

“Crazier Than a Sack of Ferrets!”: Deadpool as the Post-*Watchmen* Superhero

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ABSTRACT

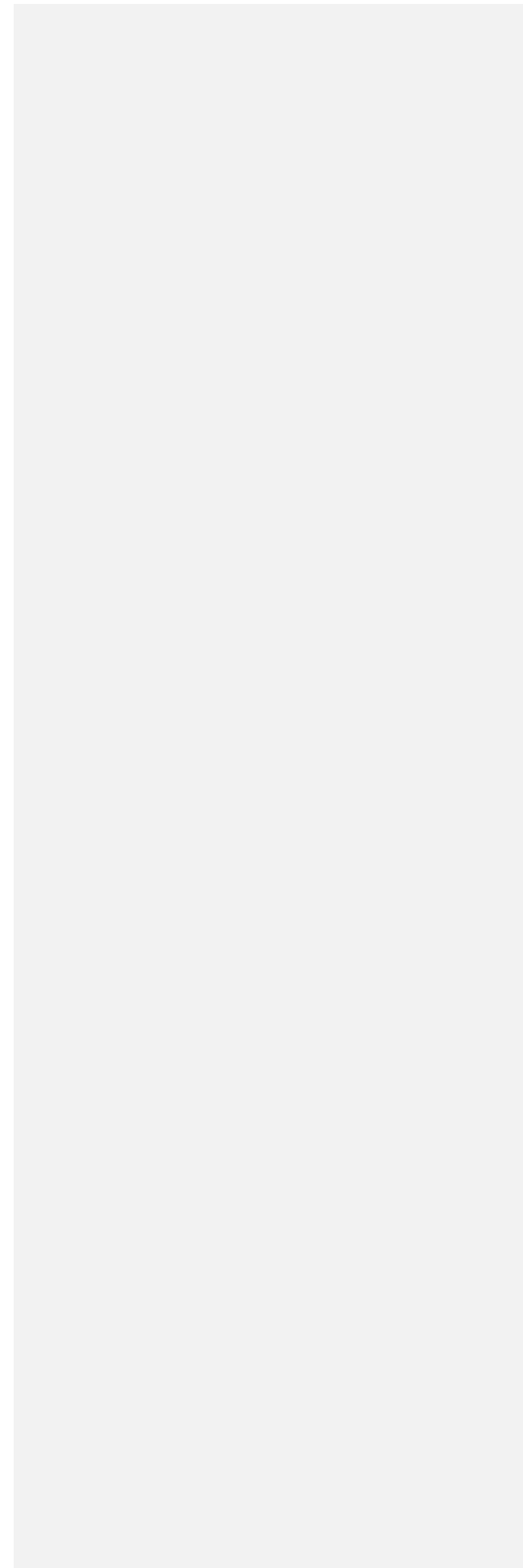
*Watchmen* has been hailed as revolutionary not only for the literary quality of Alan Moore’s script and the precise execution of Dave Gibbon’s art, but also for the novel’s successful exploration of sophisticated subject matter and realistic moral conflict. Perhaps the most interesting question *Watchmen* forces us to consider is *why* an individual would put on the costume and don the mask, and how such a constructed persona affects the individual psychologically and morally. For those heroes that came before, the compulsion to fight crime was often an in-born ideology of “justice.” But for Moore’s *Watchmen*, we find that even superheroes are corruptible, flawed, imperfect, and even (more than) a little crazy. In the wake of what is arguably one of the most influential superhero novels published to date, the comics industry saw a rise in the popularity of anti-heroes like Moore’s, but it wasn’t until the 1991 creation of Marvel’s Deadpool that fans saw exactly what it means to be a hero in the post-atomic, post-Vietnam age. Through self-reflexivity, genre deconstruction, and dark hysteria, Deadpool shows us that it isn’t so easy to walk the straight line of the righteous, and that sometimes it’s much easier to submit to the madness of a chaotic, morally ambiguous world.

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## Dedication

To all of the die-hard fans who came before me.

To all the scholars who paved the way for our field.

To all the writers and artists who shaped my perception of the world.

To my partner in all things:

Thank you for sharing your life and your love with me, Alex. Nothing I do in this world is possible without you.

## Acknowledgements

My first real introduction to comics came at the age of 14. I was browsing the shelves of a now out-of-business Borders bookstore (rest in peace), looking for more books by Neil Gaiman. Unfortunately, like any good anti-social teenager, I had read them all. A sales associate informed me that, years before *American Gods*, Gaiman had written a rather famous comicbook series. I had dabbled in manga and I had seen the Saturday morning superhero cartoons. However, I came to the slow realization that comics were able to do something other types of text couldn't. For lack of a better description, this was my "Holy Haberdashery, Batman!" moment. I became an avid enthusiast and by the time I graduated from high school, I had begun formulating rudimentary ideas of the way comics reflect the human condition. The rest, as they say, is history.

I would first like to thank my fearless graduate school leader, Dr. Diana George. A few months after I entered my master's program, I knew I had to write about *Watchmen* – the way it changed comics, the way it developed a new darkness in the superhero psyche – and I also knew that I wanted to write about Deadpool, my favorite academically underrated superhero. It was Dr. George's course in graphic novels and comics that really taught me how to write about what I love, but it was her unwavering faith in my writing and her constant encouragement that kept me going during the entire thesis process. I would also like to thank the committee readers, Dr. Jen Mooney and Dr. Nancy Metz, who met my indecision and insecurity with grace, kindness, and inconceivable patience.

It would be a cruel injustice to exclude the mention of my best friend, who sat down next to me in our sophomore year at Virginia Tech and said, "Hey, weird girls have to stick together."

Emma Briscoe has uplifted me through each of my failures and celebrated each of my triumphs. For all of the sleepless nights and delirious mornings, for all of the endless hookahs and 4 AM energy drink runs, for letting me sleep on your couch, and for teaching me that moving against the grain is a great strength in this life, thank you, Emma. You are a courageous and brilliant Wonder Woman, and I'm still convinced we are secretly related. But I guess we'll have to wait for the origin story issue before we find out for sure.

I would like to acknowledge my parents, Lisa and Tom Day, whose never-ending support of my strange and unusual interests allowed me to cultivate my mind and become the person that I am today. Thank you for letting me be such a weirdo, and thanks for letting me drop out of art school. Quite literally, I would not be where I am now if you didn't show me that it's okay to change directions.

None of what I do, from surviving all-nighters to taking out the trash, would be possible without my partner in all things. Thank you, Alex, for always letting me read my work to you and for listening to me rail about gutter space and intertextuality for hours on end. You are the Alfred to my Batman: I learned it all from you.

It would be deplorable not to remember that nameless sales associate who first guided me towards the Borders comicbook section. Thank you, stranger, wherever you are now.



# Introduction

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“Behold, I teach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of life!”  
– Frederic Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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The concept of the superhero in the American popular imagination was, for many years, based largely on the characters of the Golden Age: men and women of the 30s and 40s with extraordinary powers and campy costumes who were bound by an internal drive towards Truth, Justice, and the American Way. Their moral righteousness inspired us and offered an escape into fictional universes where that Good always defeats Evil. We considered these characters fondly, if not always seriously, as an idyllic representation of the way we wanted our world to be, of the path *we* wanted to walk. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1970s, Superman, Wonder Woman, and their comrades constituted a modern American pantheon we could really believe in, gods we could secretly pray to between the pages of cheap newsprint. But the superheroes of today are a far cry from their bright and shining origin. In the last few decades, superheroes have gone to dark places with us as a nation, and, like us, they did not come out unscathed. The Holocaust, the Atomic Bomb, Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and the AIDS epidemic left us - and the superheroes who represented the best of us - with a bitter mistrust in authority and a disintegrating national identity. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became obvious that the line between Good and Evil was growing thin. As a result, many of the superheroes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century became morally ambiguous, emotionally ambivalent, and mentally unstable.

In the pages that follow, I will discover the state of the 21st century superhero by first examining Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s revolutionary text *Watchmen* (1986), which has

become generally accepted as the turning point in superhero comics, and then by locating and interpreting the “*Watchmen* effect” in the comics of Deadpool, a contemporary superhero whose underground cult popularity has vastly expanded in the past ten years. Within this project I do not seek only to re-investigate the ideological components and socio-cultural impact of *Watchmen*. Instead, I intend to treat *Watchmen* as a model for contemporary heroes and to perform a case-study of Deadpool as the ultimate post-*Watchmen* superhero. Deadpool is, I argue, the singular character who encompasses all of the significant genre departures made by *Watchmen* and takes them to their logical conclusion. In addition, I intend to identify, through Deadpool, the direction in which superheroes as cultural representations are moving and, therefore, to where we – readers and non-readers alike – are moving as well.

## **The *Watchmen* Effect**

Many scholars and fans consider the 1986 publication of *Watchmen* to be the turning point between the naivety of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the cynicism of the early 21<sup>st</sup>. It isn't difficult to see why. The infamous initial panel of the graphic novel opens to a shot of the Comedian's splattered smiley face pin laying in a pool of blood on the sidewalk and text reading, “Rorschach's journal. October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1985: Dog carcass in the alley this morning, tire tread on bust stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face” (“At Midnight All the Agents” 1). This first moment perfectly captures the ironic namesake of the Comedian as brutal mercenary and the tragedy of his bleak perspective on the crumbling state of the post-Atomic world as it careens towards nuclear war, while simultaneously introducing readers to the grime

and garishness of the world according to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen* is set in an alternate-history version of 1985 America, in which Richard Nixon still serves as President, the weight of nuclear science looms over the world, and the Keene Act has outlawed superheroes, condemning them as dangerous vigilantes. The world of *Watchmen* is both gritty and garish, the artistic style acting as a sympathetic environment to the experiences of the characters, yet also strongly resembling the real America of the 1980s. Never before had the comics industry seen such a serious take on the superhero story, both because *Watchmen* is positioned firmly in a very real version of America and because each central character is so terribly flawed. Of his inspiration, Moore said that he “wanted to create characters that had got moral ambiguities, that weren't perfect, one-dimensional, 'here's the good guy – here's the bad guy'” (“A Hero Can be Anyone”) and that he “also wanted to write about power politics... For me, the '80s were worrying. ‘Mutually assured destruction.’ ‘Voodoo economics.’ A culture of complacency... I was writing about times I lived in” (Jensen).

The originality and innovation of *Watchmen* has not, of course, gone unnoticed. The trade paperback is now in its 26<sup>th</sup> printing and, in 2008 alone, more than one million copies of the graphic novel were printed (Brady). Joss Whedon<sup>1</sup> said that *Watchmen* is “proof of everything a comic could do, but also an affirmation of everything comics had done” (“McMillian”). Aaron Meskin states, “If there is a comics canon – a list of the great works in the art form that serves as a standard against which all other comics are judged – then surely *Watchmen* is at the core of that canon” (158). Not only did it become the first graphic novel to make it to *Time Magazine*'s Top

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<sup>1</sup> Joss Whedon is best known for creating the cult-favorite television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but has also become a comics icon in his own right for his work on the *Buffy* and *Firefly* comics, as well as for directing *The Avengers* (2013).

100 English language novels (Lacayo & Grossman), but it has also been described frequently by fans and historians as a beginning point for new comics readers. *Watchmen* didn't just change the way superheroes behave, but also how we perceive them culturally. Don Markstein explains,

While most superheroes have been aimed at an adolescent reading level...

*Watchmen* was among the first superhero stories that required an adult's point of view for full appreciation. What *The Maltese Falcon* did for detective stories and *Shane* did for westerns, *Watchmen* did for superheroes. It transcended its origins in what was previously considered a lowbrow form of fiction to provide a rich reading experience for all, whether they came in as fans of the genre or not.

(Markstein)

Though the industry had been moving towards more realistic and critical social commentary with publications like *Green Lantern* #85-86 and *Amazing Spider-Man* #122-123 in the 1970's, *Watchmen* is still considered today to be the culmination of intellectual growth and increasingly masterful writing within the comics industry at the time of its publication.<sup>2</sup> Of *Watchmen*'s ultimate effect on comics, Grant Morrison said, "People at the time were saying there's no point in doing superheroes anymore because it has effectively destroyed them and it's exposed them to the light of reason and they can no longer operate" ("A Hero Can be Anyone"). Moore explains that, in creating *Watchmen*, "it was easy to have an effect because the majority of writers to come before us never thought of challenging any of the assumptions regarding the superhero genre" (quoted in "X-Rated: Anarchy in the UK").

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to its popularity among fans, *Watchmen* has received multiple formal awards, including a Hugo Award for *Other Forms*, Kirby Awards for *Best Finite Series*, *Best New Series*, *Best Writer*, and *Best Writer/Artist*, as well as Eisner Awards for *Best Finite Series*, *Best Graphic Album*, *Best Writer*, and *Best Writer/Artist*.

*Watchmen* forces us to ask is *why* an individual would put on the costume and don the mask, and how such a constructed persona affects that individual. For the heroes of the Golden and Silver Ages, the compulsion to fight crime was the manifestation of an in-born particular ideology of “justice.” But for the *Watchmen*, fighting crime is about less noble goals. Fame, fortune, power, and glory drive them to become vigilante heroes, but because those are baser desires, we find that the characters of *Watchmen* are corrupted perversions of heroism. Former President of DC Comics Jenette Khan reminds us that “there is a tremendous exploration in *Watchmen* of why people would actually put on costumes and go out adventuring” and that “it’s actually rather hard to imagine a genuine grounded person doing that” (*The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics*). Subsequently, Moore feels that “actually a person dressing up in a mask and going around beating up criminals is a vigilante psychopath” (“X-Rated: Anarchy in the UK”). Ultimately, *Watchmen* changed the way we create, read, and experience superhero narratives. In 1986 our gods were falling from grace and becoming much more human.

The impact *Watchmen* had on the comics industry was overwhelming and immediate; it was almost as if the series had opened a floodgate for new possibilities in the genre. Though the violence and darkness of *Watchmen* was, at the time of its release, an exception to the “rule” of superheroes, the industry immediately began to reflect the idea of the imperfect and psychologically complex superhero. The Joker developed a new found identity not simply as a ruthless criminal, but as a mentally-ill psychopath, and the circulation of anti-heroes like Wolverine spiked. The popularity of publications like *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-1986), which featured the deaths of long-loved heroes Super Girl and the Flash, and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) only helped to further *Watchmen*’s effect. Ultimately, flawed

*Watchmen*-like heroes moved from their position as the “exception” and took up residence as the new “rule” for developing believable, engaging superhero narratives.

In addition, *Watchmen* set the stage for artists and writers to begin developing a new breed of heroes, ones who combine both the conventions of the superhero genre and the amoral darkness of *Watchmen*. The 1991 release of *New Mutants* #98 constituted the first appearance of Deadpool, one of the most iconic antiheroes in superhero comics to date. Deadpool's very apparent psychosis (manifesting in multiple voices and hallucinations) as well as his humorous take on the superhero condition, penchant for violence, and inability to *really* inhabit the role of *hero* or *villain* are all characteristics which can be traced directly back to the innovations made by *Watchmen*. In addition, because of Deadpool's enduring popularity, his elements of genre deconstruction, his engagement of intertextuality, as well as the questions he forces us to ask regarding motivation, psychosis, and morality, Deadpool serves as an appropriate case study for the postmodern, post-*Watchmen* superhero. By examining the *Deadpool* comics critically, we can not only establish where superheroes are now in their development but also possibly predict where the genre is headed in the future.

