. He created Conan the Cimmerian, Kull of Atlantis, and Solomon Kane, among other characters. His career spanned twelve years, and he wrote more than hundred pulp magazine stories. In 1932, the *Weird Tales* published the first Conan story, "The Phoenix on the Sword," which deals with the adventures of King Conan in the kingdom of Aquilonia. "The Phoenix on the Sword" was actually a thinly rewritten King Kull story called "By this Axe I Rule," but Conan quickly became one of the most popular pulp characters.[29]

In Conan, Howard created a character possessing the attributes of a "natural aristocrat" found not only in the English lord Tarzan but in democratic American hero types such as the cowboy and the detective. In this way, the character marked a return to the classic form of the American hero. Conan always wins, even if victory is only measured by survival. Moreover, Conan never rapes women or kills children (odd barbarian behavior); indeed his resistance to violate his code of honor often sparks the beginning of an adventure. These traits, elements of nobility not born of training but of breeding, suggest that, like Tarzan, Conan is savage but pure. He is also moral, and Conan's inherent nobility combined with simple barbarian logic is often pitted against larger-than-life struggles against insurmountable evil. Howard saw Conan as an everyman action hero, retelling the various adventures of his life. Yet popular interpretations of the character have placed him at the forefront of adventure literature from the pulp era, interpreting the character's growth as a Tolkienesque quest toward greatness that divorces the character from the everyman quality Howard wanted to impart.[30] Given the social milieu of the time, this interpretation was not surprising. Indeed, Conan was "common" in Howard's mind only in the sense he represented a mixture of strong male archetypes. As he explained in a letter in 1932, the character came from the "dominant characteristics of various prize-fighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian."[31] These men, in Howard's interpretation, represented a willingness to challenge circumstances to achieve a goal. Conan's adventures as depicted in Howard's original stories were not meant to denote a special destiny that made them unique; instead they represented a retelling of the frontier myth, emphasizing the young man who goes to foreign lands, seeks his fortune, and achieves great things. Thus, a constant theme in the Conan stories is his acquisition of skills through his travels. Conan is a thief, a pirate, and a soldier on his way to becoming a king.

In Conan, societal decay and a mocking distrust of the corrupt rules created by "civilized" societies are constant themes. Magic, which is equated to book learning, is linked to decadent ancient races (a theme also found in Burroughs). Such fears of degeneration reflected eugenics beliefs. Indeed, Burroughs shared in a common belief among middle-class Americans that the state should impose racial purity laws designed to restrict the breeding of the mentally feeble and/or unfit. In the infamous *Buck v. Bell* case, the US Supreme Court upheld a ruling by a lower court that supported a statute instituting compulsory sterilization of the mentally

retarded "for the protection and health of the state." The majority ruling written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. argued that the interest of the states in a "pure" gene pool outweighed the interest of an individual's bodily integrity.[32]

 Conan's popularity spoke to a public fixated on the idea of an Anglo-Saxon-centered racial hierarchy. Conan's origins as a "northern" barbarian mirrored the barbaric origins of white Europeans. Ever a potent symbol of the natural world, Conan's success in civilization invoked the toughening that came from the frontier:

> Conan put his back against the wall and lifted his ax. He stood like an image of the unconquerable primordial—legs braced apart, head thrust forward, one hand clutching the wall for support, the other gripping the ax on high, with the great corded muscles standing out in iron ridges, and his features frozen in a death snarl of fury—his eyes blazing terribly through the mist of blood which veiled them.[33]

Conan's success can easily be interpreted as an allegory for American self-sufficiency in the early 1930s. The advent of the Great Depression was seen as time for individuals to stand alone. Americans faced with economic uncertainty were told to look to self, family, and church, but not to government. The prolonged harshness of the Great Depression changed this thinking, but only slowly and never completely. Indeed, critics of FDR's New Deal programs worried that government spending would create a dependency in Americans that would weaken the country. Throughout the 1930s, Americans struggled to balance a long-held belief in individualism against the institutional power increasingly wielded by the government. In this atmosphere, the tone of popular adventure characters underwent alternation that reflected new societal realities.

The pulp heroes of the 1930s and 1940s followed the recurrent theme of the hero, always a white male, who rejected the corruption of society and took it upon himself to correct societal problems. Yet, the nature of these problems changed as pulp writers offered increasingly fantastic adventures divorced from reality—a response to the harshness of real life. Faced with daily struggle to survive, pulp heroes needed to provide readers with tales that upheld values, but in doing so, the pulp narrative offered greater escapism to reassure and entertain the reader. The Shadow, The Spider, and The Phantom Detective were all pulp WASPish heroes who pursued evildoers using superior physical and mental abilities to outthink and outfight their opponents.[34] Yet, there were hints of greater expansion of heroic character.

