

## **Comic Book Characters in the Age of the Corona Pandemic: Insights into the American Psyche**

by Tim Newfields

As a starting point, it might be worth considering why the heroes and villains of various cultures should be examined. A reason that Carlyle (1908), Lule (2001), and Campbell (2008) suggest is that heroes embody the cultural ideals of a given society. Conversely, villains and demons excoriate those ideals.

It is particularly fascinating to observe how narratives can be adjusted to make the same person appear as either a hero or as a villain. For example, conservative media generally depicts Donald Trump as a righteous, larger-than-life hero crusading against decadent liberalism. Conversely, more left-leaning media tends to portray him as an embodiment of greed, lust, and hubris. It is not uncommon to endow heroes and villains with teleological--or even theological--dimensions. They are often seen as gateways between ordinary, generally powerless humans and some sort of higher energy. Heroes invariably serve a power (or a principle) appearing as munificent, ethical, and wise. Villains, by contrast, either serve a power that is evil, selfish, and destructive--or become that power itself. This invites the question, "How do villains actually differ from demons?" While both are social constructed caricatures, ascribing demonic qualities to a figure adds a weighty layer of religious baggage. As most readers are aware, the Christian notion of a demon is that of a fallen angel--a luminous being whose sin of pride has hardened into hatred. In the west, demons are generally depicted as conniving scoundrels who delight in ensnaring souls and rejecting sacred authority.

Although Christianity continues to be the dominant religion in most parts of the USA, a 2020 PRRI survey suggests its influence in some parts of that nation, particularly among young adults, is waning. For some avid comic book fans, major comic books (which today are often wedded to blockbuster movies) have a significance that is almost religious. As O'Connell (2021, p. 16) states, "Casual filmgoers oftentimes forget the healing power of cinema, and how movies can boost an audience member's spirits when they are down in the dumps. Uplifting and inspirational films possess the ability to change our lives." Although movie theaters are unlikely to supplant churches, millions of viewers look to movie screens to see their favorite comic book heroes for a sense of surrogate redemption as they save imaginary cities--if not the entire world--from evil.

In particular, the similarities of Superman--an icon created by two Jewish teenagers in 1938--to Moses and Jesus have been noted by various authors (Phillips, 2013; Cover, 2016; Clanton, 2017). Both Judeo-Christian saviors and comic book heroes share features such as self-sacrifice, a sense of honesty, and a belief in the dignity of their communities. Unlike Moses or Jesus, however, modern comic books heroes seldom challenge the existing world order with its inherent systematic injustices. They are not revolutionaries and tend to prop up the status quo, challenging only a limited number of malefactors or some extra-terrestrial threats. The economics behind this decision is obvious: by avoiding controversy that might alienate some potential readers/viewers, sales are increased.

In this paper the main point I wish to make is that heroes and villains can be regarded as manufactured commodities sold in a public market. In the United States today, the manufacturing is done primarily by two mega-conglomerates. Marvel Comics--now a subsidy of Walt Disney and 20th Century Fox--has spawned heroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, Spider-man and Captain Marvel as well as their nemeses Thanos, Galactus, Venom, and many

others. Its arch rival, DC Comics--which today is a subsidiary of Warner Brothers, Sony Entertainment, and AT&T--markets exemplars such as Superman, Batman, Aquaman, Cyborg, and Wonder Woman who battle baddies like the Joker, Darkseid, Lex Luthor, Dark Angel, or Doomsday.

As multi-million dollar industries, Marvel and DC Comics are foremost interested in maximizing profits. One way to do that is to produce material resonating with consumers. Since the coronavirus began in the United States in January 2020 much of the population has become keenly concerned about the spread of that contagion. Not unsurprisingly, Marvel has tailored some comic books and movies to pandemic-related themes. Marvel's *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (2021), describes how an infectious alien symbiote decimates humans. Morbius, who appeared as a comic book baddie back in 1971, has recently been refashioned for a grisly film that will be released in 2022. The story reveals how medical science can produce unimagined horrors. DC Comics is also cashing in on the pandemic frenzy by offering some dark-hued films. In *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, which came out in March 2021, the notion of unintended consequences and alien invasions are exploited. The antagonist Steppenwolf appears like a cross between Loki (the Norse god of mischief) and a giant metallic coronavirus. The *Suicide Squad*, a 132-minute blockbuster released in August, portrays a bunch of misfit antiheroes battling a giant alien starfish which releases microscopic spores that infect humans. It should be conceded many upcoming American films have themes unrelated to the COVID-19 crisis. However, as Leckridge (2020) notes, fear and awe are powerful attractors. Today many of the major film studios and their comic book publishing counterparts in the USA are exploiting those emotions to enhance profits.

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