## **Pulp Fiction, Pulp Culture**

Projects like this one typically include in their introductions a “justification” section, a space in which the author answers the question, “Why comics?” Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith explain that comics are worthy of study for four reasons in particular: 1) the originality of comics as an art form, 2) comics present a “new literacy,” 3) comics are historically significant, and 4) comics have an immense potential as a medium (13-17). Furthermore, Angela Ndaliansis

reminds us that “asking the question, ‘Why Comics Studies?’ is like asking ‘Why Cinema, Television, Game, or Media Studies?’” (“Why Comics Studies?” 113). In short, the importance of comics studies is almost self-evident. The popularity of the form is enough in itself to warrant critical examination, especially considering recent developments regarding the visibility and cross-media formatting of superhero comics in film, television, video games, and popular culture in general (114-115). With such a vast, international readership/viewership, superheroes not only reflect aspects of human nature but affect them as well.

As a whole, the comics form has a certain kind of permanent relevance. Because they were primarily a disposable medium and because they were sold beside – and sometimes within – newspapers for so many years, comics developed a unique ability to always reflect contemporary social identity. This ability helped the form as a whole, and especially the superhero genre, to become an integral part of popular culture. Matthew J. Costello writes that “like other forms of popular entertainment, comicbooks tend to be very receptive to cultural trends, to reflect them, comment on them, and sometimes inaugurate them” (1). Superheroes, in particular, represent ideological and moralistic fantasies; each hero, through their origin story and characterization, embodies a particular idea or belief, whether it be the immigrant dream (Superman), the virtues of capitalism (Iron Man), or any other aspect of dominant national identity. The critical exploration of superhero comics provides a unique space to explore our paired concepts of good and evil, justice and corruption, and ideology and identity.

Since the pivotal year of 1986, comics have taken on more serious content through the inclusion of complex themes, narratives, and structures, both *because of* and *resulting in* an increasingly middle-aged readership. There is, admittedly, a great deal of conflicting perception regarding the cultural value of comics as a valid form of fiction. The word “comics” has a very

explicit definition for the majority of people, a definition which is constituted from the comic strips of the Sunday morning “funny papers” and images of campy spandexed heroes.

Comicbooks are often treated as a kind of “kiddy literature,” a less sophisticated, less complex medium designed for consumption by less sophisticated, less complex minds. In short, for many people, comics are “picture books” for children, while novels, non-fiction, poetry, and every other literary genre is for adults.

However, many comics scholars argue that yes, there *is* literary merit in comics and graphic novels – or at least, there is literary merit in some of them. Mila Bongco notes that this kind of “attack” on comics is part of a tradition within mass media critique of focusing on “possible harmful effects of substandard and unchecked entertainment on malleable minds” and that “traditional criticism about comics reflects the pattern of ambivalence and censorious attitude toward mass media in general” (2). Regarding this debate, Meskin suggests that “many central cases of literature (the great novels and plays) are works of fiction” (161), so perhaps comics are literary simply because they are fictional. Furthermore, Meskin reminds us that the term “*literature* is also sometimes used to refer to a body of written work that covers a specific topic” (161), which would make superhero comics the *literature* of fictionalized heroism. However, neither of these qualifications necessarily constitute our actual understanding of what is literature and what it is not. Instead, Meskin suggests that “literary status is not, as the *subjectivist* would have it, a matter of what individuals think, but rather a matter of what a community or a culture thinks” (163). So, perhaps the sheer volume of fans and scholars who do conceptualize comics as literature is proof enough of their scholarly value. Meskin concludes:

For if they are literature, then it is probably a mistake to consider them to have *solely* entertainment value – literature is the sort of thing that invites us to look for



both distinctive uses of language (metaphor, imagery, ambiguity, allusion) and significant content. That is, we read literature with an eye out for 'literary' language and 'deep meanings.' (158)

The presence of these “distinctive uses of language” and “significant content” in texts like *Watchmen*, *Maus*, and the rest thus justifies serious, critical readings of comics and graphic novels.

The popularity of comics like *Watchmen* and more recently developed characters like Deadpool is in fact crucial to this study. Because both titles are extremely popular and because both have revolutionized what it means to be a superhero, it is important to understand how these titles reflect our shifting attitudes in the way we view ourselves, heroism, and justice. As the ultimate post-*Watchmen* hero, Deadpool shows us that through self-reflexivity, genre deconstruction, and dark hysteria, it isn't so easy to walk the straight line of the righteous, and that sometimes it's much easier to submit to the madness of a chaotic, morally ambiguous world. In essence, Deadpool picks up the torch where the *Watchmen* left it, bringing to light some of the darkness within us.

## **The Streets Are Extended Gutters: Project Overview**

Chapter one consists of a discussion surrounding the concept of comics as an inherently ideological form of communication. Scholarship concerning the ideological legacy of superhero comics, followed by a brief history of the socio-cultural development of those ideologies, establishes the superhero genre of comics as particularly ideological in its discussions of morality and justice. Chapter two begins with an analytic framework within which I establish the

concept of *genre* as hegemonic by borrowing from genre theorists Steve Neal, Tzvetany Todorov, and Thomas Schatz. From there, I discuss the establishment of the superhero as a hegemonic genre, with special focus on the superhero-supervillain dichotomy as a predominant ideological mode. In chapter three, I perform an analysis of Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan in comparison with Deadpool utilizing the notion of super-identity as constructed by origin story. Chapter four discusses the ways in which code name and costume indicate a subversive malfunction of the separation between ordinary identity and super-identity. Chapter five discusses the ways in which the subversion of the superhero-supervillain dichotomy leads to a super-identity crisis.

### A Brief Note on Citation and Phrasing

Before the end of this introduction, I would like to explain the non-standard way in which I have chosen to reference comics and graphic novels. Because, again, comics studies is a relatively new field and because the idea of referencing comics in academic work has not quite taken root, scholars have not yet settled on a particular way to cite comicbook issues or graphic novels. The Modern Language Association has developed a format for citing graphic novels based on the conventions for citing print books as well as a format for citing comic strips based on the conventions for citing works of art, but neither of these allows for acknowledging the many different types of talent – letterers, colourists, inkers, pencilers, editors, etc. – needed to produce a single issue of a comicbook. Allen Ellis, former chair of the Comic Citation Committee of the Popular Culture Association, developed an in-depth guide in 1998 called “Comics in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide” (available through the Comics Research organization website), which offers an alternative to the MLA guide. Though Ellis’s formats

account for all forms of comics (graphic novels, strips, cartoons, single issues, collected editions, and so on) and all contributors, the ultimate citation product is a clunky combination of information which is sometimes difficult to parse out. Therefore, I have developed an alternative citation method that combines those offered both of these citation formats. All reference texts which do not fall under the category of comics or graphic novels (i.e. print and electronic books, journal articles, interviews, etc.) have been cited in accordance with the MLA handbook.

For in-text citations which refer to specific issues, story arcs, or graphic novels, I have opted to cite based on name of the source (rather than by the last name of the writer as required by MLA), including issue numbers, short titles, and titles of longer works where applicable. This is partially because comics authors and artists frequently have dozens to hundreds of comics in their name – thus making citation based on last name non-specific – and partially because the name or date of the issue/graphic novel will often carry more significance to the comics reader than will the authors' names. However, such references are arranged in the Works Cited based on the last name of the writer. In an attempt to acknowledge comics as a particularly collaborative medium, I have chosen to give credit to all known contributors, listing them as “Penciled by,” “Coloured by,” “Inked by,” and so on following the title of the work. Where collaborators have contributed multiple or all visual aspects to a comic, they have been credited as “Illustrated by.” It is philosophically important, I contend, that we begin to consider comics as complex collaborations, rather than single author texts, because of the very fact that collaboration sets comics apart as a medium. Additionally, because some specific issues of print comics were accessed digitally through the Comixology database website, I have included the database title in italics succeeding the city of publication and publisher information and preceding the date of access. There are many instances in which the following research cites

comics of the Golden or Silver Ages. Unfortunately, the original publishers of these early comics have been integrated into the larger publishers DC and Marvel. In such cases, I have chosen to list the publisher as DC Comics or Marvel Comics, as appropriate, for the sake of clarity because these early issues are now available exclusively through these larger publishers.

The various uses of ellipses can become confused when citing text from comicbooks. When used in in-text citation, ellipses generally denote the redaction or removal of irrelevant information from a quotation. But because the textual elements of comics primarily consist of dialogue, comics creators used ellipses liberally (some might argue heavy-handedly) in order to denote natural pauses, breaths, hesitation, and other patterns of speech. Thus, in order to distinguish between these two uses of ellipses, I have chosen to denote the removal of information from a comicbook quote by using bracketed ellipses. Ellipses which are written into comicbook dialogue are denoted as they normally would.

Finally, I would like to explain my usage of *comics* and *comicbooks*. The term *comics* can often be read as perhaps an incorrect usage because it appears in its plural form throughout this project. However, *comics* is the preferred referential term for the field of comics studies because it connotes the complexity of the multiple visual-textual forms that fall within this literary realm. *Comics* also signals the difference between a *comicbook* or *comic strip* as a product and the overarching field of *comics* as a form. There has also been a certain amount of discussion concerning the use of *comic book* or *comicbook*. Many comics writers (Will Eisner and Alan Moore among them) have expressed frustration with the attachment of *comic* to their work, finding that the word implies humor or frivolity. The problem lies in the fact many if not most of the critically acclaimed comics from the past thirty years have not been centrally concerned with humor. I believe, as many others do, that perhaps the attachment of *comic* to

these texts contributes to the misconception that comics are solely a children's literature or that comics exist purely for shallow-minded entertainment. The name *comic book* then suggests that a bound collection of panels, image, words, etc. is simply a humorous novel or short story. I have chosen to utilize the distinction *comicbook* in order to properly treat and respect comicbooks as their own unique form, separate (though frequently similar to) other forms of textual media.

# Chapter One: Becoming Heroes

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“We've always known we'd eventually be called upon to open our shirts and save the day, and the superhero was a crude, hopeful attempt to talk about how we all might feel on that day of great power, and great responsibility.”

– Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*

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## Superheroes and Ideology

At their heart, comics are a communicative art form, one that combines text and image in order to impart denotative narrative and connotative meaning. As discussed above, the typical artistic style of comics allows for a great deal of reader involvement by encouraging identification with abstract representations of our world, but the power of meaning-making within comics does not stop there. Comics also have the ability to investigate, discuss, and impart ideological meaning onto the reader. Today, many scholars are working to uncover the way superheroic identity is often actually built upon philosophy and ideology.

### Why Ideology?

In *Comics & Ideology*, Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon explain that an ideological approach to comics is both appropriate and necessary for two reasons, the first of which is the complex combination of text and image described by Eisner:

First, the nature of comic art makes the form ideologically interesting. Comic art combines printed words and pictures in a unique way. The complex nature of this combination allows for much flexibility in the manipulation of meaning, but often

in a context that is constrained within a small space (four panels in a newspaper strip; 20 pages or so in a typical comicbook issue). (3)

Of course, implied here is the high level of *intention* involved in creating comics (as acknowledged by McCloud). Such a limitation of space means that artists and writers must maintain a high level of control, purposefulness, and premeditation in order to communicate the desired message. In addition, the nature of textual illustration as a communicative art allows the comics form to “create a closed ideological text” that imposes and enforces a preferred set of meanings (3). They explain that “these characteristics have implications for both representation and interpretation of ideological images and meaning” (3). This “closed ideological text” is often achieved through the use of stereotypes, archetypes, generic conventions, and, of course, relatable abstractions. The typical textual narrative devices found in comics (narration, caption, dialogue, and monologue) “can make the themes and values in a comic especially explicit” to the reader (3-4).

The second reason that an ideological approach to comics is important is the form's social significance. As evidence of the cultural importance and influence of comics, McAllister, Sewell Jr., and Gordon cite not only the “ritual nature of reading the comic-strip page of the newspaper” by both children and adults each morning as well as the social celebrity of creators like Charles Shultz (creator of *Peanuts*), but also the proliferation of comicbook “fan-boy” culture across the United States and the world (4-5). Some of the oldest available comics scholarship, such as Frederic Wertham's infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954),<sup>3</sup> suggest a strong relationship

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<sup>3</sup> In *Seduction of the Innocent*, psychologist Dr. Frederic Wertham conducts an in-depth query regarding the supposed anti-social content in popular comics. Wertham believed that the “questionable content” of comicbooks encouraged social-deviance and delinquent behavior in young readers. Citing portrayals of violence, sex, and social deviance, Wertham’s book managed to launch a US Congressional inquiry into the possible consequences of comics

between comics, ideology, and media studies in general. In the early years of the industry, the ideological uses of comicbooks and strips have included (but are not limited to) war propaganda (early Captain America issues), youth indoctrination (*Jackie* in the 1960s) (Barker 134-195), reinforcement of conservative family values (*Family Circus*), disruption of political hegemony (the counter-cultural “comix” movement of the 1960s-1970s), and as a tool for both liberal and conservative political education (themes of Marxism and anti-capitalism in early Donald Duck issues) (Barker 279-299). Today, the unapologetic socio-political content of some of the most popular comics and graphic novels has led to more direct and scholarly discussion of comics as an ideological apparatus. For instance, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1996) recounts the lives of the Palestinian people during the territorial occupation in the wake of the Gulf War. Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) discusses the American experience of 9/11 and the reformation of national identity afterwards. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy* (2006) has become a canon text in LBTQ literature due to its compelling re-telling of the author's journey to discover and embrace her sexual orientation in the wake of her father's (probable) suicide. Despite the seeming simplicity of the form, comics maintain the intrinsic ability to communicate complex ideological messages. As with many popular culture mediums, the shifting ideological identities of common culture can be traced and discovered through the history of comics.

### Myth and Meaning-Making

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commonly read by children. Ultimately, because of *SOTI*, the Comics Code Authority was established, developing a tradition of government-enforced censorship in the comics industry.



But what special significance do superheroes hold in this context? As a genre, superhero comics deal specifically and directly with discussions of lawful, social, and natural justice, the superhero often serving as the figure who deals out justice or corrects injustice. More specifically, superheroes are often aligned with political or moral ideologies. Peter Coogan defines the function of superheroes by their specifically “pro-social mission” (30) and Umberto Eco maintains that the “iterative scheme” apparent in comics dictates that superheroes are “profoundly kind, moral, faithful to human and natural laws” (939). Apparent in this defining characteristic is the implication that superheroes are designed to abide by a particular ideology of justice, one that promotes the common good. Duncan and Smith remind us that not all believe redundancy, as Eco puts it, is at the heart of the appeal of superheroes because these theorists “believe there is no particular narrative pattern in superhero comicbooks, and that strong narrative structure is not even a necessary element of the genre” (233). However, continuity – “the relatedness among characters and events said to inhabit the same fictional universe” (233) – is how we as readers are able to identify and allocate certain conventions and characteristics which define genre.

The term “mythological” may be more appropriately applied to the repeated patterns of superhero narratives than “redundant.” Citing Joseph Campbell's theory of monomyth, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence argue that superheroes constitute a particularly *American* monomyth, both because superheroes are an American invention and because the majority of them still deal primarily with American political, cultural, and ideological issues. David A. Leeming, in summarizing the foundation of Campbell's monomyth theory, explains that “when we consider heroes and their myths comparatively we discover a universal hero myth that speaks to us all and addresses our common need to move forward psychologically as individual and as a

species” (528). Campbell writes that the Hero “is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (19-20). Comparatively, McCloud suggests that “superheroes are first and foremost about role-playing – becoming the character,” so superhero narratives enable “first-person power fantasies” to be read and experienced by a large and diverse audience (*Reinventing Comics* 118). Leeming further explains that “the Hero of the monomyth, our representative Self, the totality of our individual and collective unconscious and conscious psyches, passes in his 'adventures' through a series of transformative thresholds” (528). The shared universality of the Hero of the monomyth and the Hero of superhero comics is but one of the similarities between the two. According to Leeming, the Hero's beginning “is often a miraculous conception and birth” and that “the hero birth is the hope for a new beginning, a ubiquitous hope” (528). As Peter Coogan notes in *Superhero: The Secret Origins of a Genre*, the incredible origin stories of superheroes are a defining characteristic of the genre (44). Similarly, as described in Eco's summary of the pro-social mission of superheroes explained above, superheroes present an idealized, hopeful version of ourselves, a version in which we *do the right thing* simply because it is right.