While the original pulp version of The Shadow used subtle misdirection, as the character popularity grew, so did his abilities. In the radio version, the character could "cloud men's minds." The Spider dressed in a hideous manner and used a "Spider Ring" to mark his opponents. Doc Savage was genius and competence personified: scientist, humanitarian, and crime-fighter melded into one. These characters anticipate a new kind of hero. Peter Coogan identifies several key characteristics of the superhero: mission, powers, and identity, which is linked to a code name and a costume.[35] Though heroic missions remained largely the same, the abilities and appearances of these characters were becoming increasingly fantastic and—especially in the cases of Doc and The Shadow—more strongly expressive of the hero's individual nature. This evolution was not completed in the pulps; it took full form when audiences were drawn away from the pulp magazines to the more visual new medium of comic books. But the Man of Bronze is, in retrospect, easily identifiable as a harbinger of the Man of Steel.

Walter B. Gibson, a friend and ghostwriter for magicians such as Houdini and Blackstone, was a staff writer for Philadelphia Leger Syndicate and had written some true crime before he was hired to transform The Shadow, the popular and unseen announcer of Street and Smith's "Detective Story Magazine Hour," into a new pulp hero. Gibson borrowed heavily from other pulp characters to create The Shadow's unique persona. After The Shadow's success, Street and Smith editors decided to create a new hero in a similar mode to star in his own magazine. Doc Savage was created by Henry W. Ralston and John L. Nanovic. Ralston and Nanovic's story was revised by Lester Dent and appeared as "The Man of Bronze" in 1933. It was Dent who molded the character into the merger of heroic attributes that he became. Dent's Clark "Doc" Savage Jr. was a mix of detective, scientist, and moral paragon dedicated to crushing evil.

Savage's origins amplified the self-made man trope. While Tarzan and Conan developed as peak physical specimens through their struggle in and against the natural world; Doc was the result of cold science, given to experts as an infant to be raised to reach peak potential. The results are explained at some point in every Doc Savage adventure:

> The bronze man, Doc Savage, is an individual, the like of whom the world has never before seen. He is a superman, a colossus of brawn and brain who has been trained scientifically from the day of his birth to follow his present career." The speaker paused to let that sink in, then went on: "Doc Savage, by routine of daily exercise, pursued each day since childhood, has acquired an almost fantastic muscular development, a physical strength beside which that of Samson would pale. In addition, it is said that no one

ever studied as intensively or as widely as has Doc Savage. This has
equipped him with knowledge which borders on the profound on every
subject. Doc Savage is a rare combination of muscular strength and mental
perfection.[36]

Following the emphasis on the power of the white race's potential, Doc
Savage stressed mental and physical power the individual could and
needed to reach to face the dangers of modern world. The Man of Bronze
always utilizes his superior skills and intellect to defeat his enemies and
solve problems. While Doc's physical development was the peak of
human potential, his "superman" status never crossed over into paranormal
ability. Instead his intellectual powers gave him keen insight that made
him appear a miracle worker compared to other pulp characters. Doc was
assisted in his fight against evil by five friends—Renny, Johnny, Long
Tom, Ham and Monk. Doc's five assistants were all experts in their
fields—engineering, archaeology and geology, electrical engineering, law,
and chemistry. Together, Doc Savage and his assistants were more real-
science oriented than the characters that would follow. Indeed, Doc
Savage represents the limit of pulp characters in many ways.

Doc Savage combined the racial superiority, morality, and strength
associated with Tarzan and Conan with an emphasis that dedication to
self-improvement could achieve superior ability. Doc's adventures
demonstrated Progressive beliefs about the power of science to solve
society's problems. In 181 stories between 1932 and 1949, Doc Savage
proved that intellect governed by American values was more powerful
than Asian masterminds, dictators, or common criminals. Doc's adventures,
fantastic and entertaining, nonetheless represented the limit of what pulp
adventure narratives could offer. The symbolic confrontation with the
frontier could no longer offer the same reassurance for Americans facing
global economic depression that attacked cherished values and institutions.
Thus, heroes anchored in reality—and despite everything Doc Savage
remained a man—did not offer the satisfaction craved by an audience
increasingly jaded about the world. Indeed, Doc Savage's honor-bound
attack on evil could almost be seen as passé to urban audiences increasingly
convinced that corruption and systemic malfeasance caused the Great
Depression. While Doc Savage's strong science-centered persona remained
attractive—he would become Doc Savage, Science Detective, by the
1940s—the character's adventures did not reflect the skepticism of
modern urban life or wounded trust associated with American institutions.
Moreover, it was increasingly difficult for popular entertainment to
impress as mass media daily bombarded audiences with astonishing
images. Janet M. Davis quotes W.E. "Doc" Van Alstine, an elderly circus