Jewett and Shelton distinguish between Campbell's *classical monomyth* and their proposed superhero *American monomyth* by identifying characteristics and values particular to American cultural narratives. The classical/universal monomyth, they explain, “tells of young people who leave their homes in search of adventure,” and that “Campbell sees these stories as the narrative counterparts of rites of passage, in which young people are symbolically inducted into societies that expect them to accept the responsibility for the community's welfare” (29). The American monomyth, in contrast, depicts “helpless communities” who “are redeemed by

lone savior figures.” Unlike the hero of the classical monomyth, these savior-superhero figures, “are never integrated into their societies and must never marry at the story's end” (29):

In effect, like the gods, they are permanent outsiders to the human community...

The tales of the American monomyth depicting threatened communities typically express frustration with the limitations of constitutional government and with its allied ideals of reconciliation and compromise... In the face of such a threat, democracy can be saved only by someone with courage and strength enough to transcend the legal order so that the source of evil can be destroyed. (29)

Ultimately, the superhero, as the central figure of the American monomyth, encapsulates an idealized (and sometimes romanticized) vigilante ideology that has dominated American popular imagination since the Boston Tea Party and the rebellion that sparked the beginning of a nation. Duncan and Smith summarize the stages of Jewett and Shelton's superhero American monomyth as the following:

1. a community is threatened
2. a selfless hero emerge
3. the hero renounces temptation
4. the hero wins a victory (through superheroism)
5. the hero restores harmony to the community
6. the hero receded into obscurity (232)

Additionally, Duncan and Smith note that “the superhero is recognized as a particularly American creation and is often seen as an embodiment of American ideology” (243).

Similarly, in her introduction to *Contemporary Comic Book Superheroes*, Ndalianis claims that superheroes are a modern reincarnation of ancient heroic myths, myths which are still necessarily recurrent in contemporary fiction. She explains that these heroic narratives are always already shifting to indicate changing social values and concerns:

Heroic narratives have a history that's as old as that of the establishment of human socialization. This major cultural construct began before Hercules slew the Nemean lion with his bare hands or Odin killed the giant Ymir, and often reflects the social need for extraordinary action. Hero myths contain universal elements and have a continued presence in cultural memory, yet they're dynamic beings who shift and metamorphose to accommodate themselves to specific eras and historic-cultural contexts. (3-4)

Marco Arnaudo adds that the recurrence of the archetypical hero of mythology was established early on in the superhero genre. Because there was an early clamoring to create characters like Superman, creators ran the risk of copyright infringement if they could not invent original versions of the character they were trying so desperately to imitate. Thus, "ancient mythology offered an inexhaustible reserve of superhuman personalities and adventurous deeds that weren't the exclusive property of anyone" (11). The mythological undertones remained integral to the formation of superheroic identity in the later years of the industry due to the inherent similarities between the hero of myth and the superhero of comics: "Indeed, it is unlikely that mythological heroes would have remained a constant source for superhero comics if there had not been particular narrative or symbolic affinities between the ancient ones and the new ones" (11).

In his book *Do the Gods Wear Capes: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (2011), Ben Saunders concurs with Ndalianis and Arnaudo as he examines Superman, Wonder Woman,

Spider-Man, and Iron Man in terms of pre-modern theologies and mythologies. Saunders notes that Superman, for instance, can be read in terms of monotheistic mythologies as a Christ figure (“sent to Earth by his heavenly father to be raised as mortal among mortals, perform miracles, and model the ultimate virtue of self-sacrifice”) or as a Moses figure (“who escapes deadly peril as a baby in a floating capsule, to grow up gifted with great powers and burdened with great responsibilities”) (16). Alternatively, Superman can be interpreted through pantheistic mythology, as a Horus figure (“the mightiest member of a race of other-worldly beings, deriving his magical abilities from the sun, and following a parental directive to protect the people in his charge”) or even a Herculean figure (“a colorful adventurer, half-god, half-mortal, best known for his serial feats of impossible strength”) (16). Dozens of other similar readings across comics scholarship demonstrate that the characteristics of the superhero can be analyzed more generally in terms of the mythological hero archetype. Ultimately, Saunders comes to the conclusion that, through this mythological connection, superheroes comics primarily negotiate our eternal fascination with Good and Evil:

For although superhero comics are not commonly cited within our discussions of theology, philosophy, or literature, to the extent that their appeal also emerges from out of the gap between the *is* and *ought*, between the ways things are and the way we'd like them to be, they engage with some of the most fundamental questions that human beings know how to ask. (5)

According to Saunders, superheroes “negotiate such modern phenomena as the rise of science, the decline of traditional structures of religion, the processes of industrialization and urbanization, the pressures of nationalism, and the effects of capitalism” (142). Furthermore,

superheroes “not only identify with the political culture and goals of the United States of America, but are also capable of acknowledging that they inhabit a class system, and sometimes articulate an explicitly social account of ethics” (142).

Ultimately, the ideological origins of superheroes were pro-social and grounded in clearly defined ideas of right and wrong; the value of human life and comfort, the reinforcement of social order, and the preservation of strict Western black-and-white morality were the prime directives and driving motivations for early superheroes. However, as superheroes continued to battle evil towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became obvious that they could no longer function as narratively and morally simplistic representations of cultural beliefs. Instead, superheroes began to grapple with the reality that *morality* is entirely *relative*. In the 1970s and 80s, the creators and readers of superhero comics found themselves in a world of increasing moral ambiguity, and, in response, the genre frequently echoed Frederic Nietzsche when he begs the questions “Under what condition did man invent for himself those judgments of values, 'Good' and 'Evil'? *And what intrinsic value do they possess in themselves?*” (xix). Scholarship such as that by Ndalianis and Saunders mentioned above, as well as Dan Forest-Hassler's *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, Marc Di Paolo's *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, and a plethora of others investigate the connection between contemporary developments in superhero comics and the influence of ideology-based identity. The sheer number of such texts suggests that the ideologies of superheroes are a popular (and therefore significant) concern within comics research.

## Look, Up in the Sky!: A Brief History of Superheroes

Late one night in 1934, a flash of inspiration swept over Jerry Siegel. In his own words, Siegel said, “I conceived of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I’ve ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so” (Qtd in Goulart 174). Working with this rough concept, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster crafted the first very superhero: Superman. Even though Superman made his debut in *Action Comics #1* in 1938, the superhero did not achieve his own genre until Bob Kane was approached in 1939 by Vin Sullivan (an editor at Detective Comics, Inc., which would later become the powerhouse DC Comics). Sullivan asked Kane to create another character like Superman, one who could compete with the Man of Steel’s popularity and marketability. Bob Kane’s forthcoming collaboration with Bill Finger produced none other than the Dark Knight himself, Batman (Duncan & Smith 33). Together, Superman and Batman established the two primary types of superheroes: the hero with supernatural powers and the human with power resources at his disposal. The superhero comics that followed were largely written for youth audiences and were, as such, primarily characterized by over-the-top exaggeration, lowbrow entertainment, and fantastical narratives. The conventions of the genre – the costume, the secret identity, the formulaic plots, the stilted dialogue, etc. – were established very early on.

Superheroes initially emerged as perfect realizations of human capability; we could see ourselves in them, yet they were superior in every physical, mental, social, and moralistic way. As the readership of comics gradually transitioned towards a population diverse in age, some superheroes catered to and therefore required a more adult perspective. The upheavals of the 60s gave rise to the anti-authoritarianism of the 70s, which in turn gave way to the cynicism of the

80s. However, the center would not hold for long. As the form matured and progressed, creators and readers clamored for more realistic depictions of social, political, and moral issues. Escapist fantasy began to merge with cynical realism, facilitating the psychological development of already popular characters; after a World War, a Cold War, and war in Vietnam, superheroes no longer represented the very *best* of us. Instead, the battles our superheroes waged resembled more and more closely the real-world conflicts of comics readers. Ultimately, the unrest leading up to the 1980s capacitated the publication of now-canonical texts like *Watchmen*, *Maus*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*. The shift towards reality in these particular texts became a highly popular motif in superhero comics, resulting in many less successful imitations and, more importantly, the development of Deadpool, one of the most popular and unique characters in comics today.

### Genre Conventions

The conventions of the superhero genre are, for the most part, easily identifiable. Even the most casual comicbook reader is most likely able to recognize the semiotic patterns that set a superhero narrative apart from other sub-genres within comics. Most recognizable among these signs is the superhero costume and mask, but other factors like the plot, setting, heroic origin, and secret identity also play into the familiar archetype. Perhaps most importantly, Coogan identifies the “pro-social mission” as the *modus operandi* of the superhero (30).

Though the superhero genre still remains slightly overlooked by much of the existing scholarship on comics as a valid mode of popular fiction, it does conform very neatly to theories of the genre development. Like any genre of film, literature, or art, superhero comics follow a sequence or cycle of stages. Thomas Schatz writes that a genre begins with an *experimental*



*stage* in which the majority of a genre's conventions are determined. A genre then progresses into a *classic stage*, during which time the conventions and characteristics of the genre are readily recognized by both the creators and audience, followed by a *stage of refinement*, wherein details of form and style begin to embellish the established genre. From there, the genre enters a self-reflexive *baroque stage* in which form and style become the “substance” or “content” of the genre (37-38). At the time Schatz developed his stages, none of the genres about which he was writing (the musical, the western, the gangster drama, the romance) had reached the completion of the cycle, so he could not account for what occurs after the baroque stage. Thus, Coogan developed the reconstructive stage, which occurs “after the baroque stages wears itself out” (198).

In the reconstructivist stage the conventions of the genre are reestablished in ways that incorporate an understanding of the genre's completed cycle. Readers will be able to experience the reconstructive stores the way they did when first encountering the genre; this includes a sense of wonder or discovery, but one tied to a knowledge of and appreciation for the conventions of the genre. (198)

Additionally, Coogan notes that the stages of the genre cycle can actually be “mapped” temporally in accordance with the various “ages” or “eras” of comics: Antediluvian Age (pre-genre, 1818-1936), Golden Age (experimental, 1938-1956), Silver Age (classic, 1956-1970), Bronze Age (refinement, 1970-1980), Iron Age (baroque, 1980-2000), and Renaissance Age (reconstruction, 1995-present) (193-194).<sup>4</sup> According to this figurative map, comics published

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<sup>4</sup> There is some notable dissent among the ranks of fans and scholars regarding when each of the Ages begins and ends. Regardless, the concept remains the same. Logically, there will always be some overlap; a handful of comics in the 70s, for instance, may still reflect the dominant modes of the Silver Age, or a series of titles from the Bronze Age may be considered particularly ahead of their time and therefore fall under the category of Iron Age.

between 1980 and 2000 belong within the baroque age – a period in which the details of form and style become the actual content of the genre's work. In fact, many of the major comics and graphic novels released in the 1980s and 90s (baroque) have become integral pieces of the comics cannon. Hugely popular titles like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and, of course, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* focus on themes that accept and acknowledge the established conventions of what it means semantically and syntactically to be a superhero, while simultaneously questioning the validity of (and reverence for) those formalized conventions. Simultaneously, comics published between the 1990s and now, like *Deadpool* and *Spawn*, still read very much as superhero stories, though they have begun to reconstruct the genre in meaningful ways.

### Forging Iron from Bronze: The 70s-80s

According to Duncan and Smith, ideology plays an important role in the reading of comics because they have functioned as both propaganda and culturally subversive texts. “Ideologies aren't hidden” they explain, “unless they may be considered to be hiding in plain sight – as they are composed of taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the social world is supposed to work” (247). As these ideologies take root in a culture and endure over time, they become common sense to the people within that culture and are therefore less likely to be challenged or questioned (247-248). During World War II, superhero comics were often used to propagate pro-American ideals through the indoctrination of children (because the genre was still primarily targeted at very young audiences) (249) but that anti-war comics in the 60s and 70s, as well as the socially critical products of the underground comix movement, presented the “form's most blatant challenge to hegemony” (263). Marco Arnaudo notes that this challenge to

hegemony revitalized the previously youth-oriented market first in the early 1960s, when Marvel by introducing the idea of the “superhero with super-problems, in other words, a less optimistic or simplistic character” (1, note 3). In particular, the creation of Spider-Man – a character who, like all teenagers, came to understand that with great power comes great responsibility (*Amazing Fantasy* #15 “Spider-Man!”) – indicated the beginning of a shift in target audience towards “the same students who were listening to Bob Dylan and protesting the Vietnam War” (1). While these comics were designed to draw in a young adult crowd using young adult concerns, the artistic style remained colorful and the dialogue remained lighthearted. The revolution of the truly dark hero was not yet at hand. However, these comics began a trend of subversion that would gain momentum in the Bronze (refinement) Age.

The late Bronze Age of comics was marked by what Costello refers to as a “retreat into privacy” – a crisis of confidence following Jimmy Carter’s 1976 presidential campaign, the still-raw wounds of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and increasing civil rights protests (126-127). With more than 2/3 of Americans polling a distrust in their government after 1974, Americans “turned from the public realm to focus on themselves, their families, and their local communities, apparently rejecting the idea of government-sponsored social change” (127). Carter’s public warnings against a conflict-laden path leading to fragmentation and self-interest fell largely on deaf ears and did little to prevent “the loss of an accepted rhetoric of national identity” (128). To say the least, the transition from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age was turbulent for many of the more morally simplistic American superheroes. Many of the popular characters who were so intrinsically founded on the various aspects of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century American Dream – capitalism, industrial progress, selfless patriotism, respect for authority, and so on – had a difficult time surviving in this new environment of suspicion and distrust.

As a result, the comics industry experienced a sales crisis. According to Costello, “Circulation was in sharp decline. Sales of Captain America books fell 48 percent between 1970 and 1978. Even the *Incredible Hulk*, buoyed by a popular television show in the late 1970s, saw a 28 percent decline in sales from 1968 to 1980” (131). Heroes whose powers resulted from the happy accidents of American progress were decreasing in popularity, to be supplanted by rising interest in masked vigilantes who reflected the real-world distrust of public institutions. The creation and development of the darker, grittier heroes like the Punisher<sup>5</sup> and Luke Cage<sup>6</sup> embodied a new attitude toward justice, one that emphasized the righteousness of individual vengeance and the mercenary mindset of violence for personal gain. In addition, late Bronze Age comics were marked by recurrent themes of drug use, alcoholism, industrial pollution, murder, and many other uncomfortably realistic situations.

In what remains today one of the most controversial comics published, the 1971 two-part Green Lantern/Green Arrow team up, “Snowbirds Don't Fly” and “They Say It'll Kill Me... But They Won't Say When,” depicted Ray Harper, the young ward of Green Arrow, as a heroine junkie selling Arrow's weapons to a drug ring kingpin in order to finance his addiction. Similarly, 1973's *Amazing Spider-Man* #122-123 gave many comicbook fans their first taste of heroic defeat. The two-issue story arc depicted the death of Spider-Man's longtime girlfriend Gwen Stacy at the hands of the Green Goblin. According to Arnold T. Blumberg, “The death of Gwen Stacy was the end of innocence for the series and the superhero genre in general – a time when a defeated hero could not save the girl, when fantasy merged uncomfortably with reality,

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<sup>5</sup> First appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 in February 1974.

<sup>6</sup> First appearance in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 in June 1972. Luke Cage is also notable for being Marvel's first black superhero, as well as for the themes and aesthetics his title shared with many of the popular grindhouse exploitation and blacksploitation films of the time.

and mortality was finally visited on the world of comics. To coin a cliché, nothing would ever be the same.” Nothing would ever be the same, indeed, because the publication of these issues, in conjunction with other influential issues like them and the underground comix movement, led to significantly looser Comics Code Authority restrictions in the late 70s and early 80s.

### 1986: The Year of Legitimization

By the end of 1985, Costello writes that “the liberal consensus was long dead and the battle lines had been drawn in the politics of identity” (161). Characters like Iron Man and Captain America were “now grounded in a real society, no longer an anomic ideal in search of a people” (161). The mid-eighties marked a return in superhero comics to public concern as Americans’s Cold War anxiety gradually turned into Cold War frustration:

Thirty years of Cold War policy, of seemingly unchecked executive power, of covert activities, of extensive government intervention into the private sphere, had placed the belief in American virtue and the virtue of American institutions at risk. Distrust of government was part of a general questioning of a basic theme in the rhetoric of American identity. Thus the reengagement of citizens with the public realm that would come in the 1980s was of a different ilk than that of the 1960s or the 1970s; the reborn Cold War of Reagan's America did not have the same cultural power and could not generate the same kind of hegemonic consensus as the Cold War of the 1950s, even with the attempt at monopolizing American nationalist symbols to do so. (161)

Ultimately, the “weakened rhetoric of virtue” pervading the mid-eighties made it impossible for the public to trust authority, leading to a general sense that “irony and order would have to sit

side by side as the Cold War was reborn and ended” (161). As the Comedian understood better than any of the other Crimebusters, the American Dream had finally come true, and in doing so, it had died. Or, as Hunter S. Thompson predicted in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (68).

With the increasing inclusion of the violence, substance abuse, and the civil unrest plaguing Americans, the comics industry began to acknowledge that its readership was not strictly limited to adolescents. If *comicbooks* were still largely considered “kiddy literature” (though many were already being read by adults, often secretly), then adult comics required a new form to mark the maturation of the medium and its readers. It followed, then, that the term *graphic novel* became synonymous with *grown up comics*, even though, as McCloud notes, many creators and publishers “used the term ‘graphic novel’ cynically, to repackage run-of-the-mill stories from popular mainstream titles” (*Reinventing Comics* 28). Overall, there was an implicitly understood distinction between comicbooks and graphic novels. Despite having “book” in the name, comicbooks were periodicals – illustrated magazines – which carried a connotation of disposability or a temporary worth only apparent at the fleeting moment of its publication. But graphic novels, on the other hand, actually had the weight, square binding, and length of books. The term *graphic novel* actually predates 1986, but not by much. Will Eisner used the term first when describing *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, his landmark text about Jewish American experiences first published in 1978. Ironically, *A Contract with God* did not follow the prose style of an actual novel because it was in fact a collection of four short stories, but the term stuck regardless of that apparently minor detail.

The vast majority of scholars agree that the legitimization of comics occurred in 1986 as a result of three particular graphic novels: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. All three dealt directly with real conflicts (the Holocaust, aging, and the Cold War, respectively), but all three also dealt indirectly with more subtle ideas (the legacy of trauma, subversion of authority, and the death of the American Dream, respectively). At first glance, *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* both appeared to follow the conventions of the superhero genre, yet both titles actually worked actively to destabilize the normalized forms and functions established by Golden, Silver, and Bronze Age superhero comics. The highly successful direct and indirect approaches to realistic conflict made by *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* was very likely made possible by the emergence of *graphic novel* as an elevated form. McCloud notes that "Alan Moore and Frank Miller began to see longer formats as a haven for much more complex and challenging work" partially because the utilization of the graphic novel format constituted a "claim of permanent worth" through an appellative connection to high culture (29).

## The Post-Watchmen Superhero

In the few years prior to 1986, the mainstream comics industry was making small, but important steps towards introducing real-world issues into their publications. But 1986 was really the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. Within one year, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* hit the stands, ushering in a new age – an age of Iron. Unlike the Green Lantern/Green Arrow crossover and *Amazing Spider-Man* #122-123, *Maus*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen* could not be fully

enjoyed by adolescent readers; the texts *required* an adult perspective in the reader, while the earlier issues mentioned above only *allowed space* for it. Of course, *Maus* stands apart in that it is a memoir of the Holocaust, while the other two texts are clearly superhero comics. Thus *Maus* left an overall impact on the industry by redefining what the subject matter of comics could be, while *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* redefined what comics could say about the superheroic condition.

### The Dark Knight Returns vs. Watchmen

In comparing Frank Miller and Alan Moore's work, it might seem as though it would be just as, if not more, appropriate to examine the post-*Dark Knight* hero, rather than the post-*Watchmen* hero<sup>7</sup>, but I contend that *Watchmen* has left a larger impact, though the two do share many themes and forms. First, *Dark Knight* is a revision of a much older, more familiar character – a revision which focuses specifically on the concept of the aging superhero. *Watchmen* presents entirely new characters whose histories and personalities must be discovered slowly throughout the series; the legacy of Batman as a pre-existing cultural icon is already understood and acknowledged in reading *The Dark Knight Returns*. Both were originally released as limited mini-series, *The Dark Knight Returns* in four issues and *Watchmen* in twelve, yet *Watchmen's* prose style lends more to the “graphic novel” form it would eventually take than does *Dark Knight*. Dave Gibbons supports this idea in *Watching the Watchmen* when he explains, “Lofty though the term might have seemed, *Watchmen's* narrative certainly had the weight and

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<sup>7</sup> In reviewing the scholarship around which publication constituted the “turning point” of 1986, it appears that there are approximately equal numbers of scholars who champion *The Dark Knight Returns* as are those who champion *Watchmen*. I side with the latter due to the two reasons discussed in this section.



complexity of a prose novel, and it was, after all, indisputably graphic in representation. In addition, it was a complete story, needing no prior knowledge and requiring no further reading to be a satisfying fictional experience” (237). Markstein agrees, reminding us that as soon as the last issue of *Watchmen* was released, DC published collected trade paperback and hardcover editions. He further notes that *Watchmen* functions as “one of the relatively few graphic novels that actually are novels in terms of length, complexity and unity of themes.”

Second, *The Dark Knight Returns* takes place (as with all DC comics) in a fictional city. DC's flagship cities, Batman's Gotham and Superman's Metropolis, are exaggerated mirror images of New York City. As Dennis O'Neill explains in the afterword to *Knightfall*, “Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year” (qtd. in Popik). Though Gotham is a representation of the real world, it is still clearly intended as a highly fantasized reality. The New York City of *Watchmen*, however, was written and drawn to feel to readers like the real city. Additionally, the inclusion of pieces from the fictional memoir *Under the Hood* and other texts gives the impression that *Watchmen* takes place in the reality experienced by its readers. The first excerpt from *Under the Hood* includes a note reading, “We present here excerpts from Hollis Mason's autobiography, UNDER THE HOOD, leading up to the time when he became the masked adventurer, Nite Owl. Reprinted with permission of the author” (“At Midnight All the Agents”). Sara J. Van Ness notes that this vague use of “we” is the only reference to the narrator or recorder of the narrative, but it does encourage readers to move through *Watchmen* as a representation of real events (61):

If the narrator is the agent of control over the presentation of some of these documents (suggested by the paper-clipped notes), then one can assume that he or

she is also presenting the information contained within the panels and the other private expository materials, such as the contents of Sally Jupiter's scrapbooks or the paperwork that Rorschach and Dreiberg find on Veidt's desk. (62)

Unlike its predecessors and contemporaries, *Watchmen* adopts certain postmodern elements which lend, in conjunction with Moore's use of violence and moral ambiguity, to the series' overall impact. *The Dark Knight Returns* fixates on the idea of Batman coming out of retirement as a metaphor: the *return* of Batman, a character who already carried so much cultural baggage in 1986, signifies a *resurrection* and therefore a *rebirth* of superheroes. However, this rebirth still locates superheroes as fictional characters existing within fictional worlds.

Thus, in comparing the two titles, it becomes obvious that Frank Miller's work functions more as a commentary on stagnation of serious development in the Batman issues released prior to *The Dark Knight Returns*. Mila Bongco elaborates by rhetorically asking, "Was Miller implying that the Batman comics that had appeared in the last years, some of which were dutifully collected by fans, were insignificant and meaningless?" She posits that this was exactly Miller's intention (151). In this way, *The Dark Knight Returns* was largely a reaction to the camp of the infamous Adam West television show and the literal stasis of Batman's potential as a character; the comicbook Batman never aged, thus he and the themes of his narrative never matured, even though his core audience was growing older each year and increasingly craved the maturity that reflected their age. Bongco proposes that the real difference between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* lies in how far each was willing to go with its critique on the genre: "While Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* showed some extraordinary contradictions in authority and power in superheroes but still hinted at hope for Batman's ideal in the ending,

Moore goes further and shows that humans have no need for superheroes at all, and that superheroes are even detrimental to society” (178).

Alan Moore himself saw *The Dark Knight Returns* as an “elevation of superheroes into legends” (Bongco 152). In his introduction to the bound edition of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore writes, “As the naivety of the characters [prior to *The Dark Knight Returns*] and the absurdity of their situations become increasingly embarrassing and anachronistic to modern eyes, so does the problem become more compounded and intractable” and remarks that in *Dark Knight*, “Everything is exactly the same, except that it’s totally different.” Furthermore, “Miller managed to shape the Batman into a true legend by introducing that element without which all true legends are incomplete and yet which for some reason hardly seems to exist in the world depicted in the average comicbook, and that element is time.” If *The Dark Knight Returns* is about the superhero as *legend* or as *monomyth*, then *Watchmen* is about the superhero as *real*. *Watchmen* addresses readers within *their reality*, and, though the characters still function as metaphors or representations of the reader Self, the entire *lack* of cultural baggage in *Watchmen*’s superheroes allowed readers in 1986 to insert and interpret themselves fully, without pre-existing mediation, into the story.

### Redefining an Industry of Heroes

In the scholarship concerning *Watchmen* and Moore’s work in comics, there is a general, agreed-upon sense that *Watchmen* broke the concept of the “superhero” into its two halves – “super” and “hero” – and, in doing so, Moore negated both ideas. Van Ness asserts that

*Watchmen* destabilizes the reader’s previous understanding of heroism and as a concept, heroism becomes more abstract as the characters change and as the

appearances of right and wrong give way to their realities. When examining all of the surrounding evidence, the reader may even find him or herself questioning whether or not it is possible that a crazed vigilante is actually the best example of the hero. (118)

In a 2013 interview with *The Guardian*, Moore revealed that he finds himself disillusioned by the superhero tradition, stating, “I haven't read any superhero comics since I finished with *Watchmen*. I hate superheroes. I think they're abominations. They don't mean what they used to mean” and “I don't think the superhero stands for anything good” (Kelly). Additionally, Moore frequently cites an apparent disconnect between the audiences of modern superheroes and the audiences of superheroes at the original inception:

[Superheroes] were originally in the hands of writers who would actively expand the imagination of their nine- to 13 year-old audience. That was completely what they were meant to do and they were doing it excellently. These days, superhero comics think the audience is certainly not nine to 13, it's nothing to do with them. It's an audience largely of 30-, 40-, 50-, 60-year old mean. Someone came up with the term graphic novel. These readers latched on it; they were simply interested in a way that could validate their continued love of *Green Lantern* or *Spider-Man* without appearing in some way emotionally subnormal. This is a significant rump of the superhero-addicted, mainstream-addicted audience. I don't think the superhero stands for anything good. I think it's a rather alarming sign if we've got audiences of adults going to see the *Avengers* movie and delighting in concepts and characters meant to entertain the 12-year-old boys of the 1950s. (Kelly)

In a later interview with Pádraig Ó Méalóid, Moore explained that popular superheroes who follow the more adolescent-oriented conventions of the genre signifies a desire in audiences to return to the simplicity of pre-*Watchmen* comics:

To my mind, this embracing of what were unambiguously children's characters at their mid-20<sup>th</sup> century inception seems to indicate a retreat from the admittedly overwhelming complexities of modern existence. It looks to me very much like a significant section of the public, having given up on attempting to understand the reality they are actually living in, have instead reasoned that they might be able to comprehend the sprawling, meaningless, but at-least-still-finite 'universes' presented by DC or Marvel Comics. I would also observe that it is, potentially, culturally catastrophic to have the ephemera of a previous century squatting possessively on the cultural stage and refusing to allow this surely unprecedented era to develop a culture of its own, relevant and sufficient to its times. ( Méalóid)

In these two interviews, Moore is discussing specifically the “superhero-addicted” audiences of today, but he is simultaneously citing the very disruptions and transitions *Watchmen* created in superhero comics – the disruption of audience orientation, from adolescent to adult, and the transition from “sprawling, meaningless, but at-least-still-finite universes” that characterized superhero comics from 1938 to 1986 towards the “destabilized” heroes of today.

Though Moore openly expresses his highly controversial sense of chagrin in regards to the growing, and now dominant, trend of adult superhero fans, *Watchmen* was indisputably designed to be read by readers with adult perspectives on the moral navigation of politics, the Cold War, and crime. This intention is evidenced obvious due to the consistent appearance literary references, the inclusion of graphic sex and violence, and Moore's own acknowledgment

of the difference between early comics readers and comics readers at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his own words, *Watchmen* was “entirely a meditation about power. We were thinking about how each of these characters to some degree represented different thoughts of power. We have the global situation unwinding and unfolding behind them... and various other bits of bad news that suggests that the nuclear doomsday clock is getting closer to the midnight mark” (“X-Rated: Anarchy in the UK”). Similarly, Moore also explains that he and Gibbons wanted to lend a sense of authenticity and reality to the narrative by creating characters who existed in a world familiar to *Watchmen*'s readers:

In the course of doing *Watchmen*, what we tried to do was to set up a fabulous analogy for the way life actually is in the 1980s. It's the fears, obsessions, hopes, and aspirations of myself as a writer and Dave as an artist translated into Baroque, very fabulous terms and people in costumes. It's a sort of a little morality play. I think the problem in the 80s is that everybody feels so impotent and that is a perfect excuse for never attempting to do anything. (“Monster, Maniacs and Moore”)

As J. Michael Straczynski puts it, *Watchmen* “spoke of the darkness inside of us, not just the external threats, and that was something that galvanized the industry” (“A Hero”). If the handful of years before 1986 offered small, rebellious undulations in the pond of convention and expectation in superhero comics, then *Watchmen* was a tsunami creating “seismic waves, not just in comics but rippling across all of pop culture” (Jensen).

## The 90s, Deadpool, and Beyond

Following in the footsteps of 1986 presented a challenge to comics creators. After *Watchmen*, what else could be said about superheroes? What new ideas and comments did creators still have to offer? Could superheroes, as Grant Morrison pondered, still function after being made so fully vulnerable to reality? There were many who tried to imitate the success of *Watchmen*, creators who tried to replicate the themes and forms without taking the time to develop depth. Popular characters were beginning to stagnate again as the previously innovative aspects of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* became overused. Concurrently, the significance of such postmodern genre deconstructions was all but lost on readers who were not already fully enculturated to – or at least comfortably acquainted with – the conventions against which Miller and Moore were rebelling. According to Bongco, that new form of “reflection on the superhero genre, however, could not win readers over who were not previously familiar with superheroes” (178). This oversaturation, in conjunction with an economy left anemic by the Cold War, meant that comicbook circulation for both Marvel and DC was in steady decline at the end of the 80s (Costello 192-194).