trouper who remarked in 1938 that "the kids of today ain't so wide-eyed and amazed at what they see at a circus as they was a quarter of a century ago. So many marvelous things goes [sic] on all the time in this day and age that kids probably expect more from a circus now than it's humanly possible to give."[37] The expectations of this jaded audience pressured fictional heroes at least as much as circus performers. In order for modern readers to continue to accept pulp heroes, they needed to change. This evolution came from introduction of larger-than-life heroes in stories that abandoned realism in favor of symbolic narrative structures that provided American audiences with heroes who had the power to right wrongs, represented cherished values and, most importantly, never failed. Americans seeking escapism and entertainment wanted heroes that went beyond everything that came before—superheroes who could fulfill the dual role of moral models and societal protectors without being hampered by limitations of realism.

Part II: Comic Book Superheroes

The comic book superheroes of the late 1930s and 1940s (the so-called Golden Age of Comic Books) are direct descendants of pulp heroes. Many comic book creators and publishers came from the pulps (including Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, the founder of the company that would become DC Comics), while others had grown up reading pulp magazines. Like the pulps, most Golden Age comic books were anthologies featuring multiple heroes; only characters who had proven popular appeared in solo titles. Superheroes resemble their pulp forebears in having secret identities, distinctive garb, and special abilities. However since their inception, superhero stories have been perceived by readers, creators, and publishers as a distinct genre, not simply pulp adventures translated to a new medium. Coogan observes that the term "superhero" was already being used to describe the genre by 1942, and that the "Red Tornado" parody showed an understanding of superhero as a character type by 1940.[38]

The emergence of this genre once again reconstructed the American adventure hero, adapting the idea of transformation through confrontation at the frontier to the circumstances of the times. As the mid-twentieth century approached, American imagination had been increasingly shaped by an urban life amidst ethnic diversity and technological change. Heroic confrontation with otherness, therefore, spread increasingly beyond the confines of a geographic frontier. Superheroes faced conflicts internalized within the city and frequently between their own divided personae. Their metamorphoses became both more overt, as superhuman powers resulted

from events that transformed their bodies, and continual, as frequent costume changes transformed their appearances. Though Golden Age comic book creators provided Americans with new heroic narratives addressing concerns raised by modernity, they fell back upon entrenched patterns asserting white male superiority. These cultural assumptions were complicated, however, by questions arising from modern urban life. These complications can be explored through examination of the two most important characters of the period: Superman and Batman.

Superman: The First Superhero

Superman is—by most standards, at least—the first superhero, though the character was far from unprecedented. Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator* featured a superhumanly strong, fast, and bulletproof protagonist. Though *Superman* writer Jerry Siegel may have denied that he'd read *Gladiator*[39], he and artist Joe Shuster acknowledged enthusiasm for Douglas Fairbanks movies and the pulp adventures of Tarzan and other heroes.[40] Both the creators and the audiences of comic book superheroes were shaped by a distinctly modern media saturation. Siegel and Shuster were among the first generation of science fiction fans; Siegel's high school publication *Cosmic Stories* was arguably the first SF fanzine. As Gerard Jones observes, "This was the first generation to grow up with access to an alternate universe provided by commercial entertainment."[41] Even before Superman had been published, Siegel and Shuster had multimedia plans for their creation; among their early materials developing the character are sketches of cereal and wheat cracker boxes with Superman's likeness.[42] Debuting in comic books in 1938, Superman was portrayed in a newspaper comic strip starting in January, 1939, in animated features by 1941, and in a novel and on the radio by 1942.

Siegel's and Shuster's personal experiences also shaped their creation. Both were second-generation Jewish immigrants. Both were socially awkward. Urban violence had touched Siegel's life at the age of fourteen when his father was killed in a robbery. Shuster compensated for his nearsightedness and extreme shyness with bodybuilding. Thus, to an understanding of heroism drawn from immersion in books, magazines, and movies, Siegel and Shuster brought personal perspectives characteristic of their times: questions of manhood, ethnic identity, ability, respect, and justice.