Simultaneously, new independent publishers like Image Studios and Dark Horse Comics were successfully marketing riskier deviations from the genre with titles like *Spawn* and *Concrete*, subsequently allowing indie comics to dominate the majority of the market in the early 90s. There was, however, a surprising upsurge in mainstream superhero sales during a buying frenzy in the early 90s, which resulted from a sudden flood of mass-produced “special issues” and media events perpetrated primarily by DC and Marvel. Among these special events was the infamous Death of Superman issue, *Superman: Man of Steel* #75 (1992), special (i.e. more

expensive) editions of which came packaged in special black wrapping and included a black mourning band. Bongco writes, “As expected, the issue with Superman’s death took on an aura of a cultural event which attracted a lot of media attention” (193). Enormous groups of dedicated fans and financially-motivated investors came to believe that these special releases would grow in value over time. Unfortunately, this sales surge wouldn’t last long because, as many people began to realize, the investment value of certain comics issues is entirely dependent on their *rarity* rather than their *availability*. DC’s market share dropped below 20% by 1992 (Bongco 193) and Marvel was eventually forced to declare bankruptcy in 1996 (Costello 193). This “speculator”-manipulated market dropped out by the mid-1990s (Costello 192-194).

It was in the midst of all this industry upheaval that a group of young artists from Marvel – Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Marc Silverstri, Erik Larsen, and Rob Liefeld – developed what came to be known as the “West Coast Style” of superhero comics. “This new style,” Bongco writes, “was based on the techniques used for fight scenes and action sequences in earlier, well-known Marvel series, without the old irony and playfulness” (191). Using this style in 1990 and 1991, Rob Liefeld produced sketches of a new character whose costume was reminiscent of Deathstroke and Spiderman, two of Liefeld’s favorite superheroes at the time. Marvel writer Fabian Nicieza saw Liefeld’s sketches and, recognizing the inspirations, choose to give the character a sarcastic tone and a dark sense of humor (Nicieza). Liefeld settled on a name borrowed from the fifth *Dirty Harry* film. And thus Deadpool was born.

At this moment in comics history, Deadpool titles have reached an all-time high in popularity. With a highly anticipated film set to release in 2016, multiple cameo appearances in Marvel’s animated series, heavy merchandising, and a successful videogame in 2013, Deadpool has become a veritable pop culture icon. In accounting for his dominance in the market, fans,



writers, and artists cite, almost unanimously, his unique ability to break the fourth wall, his intertextual engagement with the readers' reality, his black humor, and his overall anti-heroic qualities. In short, Deadpool is popular because, like *Watchmen* in 1986, he is an exception to the current "rule" of superheroes. Deadpool *begs* for critical examination simply because he stands in such stark contrast to the rest of the mainstream superhero cast.

That being said, there exists no locatable academic scholarship, from any field, regarding Deadpool. The only critical considerations of his titles manifest through interviews with writers and artists in the comics industry and fan-produced reflections published on blogs and social media sites like Reddit. It should be granted, however, that "Critical Kate" Willeart's web article, "You Don't Know Merc: A History of Deadpool," most closely approaches the articulation of academic examination regarding the character. Nevertheless, the field of comics studies still lacks a socio-cultural or socio-historical examination of Deadpool. Therefore, the remaining chapters of this project will fill that void by examining Deadpool in terms of post-*Watchmen* genre and form deconstruction.

## Chapter Two: Genre & Hegemony

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“Superpowers, don’t always make you a superhero.” – Michael Grant, *Hunger*

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### Introduction: Superhero as Genre

What exactly is a *superhero*? This question seems to beg a simple enough answer. In recognizing the combination of common visual signifiers like *cape*, *costume*, and *mask*, can we easily point to certain characters and say, “Yes, *you* are a superhero!” with absolute conviction? Or can we look to a character’s dual identity and penchant for crime-fighting and say, “Yes, *you* are a superhero!”? Not necessarily. Johnston McCulley’s Zorro, for instance, wears cape, costume, and mask, yet he is culturally recognized as *masked adventurer* rather than *superhero*. Similarly, neither can the Hulk, who wears no cape or mask, be confused with *science-fiction superman*, nor can Iron Man, whose identity is public knowledge, be confused with *pulp übermensch* (Coogan 126). Therefore, we cannot simply chalk it up to passing the Stewart I-Know-It-When-I-See-It test.<sup>8</sup>

In view of this and a plethora of other available examples, it seems that there must be other qualities and characteristics, less tangible and less superficial, that help us identify superheroes from among the vast cast of genre-specific characters in comics. Comicbooks may

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<sup>8</sup> “I know it when I see it” is a colloquial expression made popular after a famous First Amendment case, in which the State of Ohio tried to ban showings of the French film *The Lovers*. The Supreme Court ruled that the film was protected under the right to free speech. Justice Potter Stewart described his decision by saying, “I shall not today attempt to further define the kinds of materials I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [“hard-core-pornography”], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.” For more information, refer to *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964).

be a hybrid visual-textual medium, but the majority of space within them is still dominated by image. Because of this, we our ability to identify superheroes often hinges, incorrectly, on appearance and the use of specific visual signals. But we cannot rely on surface-level signifiers alone because, for lack of a better comparison, the cape does not the superhero make.

Establishing a generalized working definition of *superhero* creates an avenue for understanding the socio-cultural construction and identification of the superhero genre. Determining and utilizing such a definition then allows for a critical examination of the ways in which some examples of superheroes – *Watchmen* and *Deadpool*, in particular – may subvert and therefore instigate change regarding understandings of the genre and, more importantly, encourage reconsideration of the genre’s accepted conventions.

## **Genre, Hegemony, Subversion**

Steve Neale explains that genres are systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions (rather than forms of textual codifications) which “provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding” (45-46). “These systems of expectation and hypothesis” Neale explains, “involve a knowledge of – indeed they partly embody – various regimes of verisimilitude, various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief” (46). These systems form “networks” that connect subjects, texts, and industries, both external and internal to a genre. Neale explains that this “entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and *therefore* probable (or probable and therefore appropriate)” (46). Tzevtan Todorov examines the relationship between primary texts and “extra-literary” texts within a genre, finding that

individual texts conform to an external textual norm, producing an “*illusion of realism*” (in contrast to reality) which we, the consumers and producers, consider “*verisimilitude*” (18):

If we study the discussions bequeathed us by the past, we realize that a work is said to have verisimilitude in relation to two chief kinds of norms. The first is what we call the *rules of the genre*: for a work to be said to have verisimilitude, it must conform to these rules... Verisimilitude, taken in this sense, designates the work’s relation to literary discourse: more exactly to certain of the latter’s subdivision, which form a genre.

But there exists another verisimilitude... The relation is here established between the work and a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership; in other words, to *public opinion*. The latter is of course not “reality” but merely a further discourse, independent of the work. Public opinion therefore functions as a rule of genre that relates to all genres. (18-19)

In order to elucidate Todorov’s concept of “verisimilitude,” Neale offers the musical genre of film as an example: “Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre. (Bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable – therefore intelligible, therefore believable – in a musical. Less so in a thriller or a war film.) As such these regimes entail rules, norms and laws. (Singing in a musical is not just a probability, it is a necessity. It is not just likely to occur, it is bound to.)” (46-47).

Following Neale’s and Todorov’s respective lines of thinking, I posit that genres, as aggregates of systems and networks, define/refine a set of four relationships between 1) a group of creators and the texts they create, 2) the group of texts and their readers, 3) the group of texts

and all other texts, and finally, 4) a group of creators and their readers. When a genre is established in popular culture mediums, meaning that it is recognizable and reproducible, it represents a discussion between producers and consumers which creates a cultural consensus regarding content and form. Thus, for reasons of brevity, convenience, and clarity, the related elements of “propriety,” “expectation,” and “verisimilitude” within texts as described above can be referred to more simply as genre conventions. Thomas Schatz adds that genres are a form of “collective cultural expression” which celebrates and reflects mutual (or, as Todorov would suggest, verisimilar) beliefs and ideas (12-13). In essence, genres create parameters that negotiate our reading and connecting of texts based on intent (on the part of creators and readers), content (the substance of narrative or aesthetics), and form (the structures and techniques used in the execution of texts). If genre is contingent on a body of texts’ *verisimilitude*, as mutually understood by readers and creators through the texts’ engagement of *convention*, it is then necessarily true that a *subversion* of (or diversion from) *convention* constitutes a break from *verisimilitude*. Such subversion, if proven intentional, would call readers to reinterpret or reconsider the value and meaning of those normalized, mutually understood conventions.

I also submit that texts within a genre are either 1) *hegemonic* or 2) *subversive*. Using Neale’s, Todorov’s, and Schatz’s theories of genre, it is tenable to say that texts which follow the *rule of the genre*, through submission to the demand of *public opinion* (i.e. popular opinion), might be called hegemonic. The *Encyclopedia of Political Science* defines hegemony as simply as domination with consent (721). More specifically, hegemony “presumes ongoing debate and discourse, dominant states or groups exerting leadership to retain their power, and allies or subordinate groups striving to shape the policy direction of the leadership” (721-722). If genre is

a system of propriety, expectation, and verisimilitude achieved through social consensus, then genre constitutes a *dominant* apparatus that controls text through convention *because* producers and consumers have *consented* to the repeated use of those conventions. Therefore, texts which are compliant with convention by upholding genre as a dominant narrative mode are *hegemonic*.

However, hegemonic arrangements are challenged by continuous contestation, which occurs because subordinate groups are able to “advocate and implement deeply opposed policies within the context of the prevailing hegemonic system” (722). Counterhegemony, for instance, arises from within the established hegemonic arrangement, and the success of counterhegemony “relies upon crisis and the addition of new ideological beliefs that are combined with those from which it arose” (722). Thus, there may exist a text or texts (subordinate groups) within the genre (hegemony) that express deep oppositions to the normalized conventions (policies) of the genre. Such texts may only succeed by combining established genre conventions with radical new diversions. Therefore, texts which appear to follow the conventions of a genre but deviate both significantly and intentionally, thereby transgressing the genre’s “regime of verisimilitude,” may be called *subversive*.

Having established this framework, it is obvious that the superhero genre functions in the same way as does any other in that it maintains defined characteristics and forms that help readers understand the narratives in the context of the genre’s “network.” Also, like other genres, counterhegemonic diversions from convention within superhero comics signify important developments in socio-cultural understandings of the genre’s content or primary concern. The pleasure in reading these subversive superhero comics lies in simultaneously recognizing repetition and in negotiating difference of convention. Therefore, in order to conceptualize and identify significant moments of subversion in the superhero genre, , specifically those achieved

by *Watchmen* and *Deadpool*, the generic conventions – or parameters – of the form must be established.

## Establishing the Superhero Genre

### Essential Elements: Naming, Parody, Imitation & Repetition

In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan explains that we are able to recognize certain narratives as superhero stories through a cultural consensus of genre characteristics. By applying Thomas Schatz's theories of genre, Coogan claims that there are three elements necessary – *naming*, *parody*, and *imitation and repetition* – for a genre to be established (though they need not arise in a particular order). First, because stories about superheroes are given a specific *name* by which to be identified, they are elevated to a position of “privilege” among other stories. This *naming*, Coogan notes, does not happen at the creation of the first genre text; rather, the stage of naming occurs once audiences and creators both recognize the name as referent to the genre. Accordingly, the naming of superheroes occurs in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when the terms “super-hero” and “superhero” began appearing on the covers of certain comics, thus evidencing that readers could view the cover of these issues and understand that the stories held within were of a specific kind. “So by the Silver Age,” Coogan explains, “the idea of the superhero was clearly established, as evidenced by the existence of the term *superhero*” (26).

*Parody* is the second element necessary in the establishment of a genre. Schatz writes that a successful parody indicates that the characteristics of the genre are mutually understood implicitly by audience and creators through cultural saturation of these conventions (39). Coogan summarizes, “Unsuccessful parody can indicate that the audience is not yet familiar enough with

a genre to appreciate the subversion of its conventions. Thus parody – successful parody –clearly indicates that a genre has been fully established in the minds of the producers and consumers” (27). Furthermore, the parodying of a genre signifies willful critique and deconstruction of the genre’s primary concerns (Schatz 40), demonstrating that both producers and consumers are able to identify spaces of conflict/disconnection between creator and text, convention and reader, or text and convention. More simply, there must be something to make fun of in order to make fun of it. Interestingly (and perhaps frustratingly), the first successful parody of superheroes, as identified by Coogan, also constituted the creation of the first female superhero. In *All-American Comics* #20, a neighborhood mother puts on red flannel pajamas and a stock pot helmet to become the Red Tornado (also referred to as the Red Tomato) in order to imitate the Green Lantern (Coogan 27-28).

The third element of genre establishment is *imitation and repetition*. High culture may value distinction and originality, but popular culture places value on imitation and repetition. Coogan notes that genres “fail to emerge when culture-industry workers fail to imitate successful individual pieces, or when audiences fail to respond to such imitations” (28). Though Siegel and Schuster’s Superman was the first superhero, the superhero as a character could not be recognized as more than a singular, individual artistic creation until Vin Sullivan hired Bob Kane and Bill Finger to produce a similar character for Detective Comics. The *imitation* and subsequent *repetition* of an original piece thus creates a space in which genre conventions can begin to emerge. Similarly, in “The Myth of Superman,” Umberto Eco suggests that, as with most forms of genre fiction, the appeal of the Superman story (and, I would add, the appeal of superhero narratives in general) lies in the use of iterative scheme as redundant message. Eco explains that “if we examine the iterative scheme from a structural point of view, we realize that



we are in the presence of a typical high-redundance message” and that “the hunger for entertaining narrative based on these mechanisms is a hunger for redundancy. For this viewpoint, the greater part of popular narrative is a narrative of redundancy” (938).

One of the most unique aspects of the development of the superhero is that, unlike other genres of comics, its fully-fledged central figure did not originate in another medium; the superhero was born in a comicbook, while his predecessors (pulp re-incarnations of detectives, thieves, cowboys, monsters, etc.) migrated to comics from other forms of entertainment, like television, film, and novels. However, superheroes were able to emerge so easily as a genre due in part to the fact that the superhero figure borrows heavily from three classic adventure-narrative figures: “the science-fiction superman, beginning with *Frankenstein* (1818); the dual-identity avenger-vigilante, beginning with *Nick of the Woods* (1835); and the pulp übermensch, ... the Nietzschean superman trope in pulp fiction, beginning with *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912)” (Coogan 126). Additionally, Duncan and Smith note that American comicbook industry, encompassing both superheroes and non-superheroes alike, actually sprang from two pre-existing industries: newspaper comic strips and pulp magazines (26). Consequently, the “familiar aspects of the superhero – the powers, the costume, and the dual identity – had all existed before Superman made the scene, albeit not quite in that combination” (222). Thus, these adventure-narrative characters are the shared ancestors of the figure of pulp magazines and superheroes. Yet today, the superhero remains unmistakable from his cousins in other popular comics genres because the superhero genre has developed its own generic distinctions.

### Distinguishing the Genre

As evidenced above, an inherent element of genre is constant cross-pollination. It would seem obvious that distinguishing one genre (such as the *superhero*) from another related genre (such as the *noir detective* or the *masked adventurer*) would become difficult. I grant that this is frequently the case when discussing a genre in its early stages of development, in which not enough imitation and repetition over time has allowed the genre to develop its own unique characteristics, yet the superhero comic as we know it today has clearly become a distinct genre in itself. Indeed, Coogan reflects on this initial confusion, and eventual clarification, by citing the particular uses of three primary characteristics – mission, power, and identity, or MPI – as marking a character specifically superheroic:

But, as with other genres, specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and heroes from other genres may exist who display all three elements to some degree but should not be regarded as superheroes... The similarities between specific instances of a genre are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero. (39-40)

It now becomes clear that the factor which distinguishes superheroes from other examples of the adventure meta-narrative is the distinct use of the mission-power-identity triumvirate (Coogan 58).

## The Superhero-Supervillain Dichotomy

### The Hegemonic Superhero

There have been and will continue to be many studies of superhero comics in which the exact definition of *superhero* is not explained. However, because this study – and this particular chapter of this study – is primarily concerned with examining the ways in which *Watchmen* and *Deadpool* deviate from genre convention, a definition of *superhero* is required. Such a definition would facilitate the delineation of hegemonic superheroes – who reinforce accepted conventions of power and morality as represented in mainstream superhero comics – from subversive superheroes – who destabilize and undermine those same normalized cultural values. Coogan develops a working definition for *superhero* that takes into account the necessity of both visual and narrative qualities:

**Superhero** (soo'per hîr'o) *n., pl. -roes*. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. - **superheroic**, *adj.*

**Also a super hero, super-hero.** (30)

Here it becomes obvious that the *super* in *superhero* can describe one of two possibilities: *supernatural* powers (natural, inborn) or *superhuman* powers (artificial, manmade). Meanwhile, *hero* describes the utilization of the *super*-power as a force that acts for the good of the world and the interests of the community at large. Eco explains that the pro-social heroism of the superhero results not from the ability to actively repress self-interest but from an innate and absolute motivation towards Good:

Each of these heroes is gifted with such powers that he could actually take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics. On the other hand, it is clear that each of these characters is profoundly kind, moral, faithful to human and natural laws, and therefore it is right (and it is nice) that he uses his powers only to the end of good. (939-940)

The definition of Good as it pertains to Eco's idea is, of course, highly subjective and entirely up for debate. However, it must be noted that conventional superheroes, from 1938 to today, seem to share an understanding of what Good means almost unanimously; superheroes perform incredible feats of strength and fight nigh unstoppable villains so that they may rescue those in need, all in order to protect and uphold the sanctity human life. In fact, the pro-social imperative of the superhero evolved into what could be called a "no-kill" rule in the 1950s (due partially to the restrictions on graphic violence by the Comic Code Authority, but also simply because the 50s readership was still primarily adolescent). Arnaudo explains, "a fundamental component of the superhero code of ethic is that they may never kill, for any reason or under any circumstances, not even for legitimate defense, by failure of rescue, or 'for the greater good'"

(78).<sup>9</sup> Today, the superhero code dictates that superheroes cannot kill, *even if* the death of one could rescue the lives of millions.<sup>10</sup> The superhero as pro-social is then coded hegemonic because it is a necessary *dominant* convention of the genre.

### The Hegemonic Supervillain

Of course, the superhero isn't the only important character in superhero comics. If, in our reading, we align ourselves with superheroes by a process of identification to understand what we are or wish to be (as McCloud claims we do), then part of that process must also be understanding what we are not. Duncan and Smith suggest that supervillains, as well as sidekicks, function as "supporting characters" who help the reader better understand the role of the superhero (228-230), but I would strongly suggest that supervillains are much more than that. Iain Thomson writes, "Our identities as individuals and as groups are shaped, in ways both subtle and profound, by our heroes. If our enemies (and the other 'villains' in our psychic narratives) help give us a sense of who we are *not*, of what we stand *against*, then, conversely, our heroes help tell us who we *are*, what we stand *for*" (100). In conjunction, Coogan writes that supervillains are a defining characteristic of the superhero genre, and that these villains appear in

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<sup>9</sup> Arnaudo further explains that the "no-kill" rule is one of the markers that distinguishes superheroes from superpolice because the superpolice officer "as the actual law enforcement is permitted to respond to deadly force with deadly force" (78).

<sup>10</sup> Evidence supporting the necessity of this as an essential superheroic quality can likely be located in any title, but no other character exemplifies this code better than Batman. The battle between Batman and the Joker has now raged for 75 years, and each time the two meet, the Joker's body count raises (it's now over 500). Yet time after time, rather than killing the Joker and potentially saving hundreds of lives, Batman chooses to hand the villain over to the authorities in order to protect Gotham from the Joker's homicidal mania – if only for a handful of issues, until the Joker inevitably breaks out again. This kind of hard-headed, uncompromising reverence for all human life seems to be ingrained in the vast majority of superheroes.

five types: the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted-superhero supervillain (61).

From here, it can be assumed that the definition of *supervillain* may be determined by inverting the positive connotations of *superhero*. Coogan elaborates on the definition of the supervillain:

The easiest definition is simple, a villain who is super, that is, someone who commits villainous or evil acts and does so in a way superior to ordinary criminals or at a magnified level. But that definition is not satisfying. Another way to look at the supervillain is as the reverse of his foe the superhero, and thus to reverse the definition of the superhero... But the superhero's primary triad of mission, power, and identity, is useful in looking at the supervillain, although they operate differently than with the superhero. (76-77)

If the superhero's mission is pro-social, then the mission of the supervillain (as the inversion of superhero) must be anti-social. Supervillains act as foils to superheroes; they are able to perform on an equivalent scale of power, but choose or are compelled to use their powers for their own interests. Both superheroes and supervillains maintain "codenames" and symbolic costuming so that readers may visually associate the hero and the villain as opposites, while also contrasting both figures against civilian society. The *superhero narrative* requires a villain of some type (which may sometimes be environmental rather than an actual individual, such as a comet plummeting towards New York City) in order to be constituted as a *superhero narrative*. Hence, the supervillain as anti-social is also coded hegemonic.

The eternal struggle between the superhero and the supervillain, as a central concern of superhero comics, manifests dichotomously through an arrangement of equal and opposing

forces, ideas, and characteristics placed directly in conflict with each other. These conflicts include but are not limited to democracy versus tyranny, life versus death, charity versus greed, environmentalism versus industrialism, nature versus science, collectivism versus individualism, and so on. In each of these oppositions, one side (superhero) is positioned as Good, while the other (supervillain) is positioned as Evil. As epic and destructive as the battle between the superhero and supervillain becomes, we always know that by the end of the issue the hero will come out on top because Good always triumphs over Evil.

Because of the highly generic patterns of superhero comics, we always know which side to root for; rooting for the ideas championed by wrong side of the battle (whether or not these ideas are *necessarily* wrong) would put us in direct conflict with our favorite superheroes and create a dissatisfying reading experience. In this way, Evil is always defined for us, because the villain always represents socially, culturally, and politically undesirable elements. By enacting this type of verisimilitude and by submitting to public expectation of generic conventions, superhero comics promote hegemonic ideology determined by the American justice system, Western cultural norms, and Christian morality. The simplicity of this binary between *hero* and *villain*, between Good and Evil, between right and wrong, is the foundation upon which the superhero-supervillain dichotomy, and therefore all contemporary hegemonic superhero convention, is built.

However, as I endeavor to explain in the following chapters, *Watchmen* and *Deadpool* both defy the hegemonic superhero-supervillain dichotomy (and therefore the Good-Evil dichotomy) by allowing superhero characters to frequently undertake tasks and activities which would, in hegemonic comics, be read and interpreted as supervillain-like. This essential

subversion constitutes the importance of both *Watchmen* and Deadpool in comics today. In denying readers the ability to always recognize Good and Evil in these instances, *Watchmen* and Deadpool transcend hegemonic notions and transform the comicbook superhero into a multi-dimensional, psychologically and morally complex figure.



## Chapter Three: Origin Stories

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“How? is not the question. What? is not the question.’ Sammy said. ‘The question is *why*.’”  
-Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

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### Introduction

The *origin story* is best described as the moment at which an ordinary person undergoes transformation through a significant event to become an extraordinary person. In comics, the superhero and supervillain are the extraordinary products of these transformative events. As such, the dual identity (and the iconic costume and codename embodied within it for both figures) are important signifiers – symbolic representations of the event that created the extraordinary characters. In effect, the reaction a person has to the transformative event will decide whether they become a *superhero* or a *supervillain*. Bruce Wayne, for example, becomes Batman, the defender of Gotham, as a direct and congruous result of the murder of his parents at the hands of a petty criminal. That he becomes *hero* rather than *villain* is due to his specific interpretation and internalization of this trauma. Bruce Wayne *interprets* the event of his parents’ murder as an indication that the universe is chaotic and thus *internalizes* this revelation by taking on the dual identities of bat and man. “Criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot,” young Bruce Wayne reflects, “So my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible... a... a... a bat! That’s it! It’s an omen. I shall become a bat!” (*Detective Comics* #33 “The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom”). Thus, the nature of Bruce Wayne’s super-identity prescribes that Batman imposes order on the seemingly random and chaotic world in which Bruce Wayne lives. Had Bruce Wayne *interpreted* the

traumatic event as evidence that the universe is chaotic, but *internalized* the event by submitting to and embodying that chaos, he could have just as easily become the Joker.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike previous superheroes, whose origin stories are constituted by a singular transformative event, Rorschach's origin story occurred in three stages, which are laid out in *Watchmen* VI "The Abyss Gazes Also." After Rorschach is mistakenly arrested for killing retired supervillain Moloch (alias Edgar William Jacobi) and sent to prison, Dr. Malcolm Long is charged with his mental rehabilitation, though it becomes obvious that Dr. Long is perhaps more interested in using Rorschach's notoriety to further his own career. Rorschach accuses, "Other people, down in cells. Behavior more extreme than mine. You don't spend any time with them... But then, they're not famous. Won't get your name in the journals. You don't want to make me well. Just want to know what makes me sick" (11). In this chapter, we discover that Rorschach's black-and-white take on Good and Evil are the direct results of growing up in a difficult world and being forced to see terrible, unforgettable horrors. He can be read as *hero* in that his basic ideas, a retributivist take on right and wrong, are meant to cleanse the "accumulated filth" of the world ("All the Agents at Midnight"), but the ways in which he dispenses his version of justice are so extreme and gratuitous that he may also be read as *villain*.

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<sup>11</sup> In Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), just such a suggestion is made. The Joker tells the following joke in the story: "See, there were these two guys in a lunatic asylum and one night... one night they decide they don't like living in an asylum any more. They decide they're going to escape! So like they get up on to the roof, and there, just across the narrow gap, they see the rooftops of the town, stretching away in moon light... stretching away to freedom. Now the first guy he jumps right across with no problem. But his friend, his friend daren't make the leap. Y'see he's afraid of falling..." This joke positions Batman and the Joker, both products of traumatic transformation, as lunatics in a lunatic asylum (the chaotic universe) who can only escape by taking a metaphoric leap towards freedom. The Joker (the first guy) achieves this freedom easily by embracing madness, while Batman (the second guy) retains a visage of order and sanity by fearing the leap. Thus, Batman and the Joker embody the superhero-supervillain dichotomy perfectly, the only difference between them being how they internalize their traumatic event.

Contrary to the unique origin of Rorschach, whose tragic experiences were certainly atypical/non-existent for superheroes at the time of *Watchmen*'s publication, Dr. Manhattan's origin follows a more traditional layout. He is, after all, the singular character in *Watchmen* who can be called a superhero in the truest sense of the word, in that he is the only one who actually has otherworldly, godlike powers. The origin story of Dr. Manhattan seems, on the surface, to mimic the "science accident" elements of heroes like the Hulk, Spider-Man, and the Fantastic Four. But because of his growing ambivalence towards human life, it becomes obvious that Dr. Manhattan might be the most *super* but he isn't the most *heroic*.

For Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan, the origin story reveals *how* the identity developed; readers can clearly trace elements of the heroes' identities in 1985 from the specific events that transformed them. Deadpool, however, has no particular origin story – or rather, his origin story is so convoluted and so irreconcilable to him that he faces a constant identity crisis which results in his inability to satisfyingly or gratifyingly fulfill the role of either *superhero* or *supervillain*.

## **Walter Joseph Kovacs, alias Rorschach**

Through a series of Rorschach ink blot tests, Dr. Malcolm eagerly hopes to discover just what does make Rorschach so "sick." In the first of these tests, Rorschach refuses to answer honestly what he sees in the ink, answering "pretty butterfly" to his vision of a dead dog and "some nice flowers" to a memory of his prostitute mother. But the reader is privileged with full memory of the "nice flowers." Before he became Rorschach, Walter Joseph Kovacs grew up in an ugly world, a fact Kovacs, as a fatherless child of a prostitute, came to terms with very early on. After interrupting her at work because he confused her coital moans with pain, his mother

becomes irritated. As the John pulls his pants back up, young Walter Kovacs still standing in the doorway, she begs, “Oh, baby, please, listen, he’s kinda backwards. Please don’t get mad,” but the man leaves anyway, tossing a paltry five dollar bill at Kovacs’s mother. She blames Kovacs, responding to his plea, “Mom, I’m sorry. I, I thought he was hurting you. I thought…” with “You know what you cost me, you ugly little bastard? I shoulda listened to everybody else! I shoulda had the abortion!” The memory closes on Kovacs’s shouts of pain in a parallel of his mother’s sexual groans from moments before, the shadow of his mother beating him cast upon the wall like an ink blot (VI 3-4). After the incident with his mother, Kovacs is accosted by two older boys in the street. They insult him, remind him mercilessly of his mother’s profession, and call him a “whoreson” (6). Rather than taking it all in stride, we see the first glimpses of the man Kovacs will eventually become; he attacks the boys, putting a lit cigarette out in the eye of one and gnawing on the face of the other (7).

At the end of the chapter, files from Dr. Long’s psychological evaluation of Rorschach are included. Among them is a transcript of a psychologist’s session with Kovacs at the Charlton Home, where Kovacs was sent to live at the age of ten. In it, 13 year old Kovacs describes a dream about the event summarized above using monstrous, animalistic, surreal, and carnivalesque terms:

When they got nearer, I saw they weren’t dancing at all, they were squashed together like Siamese twins, joined at the face and chest and stomach. They didn’t have any face, you could only see their ears, two on either side of the head facing towards each other. Their hands were growing into each other as well, but they had all four legs free and they were sort of dancing sideways towards me down the dark hall like a crab, and there was something tripping ‘em up, wrapped

around their feet, and I looked down and I saw it was trousers and underwear and stuff. (n. pag.)

Alongside the transcript is a horrifying, albeit lude, drawing of the event as 13 year-old Kovacs remembers it. It becomes obvious at this point that young Kovacs is developing an unhealthy connection between sex and violence. He is equating the two and coming to understand, in his mind, that they are both part of the moral corruption he resists. The moment of interrupting his mother at work has left a permanent scar on Kovacs's psyche. He explains, "I had feelings when I woke up. Dirty feelings, thoughts and stuff. The dream it sort of upset me, physically. I couldn't help it. I feel bad just talking about it" (n. pag.). We understand that this event has sparked within him an uneasy arousal, which his undeveloped mind is too woefully mal-

equipped to reconcile. The first piece of Rorschach's origin story informs his identity thus: Rorschach must resist the "dirtiness" of humanity because it produces so much shame in himself.

The second stage of Kovacs's origin story occurs when he is sixteen. While working at a dressmakers after leaving the children's home, Kovacs comes across a dress made of white latex with bubbles of blank ink pressed between the folds. The dress had been discarded as aesthetically displeasing, but to Kovacs, the dress serves as a perfect metaphor for morality. "Not ugly at all," he remarks, "Black and white. Moving. Changing shape... but not mixing. No gray" (10). Later, Kovacs learns that this dress belonged to a woman named Kitty Genovese, who was murdered in her neighborhood while her neighbors quietly watched from the safety of their apartments. It is from the scraps of Kitty's dress that Kovacs creates his new face and his new identity as Rorschach: "I knew what people were then. Behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress... and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror" (10). For a while after, Kovacs wore the

**Commented [KD1]:** Include scan of final three panels from "The Abyss Gazes Also" page 7.

mask and took to the streets, but he wasn't yet Rorschach. "I wasn't Rorschach then" he explains, "Then I was just Kovacs. Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach... All Kovacs ever was. Man in a costume" (14-15). He joined the Crimebusters, at which point he came to the realization that he, and all his friends, were "soft" because they let "scum" live (14). In 1965, he met the Comedian:

Forceful personality. Didn't care if people like him. Uncompromising. Admired that. Of us all, he understood most about the world. About people. About society and what's happening to it. Things everyone knows in gut. Things everyone too scared to face, too polite to talk about. Understood man's capacity for horrors and never quit. Saw the world's black underbelly and never surrendered. Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn't exist. He understood. No matter who orders him to look the other way. We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled. (15)

The second stage of Rorschach's origin story begins with the development of his dual identity and ends with his coming to understand his new role as a *compulsion*.