The partners experimented with the idea of a superman for years before they created the character that would inspire the superhero genre. In their 1933 self-published story "Reign of the Superman," the mentally enhanced

"Superman" fit the pattern of most previous science fiction characters with extraordinary abilities: a villainous threat to humanity. Prior to Siegel and Shuster's costumed hero, few science fiction supermen had been heroes; Burroughs's John Carter of Mars and E.E. Smith's Lensmen are notable examples.[43] These heroes wielded their world-changing power, however, safely distant from human society: on exotic Mars or the far reaches of space and time. The 1938 Superman relocated the dynamics of frontier confrontation to the modern city, allowing a benign superman amidst human civilization. John Carter and the comic book Superman have in common a primarily physical superiority; where modern technology, bureaucracy, and social complexity threatened the urban dweller's sense of self-worth, super physicality may have held more appeal and posed less threat than mental advancement. The superhuman intelligence and psychic powers marked by the protagonist's bald head in "Reign of the Superman" persisted primarily among comic book villains like Lex Luthor, Dr. Sivana, and Brainwave.

Superman's dual identity was key to his success. Editor Sheldon Mayer declared that "the thing that really sold Superman in the first place… is the alter ego of the hero as contrasted to the crime fighter himself."[44] Superman was not the first hero with a dual identity. The Scarlet Pimpernel—secretly the foppish aristocrat Sir Percy Blakeney—set the pattern in Baroness Orczy's 1903 play; Frank L. Packard's *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale (1914)* brought the device to a contemporary setting with a gentleman thief who operated as "The Gray Seal" and several other identities; in 1919, Johnston McCulley created the swordsman hero Zorro—secretly Spanish nobleman Don Diego de la Vega—and a host of other pulp heroes with dual identities followed. The popularity of this convention in the pulps, however, was dwarfed by its near-ubiquity among comic book superheroes. As Coogan observes, superhero code names and identities externalize the hero's character or biography[45]; this added new dimensions to the convention of dual identity. Meanwhile, the growth of urbanism through the century increased the thematic appeal of the hero hidden behind an apparently ineffectual mundane persona. The disdained, seemingly weak figure of Clark Kent embodies a fear of manhood diminished by modern life, anonymous in the urban mob and made soft by the unhealthy environment of the city. Though this fear of degeneration applied to all, the weakened man was particularly associated with stereotypes of Jews. As Eric L. Goldstein observes, "Traits such as nervousness, intellectuality, and a lack of physical development were routinely attributed to Jews, making them seem to exemplify the effects of the confining life of the metropolis."[46] This stereotype must have had a

personal sting for the scrawny Joe Siegel and shy Joe Shuster. But they and their readers could empathize with Clark Kent while believing that his apparent weakness belied the Kryptonian immigrant's true self.

The costumed Superman is the revelation of that self. Coogan explains that a superhero's costume externalizes his biography or nature.[47] Superman's chest and cape chevrons represent his name and his "super" nature. Metaphorically and to a great extent visually, the costume is a non-costume, an approximation of nudity. The prototypical bodybuilder of the 1890s, Eugene Sandow, customarily stripped to near nudity in his public appearances; clothing concealed his remarkable form, and removing it effected in what Kasson describes as a metamorphosis "from man of the crowd to marvel of muscle."[48] Shuster, a devotee of Sandow-successor Bernarr McFadden's *Physical Culture* and other bodybuilding magazines, brought this powerful transformation to comic books. The aesthetic appeal of the nude form suited (when sanitized by tights) the visual medium, contributing to superheroes' success far beyond that of the previous pulp-like comics heroes. Simultaneously, these forms promised the solution to the problems of weaklings like Clark Kent. Kasson describes how Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan had similarly reasserted the primacy of the white male body:

> The overriding theme for these three men concerned metamorphosis. They repeatedly dramatized the transformation from weakness to supreme strength, from vulnerability to triumph, from anonymity to heroism, from the confinement of modern life to the recovery of freedom.[49]

Superman's change of identity exaggerates this idea of metamorphosis and makes it more continuous; the frontier experiences that transform him have become everyday events in urban life. When Superman doffs Clark Kent's clothing, he undergoes a transformation of ability far beyond that of his human precursors. While the physiques of Sandow, Tarzan, and Houdini marked individual defiance of modernity's perceived threats to strength and health, Superman's body defies the full technological power of the modern world. In his debut on the cover of *Action Comics* #1, Superman lifts a car over his head and smashes it; by the first page of the story one learns that he could "hurdle a twenty-story building… run faster than an express train… and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!" So too does his strength defy the power of organized crime, governmental corruption, greedy businessmen, and enemy armies: everything that could make a man feel powerless in the mid-twentieth century. The superhero's transformation is more continual because the

frontier-like experiences that transform him have become everyday events in urban life.