The final and most definitively horrifying stage of his transformation comes to pass in 1975 when Kovacs learns of an important abduction case. He promises to return six year old Blaire Roche to her parents and begins tracking down her kidnappers. He remembers, "Thought of little child, abused, frightened. Didn't like it. Personal reasons," subtly reminding readers of his first stage of transformation through his mother's abuse (18). Once he gains the information about a man who might be connected to the abduction, Kovacs, in costume, heads to a defunct dressmakers shop in a bad neighborhood in Brooklyn. Through a series of utterly silent panels,

the readers experience the scene with the same slowly rising horror as Kovacs: the girl has been murdered, chopped to pieces with a cleaver, her body thrown into a small furnace and her bones fed to two German shepherds (18-20). Wordlessly, Kovacs takes the cleaver and splits the dogs' heads in half. This is his final moment of transformation:

Shock of impact ran along my arm. Jet of warmth spattered on chest, like hot faucet. It was Kovacs who said "Mother" then, muffled under latex. It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again. (21)

The man responsible for Blaire's death, Gerald Grice, was Rorschach's first kill. Following this final transformative event, Kovacs ceases to exist. As Rorschach explains, he was "reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach" (26). Previously in this issue, Dr. Long says that he'd like to talk about Rorschach (9) and suggests repeatedly in his personal journal that Rorschach is an unhealthy fantasy resulting from a dissociative personality disorder. However, it is obvious that Rorschach is the only identity left inside the man that was once Walter Joseph Kovacs. Dr. Long concludes the issue while pondering over the psychological test from which Rorschach borrows his name:

I sat on the bed. I looked at the Rorschach blot. I tried to pretend it looked like a tree, shadows pooled beneath it, but it didn't. It looked more like a dead cat I once found, the fat, glistening grubs writhing blindly, squirming over each other, frantically tunneling away from the light. But even that is avoiding the real horror. The horror is this: in the end, it is simply a picture of empty blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else. (28)

In this case, there is no dual identity. Upon his violent arrest in *Watchmen* #5, the police tear at the latex around his head and Rorschach screams "No! My face! Give it back!" (27) – not *mask*

but *face*. There is only Rorschach, and Rorschach has consumed the entirety of the delicate, fragile humanity Kovacs once clung to.

It is worth mentioning in this reflection on Rorschach's origin that Moore has chosen to use the setting of a dressmakers twice in this issue, first when 16 year old Rorschach finds Kitty Genovese's dress and again when Rorschach kills Gerald Grice, suggesting that, had Kovacs reacted differently to his first two stages of transformation, he could have *become* Gerald Grice instead of Rorschach. Indeed, it appears that the line between hero and villain is thin.

## **Jon Osterman, alias Dr. Manhattan**

*Watchmen* #4 "Watchmaker" focuses solely on the transformation of Jon Osterman into Dr. Manhattan. Because of the unique nature of his superpower, Dr. Manhattan's tragically ironic origin story is told in a sporadic order, remembered – rather, not remembered but experienced – according to the significance of the story to him. We learn that Jon Osterman was the child of a German watchmaker. He had always planned to follow in his father's footsteps, until August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945, when the American government dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. His father exclaims, "This changes everything! There will be more bombs. They are the future" and "I'm doing what's best for you. This atomic science... This is what the world will need! Not pocket-watches!" (3). After graduating with a Ph.D. in atomic physics from Princeton, Osterman goes to the Gila Flats test base to work on intrinsic field experiments, where he meets Janey Slater. The following year, the two become lovers after Osterman promises to fix her broken watch. In August of 1959, Jon realizes he has left Janey's now-repaired watch in his labcoat, which he forgot in the IF chamber. Osterman becomes trapped inside just as the intrinsic field of



the chamber is about to be removed. The door cannot be opened due to a safety feature, and Osterman must spend his final human moments watching Janey walk away. When the experiment begins, Osterman is entirely physically obliterated, the atoms of his body sent sprawling into the universe. Though there was a token funeral service that September, the IF experiment left nothing behind to bury.

This wasn't the end of him, though. His circulatory system was seen walking through a kitchen on November 10th, and a partially muscled skeleton was seen in the courtyard on November 14<sup>th</sup>. With a watchmaker's precision, Osterman was putting himself back together. He explains, "Really, it's just a question of reassembling the components in the correct sequence" (9). On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, Osterman returns fully formed, bright blue, naked, entirely hairless, and floating in the middle of the Gila Flats cafeteria. He and Janey are reunited, but as time passes, it becomes clear that Osterman is no longer able to behave as a human, and this is putting a strain on his human relationships. Janey voices her discomfort in being around him:

I'm scared because everything feels weird. It's as if everything's changed. Not just you: everything! I mean, I don't know what you are. Nobody does. You were disintegrated, you put yourself back together... They say you can do anything, Jon. They say you're like God now! (11)

As Janey notes, the revelation of Osterman's new form begs an important spiritual question. If Osterman is God, have we, as Rorschach suggests, been alone in the universe all this time?: "There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it too long" ("The Abyss Gazes Also" 26).

Upon "going public" with his existence in 1960, Osterman asserts a new-found agency and chooses the visual symbol of his new identity. At his first photo shoot, he is provided a

costume – a long black fitted leotard – and a black helmet with a childish 1950s-esque drawing of a circle overlapped by multiple oval orbits. The photographer explains that the symbols mean “like, atoms, atomic power, like that...” (12). But Osterman is having none of it:

**Osterman:** It’s meaningless. A Hydrogen atom would be more appropriate. I don’t think I shall be wearing this.

**Photographer:** B-but that’s the only place where your symbol shows! The marketing boys say you need a symbol...

**O:** [burning atomic symbol for Hydrogen into his forehead] They don’t know what I need. You don’t know what I need. If I’m to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect. [He finishes] There.

**P:** I... I like it! It’s got something, you know? It’s simple, but it’s... Yeah! Yeah! That’s good! People will remember it. When they see it they’ll think of Dr. Manhattan. (12)

The name was chosen for Osterman as a reference to the very event that (unbeknownst to the “marketing boys”) inspired a German watchmaker to push his son into physics in 1945. This new name is designed to strike fear into the hearts of America’s enemies. Thus, Dr. Manhattan becomes a propaganda symbol for American power. As a news anchor puts it, “We repeat – the Superman exists and he’s American” (13). Osterman became a physicist because his father saw watchmaking as an obsolete trade in the face of the atomic era, though it was watch repair that ultimately brought Osterman and Janey together – but in repairing Janey’s watch, Osterman was unwillingly transformed into an anomaly of physics who would eventually be used as a weapon by the American government. The tragic irony of the story lies here: time, a construct now void of any true meaning, has shaped every stage of Jon Osterman’s life.

As Dr. Manhattan's story progresses, he begins to shift further and further from humanity, as evidenced by his notable disappearance of clothes. In his first photo shoot, his superhero costume is a full-length leotard, classically styled after the masked vigilantes of the 1940s (13). In 1964, Dr. Manhattan informs the Pentagon that he'll no longer be wearing the full costume (opting for another leotard with a deep v-neck, no sleeves, and no legs) and, in 1966, he finds himself in a room full of Crimebusters where he's the only one not wearing a disguise (17). In 1971, he is asked by President Nixon to "intervene in Vietnam" alongside the Comedian (19). After two months in one-sided combat, Dr. Manhattan has decisively ended the war and has begun wearing only black underwear (20). By 1985, when he finds himself walking the surface of Mars, re-experiencing his life, Dr. Manhattan has gone entirely nude. In fully coming into his super-identity, he is no longer part of humanity at all. He asks Laurie, "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have a stake in?" (IX 8).

## Wade Wilson, alias Deadpool

The generally accepted origin story for Deadpool – at least, generally accepted by fans – is described in the 1998 issue of *Deadpool and Death Annual* "A Kiss, a Curse, a Cure." According to this story, before becoming the Merc with a Mouth, Deadpool was a mercenary named Wade Wilson.<sup>12</sup> After being diagnosed with cancer, Wilson either sought out or was approached by Department K, a special weapons branch of the Canadian government. There, he became a part of the Weapon X program at a classified facility known to some of the higher ups

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<sup>12</sup> Deadpool's creators Rob Liefeld and Fabian Nicieza insist that the name Wade Wilson was meant to be an inside-joke between the artist and writer as a reference to Slade Wilson, aka Deathstroke, who was apparently one of Liefeld's favorite characters at the time of Deadpool's creation (Liefeld, Nicieza).

as “the hero factory” (4). Through experimental medical testing, the Weapon X program is dedicated to replicating superpowers from heroes like Wolverine and Sabretooth, both of whom are previous successful alumni of Weapon X (*Vol 1: Adamantium Men*). Wilson accepts a position in Weapon X with the mistaken understanding that the program will somehow cure his cancer. His recruiter promises that “man can transcend his station, son. Man can climb up out of the muck and fly with the angels” (5) and “You’ll make one bang-up super hero. Unless you bomb out of the program, of course...” (6).

And of course, like all tragic anti-heroes, Wade Wilson bombs out of the program, ending up in a secondary facility for the “rejects” and failures – those test subjects who did not react well to the Weapon X medical procedures (6). Wilson, now horribly scarred and becoming steadily more suicidal by the day, becomes part of what the other inmates designate as the “dead-pool,” a term commonly referring to a gambling arrangement in which the participants bet money on who will die.<sup>13</sup> Because Dr. Killebrew and his costumed assistant (humorously named the Attending) have taken a special medical interest in Wilson and therefore plan to keep him alive for further testing, Wilson’s odds in the deadpool shoot to a thousand-to-one. As one inmate ironically puts it, “Yeah... He just become the new King of the Deadpool. Long live the King” (9). Through Dr. Killebrew’s dialogue, we learn that Department K hoped to distill a mutant healing factor (the ability to rapidly heal from any wound) and implant it into Wilson’s brain, but their utter failure became an opportunity for the doctor to continue his experiments, unbeknownst to the Canadian government (10). Wilson and his fellow inmates are thus

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<sup>13</sup> In his interview at the Las Vegas Comic-Con 2013, Liefeld claims that the name Deadpool was borrowed from the 1988 film *The Dead Pool*, the final installment of the Clint Eastwood Dirty Harry series.

submitted to increasingly debilitating torture, and each can only hope for death, if only to garner a reprieve from their endless suffering.

As the issue carries on, Wilson has his first encounter with Death personified. To him, Death appears as a beautiful woman in purple robes with a skull face, and the process of dying becomes a dance of seduction. Death is initially surprised that Wilson, as a still-living person, can see her, while Wilson believes that he has, through his suffering, finally gone insane:

**Death:** Wait ---! You can see me?

**Wilson:** S'funny... I always expected my descent into madness to be more... violent. This was almost anti-climactic. Not that I'm complaining... If one's going to spend his days hallucinating about the grim reaper... she may as well be drop-dead gorgeous.

**D:** Something's wrong here. A living being shouldn't be able to see me... At least, not until the actual time of departure. If you could... If anyone could, they'd instantly go out of their gourd – But I don't see any aneurysms erupting... And you haven't started drooling yet – (12)

Death explains, “I’ve got it, I know why you can see me... Why I was drawn here so early... Cosmic abomination. Body and soul, you’re primed to pierce the dark veil... But outside circumstances conspire to keep you alive... and you’ve given into them” (14). Through his suffering and degradation, Wade Wilson has become a “cosmic abomination” and, though he doesn’t know it yet, he is predicting his eventual transformation through a violent, psychotic breakdown.

Wilson eventually realizes that his value in Dr. Killebrew’s experiments give him immunity against the threats of lobotomy to which the other patients are constantly subject. He

begins to push back against the authority system in the facility, first by trying his hardest to kill himself so he might reconnect with the beautiful Death (“I have to find a way to see Death again. I will find a way.” [15]), then by picking fights with humor as his weapon, mocking the Attending’s real name (“Were you a fatty... Francis?” and “Francis prances in pink frilly pantses” [17]). His bravery, and Francis’s inability to punish him against Dr. Killebrew’s orders, incites a social rebellion among the inmates. His closest almost-friend Worm remarks, “This war between you and Francis... A battle of wills in a place where most guys check their spine at the door. Somehow you seem to be winning it, with style, and it’s infecting this whole place... with hope” (22). In chasing his death wish, Wilson has provided Weapon X’s rejects with a voice, “defiant words for all that hate and frustration and anger bottled up inside” because “to see one of their own, going head-to-head with the unstoppable Francis... It feels right. Reminds us what it felt like... when we used to stand up like men.” Worm confesses, “You’re... You’re like a hero, Wade” (22).

It would seem that Wilson has finally achieved what he set out to when he joined the Weapon X program, but now, in his search for release from the world, Wilson rejects the hero title, grabbing Worm by the shoulders and shouting, “Shut up. You shut your trap and listen good, freak. I am not a hero. I don’t give a squirt about you or anyone else in this godforsaken place. I’m just a guy trying to check out so I can spend eternity with a hot skeleton” (22). Here, Wilson begins to echo Rorschach in his third interview with Dr. Long (regarding Blaire Roche), as indicated Table 1. Wilson’s explanation that the world is “a flawed, broken thing that grinds the little guy for breakfast and laughs about it” and that “Hope is a waste of energy” parallels Rorschach’s remarks that “God was not there,” “This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces,” and “It’s us. Only us.” When faced with the crushing realization that Good

and Right are idealistic concepts, not tangible forces which give meaning to the world, both Rorschach and Wade Wilson have turned away from hope. Interestingly, this view of the world is not only suitably nihilistic for postmodern comicbooks – *there is no Right, therefore nothing matters*<sup>14</sup> – but also strangely Buddhist – *life is suffering*.<sup>15</sup>

Wade Wilson <i>Deadpool and Death Annual #1998</i>	Rorschach <i>Watchmen # 6 “The Abyss Gazes Also”</i>
The world don’t work like that, Worm! There is no “right”! Would a place like this exist if the world was right?! Would I have gotten cancer, or been made into a #@*@*#% oddifty?! No! The world is a flawed, broken thing that grinds the little guy for breakfast and laughs about it. Hope... Hope is a waste of energy. Stop lookin’ for heroes, Worm... No one here but us washouts. (22)	Looked at the sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. (26) Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It’s us. Only us. (26)

Table 1: Comparison of Wilson’s and Rorschach’s nihilistic rhetoric.

Once the Attending/Francis has had enough of the inmates’ rebellion, he devises a new way to control the populace through “displaced punishment” (24). For each incident of Wilson’s misbehavior, Francis will lobotomize one of Wilson’s friends, beginning with Worm. At first, Wilson wants to relent and give in to Francis’s demands, but Worm tells him to “keep at it” and “don’t fold, Wade... Make things right” (25). Thus, Wade Wilson is presented with his transformative choice: to give in to the nihilism of the “flawed, broken” world by coalescing to

14 Jean Baudrillard explains that the postmodern age is a particularly nihilistic epoch: “Today’s nihilism is one of transparency, and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms... When God died, there was still Nietzsche to say so – the great nihilist before the Eternal and the cadaver of the Eternal... We are in a new, and without a doubt insoluble, position in relation to prior forms of nihilism” (159).