Superman's dual identity also internalizes the confrontation with the other formerly represented at the frontier. Gary Engle explores Superman as an assimilating immigrant, viewing the hero's powers as "the equivalents of ethnic characteristics" while his Clark Kent identity is a moral act of participation in American society[50]. Superman stories simultaneously exaggerate and diminish the conflicts of Slotkin's "man who knows Indians"; Kal-L is more exotic than any hero before him, while Clark Kent is more tamed by civilization. There is tension inherent to the superhero's double identity—Superman and Clark are rivals for the attention of Lois Lane—but it is a tension without much danger; the hero wins whether Superman or Clark prevails. This collapsing of difference resembles the transposition Slotkin identifies in Burroughs's use of the red-skinned Martian princess Dejah Thoris as both a sexually appealing, racially dark woman and as a "whitened" victim to be rescued in captivity scenarios.[51] Superman's double identity merges the roles of exotic marvel and white hero. This convention gives the superhero genre a commodious framework for the exploration of otherness. However, its use in Golden Age comics did not challenge the categories of otherness or conventional heroism; it erased much of the violence in the conflict between white civilization and the provocative "other" but demanded that this conflict never be resolved.

Batman: A Human and Technological Superhero

The commercial success of Superman created demand among readers and publishers for more heroes like him. Comic book publishers sought to capitalize on the demand but then—after DC showed determination to defend their copyright—tried to avoid too overt a similarity. Many of the comic book heroes of 1938–1939 showed a strong resemblance to their forebears in the pulps, including the avenger-detective character of Batman[52]; he was, however, distinctly a superhero. Though his abilities were merely those of an equipped and highly competent human, he had a costume, dual identity, and the sort of adventures that clearly invited comparison to Superman's.

Bruce Wayne is as representative of the presumed effects of overcivilization as Clark Kent. Where Clark demonstrates weakness, cowardice, poor vision, and ill health, Bruce Wayne seems suspect of immorality brought on by an overprivileged life: he is known as an "idle playboy," lazy, frivolous, and apathetic. This degeneration is bonded to a

social class fantasy, combining the appeal of wealth (and the consequent time and resources to live a life of adventure) with a lingering resentment for the wealthy. The gritty, dark stories of Batman focus more on the destructive aspects of civilization than those of Superman. However, they do suggest that city life, even at its worst, is not inevitably debilitating. Batman's frontier is internalized within the city, where the savagery of street crime causes the death of his parents and transforms him into a vengeful instrument of justice, a hero, and a complete man. A hero who poses as an idle aristocrat was nothing new—the Scarlet Pimpernel, Jimmy Dale, Zorro, and Green Hornet had done much the same. But Batman's motivations are more complex than the *noblesse oblige* of his predecessors. Though he has a hereditary position of leadership in Gotham City, he is also marked by the worst aspects of city life – and is stronger for it. This vulnerability became all the more important to the character as he remained conspicuously human amidst a host of superhumans; Jules Feiffer notes that "The Batman school preferred a vulnerable hero to an invulnerable one, preferred a hero who was able to take punishment and triumph in the end to a hero who took comparatively little punishment, just dished it out."[53] Batman stories recognize the costs of modern urban life but find value within it as well. While Clark Kent is a conformist liberated by the uncompromised individuality of Superman, Bruce Wayne is an effete aristocrat grounded by the harsher but more virtuous experiences of Batman.

Batman also casts modern technology in a positive light. Though he faces as many evil scientists as Superman, his own gadgetry is essential both to his effectiveness and to his style. A selection of useful equipment seems only logical for a hero lacking superhuman powers, but Batman's gear, often distinguished with the ubiquitous "Bat-" prefix, differs from that used by previous heroes in being more personalized and wholly integrated into his superheroic identity. His resources thus resemble Superman's abilities more than the weapons of pulp heroes.

Conspicuously absent from his equipment is a gun. The early Batman was depicted with a gun on only four occasions, each of them an unusual circumstance.[54] By the spring of 1940, the DC editorial staff proscribed Batman's use of deadly weapons entirely lest he set a dangerous example for young readers.[55] In earlier, more agricultural America, use of guns was a simple fact of life; in urban America, it was dangerous. Guns were also stylistically ill suited to a hero cast in the mold of Superman. A normal pistol or rifle would have been too mundane for a superhero, lacking the ties to a distinct identity one finds in a "baterang" (later "batarang"), and would have been a hindrance to the superhero genre's emphasis on