15 According to the sacred Buddhist text *The Discourse that Set the Dharma-Wheel Rolling*, Buddha laid out the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is described thus: “Herein, what is suffering? Birth is suffering. Also old age is suffering. Also sickness is suffering. Also death, being joined to what is not dear, being separated from what is dear, is suffering. Also not to obtain what one seeks for is suffering. In brief, the five constituent parts (of mind and body) that provide fuel for attachment are suffering” (6).

Francis, or to fight back and become, if only for that moment, the hero his friends need. Of course, he chooses the latter. After Worm's lobotomy – his final sensical words being “Wade hero!” (68) – Wilson does the only decent thing he can think to do and breaks Worm's neck. However, Dr. Killebrew upholds a strict policy about such behavior and chooses, with an apparently heavy heart, to let Francis finally kill Wilson (27). Wade Wilson, strapped down, waiting to have his heart torn out, shouts a promise of revenge, “This is not over! Do you understand?!” as Death whispers in his ear, “Honey? Honey, please... Just lay back... I'm here...” (27). As he bleeds out, his heart now external to his body, Death begs him to just accept his transition into her world, but it is too late – his healing factor has finally activated and he has literally no choice but to survive:

**Wilson:** Healing factor?! It doesn't work... My heart... I should be dead...

Fighting? Feels... Strange... Like... Like God –

**Death:** God has nothing to do with this! Your will for vengeance has kick-started the healing factor – You must give up, or you will live! And you can't live... I have plans...

**W:** \*NNGH\* Dead. Alive. Dead. \*HNNGH\* Alive... Alive... And livin' large?

Mama, I don't feel right in my head – Feel... Burn. Blood. Birthday... Can I get a party hat? Can I get an Amen? (29)

There is, as indicated above, a sudden shift in his tone as he transitions from a resigned dignity to comedic absurdity. Additionally, Wilson's remark that he feels “like God” parallels Janey's discomfort at Dr. Manhattan's new god-like abilities (table 2).

Deadpool	Dr. Manhattan
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<p>Healing factor?! It doesn't work... My heart... I should be dead... Fighting? Feels... Strange... Like... Like God –</p>	<p>I'm scared because everything feels weird. It's as if everything's changed. Not just you: everything! I mean, I don't know what you are. Nobody does. You were disintegrated, you put yourself back together... They say you can do anything, Jon. They say you're like God now! (11)</p>
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Table 2 *Becoming like God.*

Wilson then eschews Death the seductress figuratively, but doesn't realize that in doing so, he is also eschewing Death/the end of life. Unleashing himself on Francis, he explains his survival, "So in my last moments... All I could see was your ugly mug, that Colgate grin ... All I felt was hate... And, for lack of a better word, I was a zero... Reborn" (33). In this literally transformative moment, Wilson has gone insane, as indicated by the one-liners with which he punctuates his nonsensical, over-the-top action hero dialogue. When Francis stammers that Wade Wilson is dead, that Wade Wilson can't kill him, the "reborn" man before him explains, "You're right, Wilson can't... He's dead... But Deadpool's in the house now spanky!" (33).

Wilson's split-second decision to embody *hero*, if only to enact vengeance, means that he no longer *can* die, that the only thing he truly wants is now and forever out of reach. The ironic emergence of his superpower and the nature of its function, then, is the final straw – he *becomes* violent, he *becomes* merciless, he *becomes* hilarious, he *becomes* insane – because he chose *hero* for one brief moment. It seems that cowardice would have served him better. He is trapped in his permanently disfigured body (a side-effect of the healing factor) on a plane of reality in which he sees no hope. Similarly, Deadpool's rebirth through hate – hate being hegemonically coded as anti-social or Evil – as a result of his love for Worm – love being hegemonically coded as pro-social or Good – creates an immediate cognitive dissonance between *superhero* and *supervillain* which becomes the foundation of his identity.

## Chapter Four: Super-Bodies

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“It is at despair at not being able to be noble and beautiful by natural means that we have made up our faces so strangely.” – Charles Baudelaire

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### Introduction

The code name and costume of the hegemonic superhero embody the character’s biography, power, and/or origin story. The code name typically recalls the superhero’s origin as ordinary human while simultaneously encapsulating the ideological symbolism of the superhero’s chosen super-identity. Similarly, the superhero’s costume acts as a divider between the ordinary human identity and the super-identity, allowing both to function separately. By using code names and costumes, superheroes are able to protect their ordinary Self two-fold: the *human identity* is protected from public knowledge and the *connection to humanity* is protected from being overpowered by the super-identity. When the function of the code name and costume is subverted, the superhero loses connection to both the human identity and humanity, thereafter becoming entirely unable to maintain a pro-social mission.

### The Code Name

In classically-styled comics, the code name frequently consists of two parts: 1) a term that denotes literal humanity, and 2) a term that connotes the superhero’s symbolic identity. The first term, denoting “humanness,” is commonly an expression of gender – *Superman*, *Mister Fantastic*, *Wonder Woman*, *Miss Marvel* – or of profession – *Doctor Strange*, *Winter Soldier*. Sometimes, the “humanness” is recalled only by terms that refer to some notable characteristic of

the specific body beneath the costume, such as race or ethnicity – *Black Panther*, *El Diablo*. Other times, “humanness” is marked simply by the use of a familiar name – *Luke Cage*, *John Constantine*, *Nick Fury*. The second term, connoting symbolic identity, often refers to nature – *Batman*, *Black Orchid*, *Red Falcon*, *Spider-Man* – or concept abstraction – *Captain America*, *Crimson Crusader*, the *Punisher*. The “human” term often says less about the significance of a character’s ideological identity – what they believe or represent – than does the symbolic term, thus the “human” term is not always present in a code name. Single-word names like *Wolverine* and *Daredevil* are often held by anti-hero characters. The lack of the “human” term in the code name signifies an isolation from normalized society.

Jon Osterman’s superheroic code name, Dr. Manhattan, contains both types of terms and can be broken down as such to signify both his human biography and his symbolic identity. *Dr.* refers to Osterman’s biography by referring to both his previous profession as a physicist and his background as educated. *Manhattan* refers to the Manhattan Project, the American research and development project that yielded the atomic bomb. In becoming Dr. Manhattan, he literally embodies the transformative potential of nuclear power, the devastating ability of nuclear power to transform the world. In 1960, Dr. Manhattan chooses the atomic sign for hydrogen as his symbol, explaining, “If I’m to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect” (IV 12). The choice of a hydrogen atom is not coincidental here; the hydrogen atom bomb was the weapon of choice for both Russia and the US during the Cold War. Suitably, Dr. Manhattan’s superpower is the ability to “control atomic structure itself” (IV 13). Though he is able to use this power for both construction and destruction, Dr. Manhattan is consistently shown destroying tanks, atomically

disassembling enemies, and other acts of violence.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the United States government immediately seizes the opportunity to harness Dr. Manhattan as a weapon in Vietnam (FIGURE). Thus, as his code name suggests, Dr. Manhattan isn't just a representation of nuclear power, he is atomic power manifested.

The name *Deadpool*, on the other hand, accurately reflects Wade Wilson's status as anti-hero because it cannot be broken down into two parts. *Deadpool* is borrowed directly from the term "dead pool," a common game in gambling in which the participants bet money on who will die.<sup>17</sup> As recounted in *Death and Deadpool Annual* #1998, Wade Wilson and his fellow prisoners in the Weapon X "reject" facility maintain an on-going gambling arrangement in which they place bets on who among them Dr. Killebrew will kill next. Because Dr. Killebrew takes a special interest in keeping him alive for torturous medical testing, Wade Wilson's odds in the dead pool shoot to one thousand-to-one. He is dubbed "King of the Dead Pool" by his friends. Later, when his healing factor activates, he swears revenge against the doctor and against his assistant the Attending and takes the name *Deadpool* in honor of his fallen friend Worm. However, the gambling aspect of *Deadpool* also refers to the character's ironic relationship with death. In arriving at the reject facility, Wade Wilson only wanted to die and was even visited by Death, who attempts to seduce Wilson to "pierce the dark veil" (14). But in swearing revenge for Worm, his healing factor activated and he is no longer *able* to die.

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<sup>16</sup> There is one notable exception worth mentioning. In chapters III and IV, Dr. Manhattan travels to Mars. While there, he builds a shining palace of glass from the red Martian sands. He remarks, "Deciding to create something, I turn away from the stars that may have burned out aeons ago. I no longer wish to look at dead things" (IV 20).

<sup>17</sup> In his interview at the Las Vegas Comic-Con 2013, Liefeld claims that the name *Deadpool* was borrowed from the 1988 film *The Dead Pool*, the final installment of the Clint Eastwood Dirty Harry series.

## The Costume

The superhero costume typically builds upon some aspect of the code name to further illustrate the character's qualities. The use of dark colors versus bright colors or saturated tones versus monochrome tones indicates an isolated disposition or an outgoing one. A black and grey costume performs Batman's brooding nature and bat-like qualities (stealthy and nocturnal), while a brightly colored costume covered in web-like lines indicates both that Spider-Man is outgoing ("your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man") and maintains arachnoid powers (Spidey senses, web-slinging). The code name gives a title to the superheroic identity, but the costume is the physical border between the character's two identities of civilian and superhero. In putting on the costume, the character crosses over the line between ordinary and extraordinary. The presence of this tangible boundary allows for a division of the two lives, enabling the character to continue functioning in both identities without becoming mentally unstable.

Because Deadpool's costume covers every inch of skin, reader recognition of his character is highly contingent on the visual signals of appearance. His costume could bring to mind images of Spider-Man if he had been bitten by a black widow spider, as many fans across the internet have noted.<sup>18</sup> But the color palette of his full-body suit, stark black panels contrasting the primarily red suit, seems to simultaneously reference both his name and profession as mercenary (black *death*, *pool* of blood). His sock-like face mask is frequently drawn to appear loose near the back of the head, lending a jester-esque element to his appearance (referencing the important comedic aspect of his character). The covering of his mouth creates a new level of

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with Rob Liefeld corroborate this suggestion. Liefeld's original sketches for Deadpool were inspired by what he refers to as "100 percent envy of Todd McFarlane." Before co-founding Image Comics, Todd McFarlane gained notoriety for his artwork on Marvel's Spider-Man titles.

irony in his character when considering the importance of witty banter to his personality (as evidenced by his alternate name “The Merc with a Mouth”). Deadpool rarely appears outside of his costume due the disfiguring never-quite-healing wounds covering his entire body. Even in instances when Deadpool wears other clothing, such as a tuxedo (FIGURE), he wears the alternative outfit over the top of his costume. Because he always appears in costume, there is no familiar ordinary body beneath to identify with his non-heroic identity. In this way, Deadpool’s super-identity is especially tied up in his costume because his costume acts as a *fully-functioning skin*.

Unlike most other superheroes, Dr. Manhattan does not wear a costume. He is given a full-body black suit by the “marketing boys” from the government in 1960 (IV 12), but he tells the pentagon in 1964 that he’ll no longer be wearing the “full costume,” opting instead for a leg-less, arm-less black leotard (17). In 1971, he appears in black thong underwear, and in 1985 we walks across the surface of Mars completely nude (1). That being said, the specific hue of his new color performs his origin story in lieu of a costume. The characteristic blue glow of a nuclear reactor submerged beneath water is caused by Cherenkov radiation. Thus, it seems fitting that Dr. Manhattan’s body would become Cherenkov blue after a transformative accident at a nuclear testing facility.

The separation of the ordinary and extraordinary identities via code name and costume are highly important. The disappearance of the ordinary name suggests a displacement from the “humanness” of the pre-transformation biography. The full-time use of the code name demonstrates a full-time embodiment of the super-identity. Similarly, a malfunction in the wearing of the costume (when the costume becomes significantly damaged or altered, when the

character does not wear the costume while enacting the superhero identity, or when the costume is worn at all times) indicates an instability in the separation of dual identities.

Dr. Manhattan, as a man who *became* a nuclear weapon, cannot reconcile his past as Jon Osterman with his current state. When surrounded by other superheroes in 1966, he notes, “I’m in a room of people wearing disguises” (IV 16). The use of the word “disguise” here suggests that he wears no costume because there is no second identity – no human identity – to protect. He draws a further distinction between his two identities at the end of the graphic novel: “Restructuring myself after the subtraction of my intrinsic field was the first trick I learned. It didn’t kill Osterman... did you think it would kill me?” (XII 18). In referring to Osterman as a separate entity from himself, he suggests that there is a misalignment of his humanness as *Dr.* and his super-identity as *Manhattan*. Additionally, the subtraction of his “intrinsic field” in his origin story seems to suggest that there is something “intrinsic” which separates a person (like Osterman) from a weapon (like Dr. Manhattan). The intrinsic field is described as a “force holdin’ stuff together other than gravity” (IX 4). The removal of the “intrinsic field” from the person transforms them into a being who cannot relate to humans, implying that the “intrinsic field” is *humanity*. Dr. Manhattan is unable to be both human and weapon in one body because, as Buddhist leader Daisuke Ikeda famously said, “humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist” (“Buddhist Leader Calls”).

Likewise, the name *Deadpool*, lacking any term to denote “humanness,” implies that the character to whom it belongs has lost some intrinsic connection to his ordinary origin as human. In *Death and Deadpool Annual* #1998, Deadpool unleashes his newly reborn self on Francis, Dr. Killebrew’s sociopathic assistant. When Francis stammers in confusion that Wade Wilson is dead, that Wade Wilson can’t kill him, Deadpool responds, “You’re right, Wilson can’t... He’s

dead... But Deadpool's in the house now spanky!" (33). It is evident that ordinary identity Wade Wilson has disappeared completely and permanently (died) and that the super-identity Deadpool is all that remains. There is no dual identity, at all. As in the case of Dr. Manhattan, Deadpool's super-identity has fully supplanted the ordinary one.

## The Transformed Body

Furthermore, the human form beneath the hegemonic superhero's costume offers a reprieve from the extraordinary moralistic pressures of the super-identity (defending justice, fighting Evil, saving the day, etc.) and serves as a reliable, stabilizing connection to humanity. Without a normal human form to retreat into, Dr. Manhattan and Deadpool are cut off entirely from normal society and therefore cannot behave according to its expectations. To say that Dr. Manhattan and Deadpool both lack costume would be misleading; the symbolism usually captured in the iconic costume is instead represented by the *disfigurement of the body*. Dr. Manhattan's Cherenkov blue, hairless body and his white eyes are familiar enough that he can be among ordinary humans, but uncannily different enough that he cannot actually *be* ordinary human. Deadpool's grotesquely scarred body is so disfigured that removing his costume frightens and repulses the ordinary people around him. Their transformed bodies are thus *de-humanized* both in the sense that they are distanced from humanity and in that they are no longer identifiable as human. Thus for both Deadpool and Dr. Manhattan, the metaphoric content of the code name and costume emphasize their isolation from normal society and subsequent anti-social natures.



The super-identity transitions from being *performed* (worn as a costume) to being literally *embodied*. The subversive *transformed super-body* indicates a fusing of the dual identities, creating a malfunction in the character's ability to maintain a pro-social mission because, without a concrete connection to humanness through physical form or name, the character exists totally outside the protocols of humanity.

## Chapter Five: Heroes in Crisis

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“History is moving pretty quickly these days and the heroes and villains keep on changing parts.”  
– Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale*

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### Introduction

The ability of hegemonic superhero comics to distinguish between right and wrong for the reader is perhaps part of the reason superheroes remained outside of critical examination for so long. In reading these comics, we are often encouraged to simply accept definitions of Good and Evil at face value; questioning the motivations or convictions of the hero is simply not part of the process. When described in this way, it may seem that the frequent disavowals of comics as “kiddy literature” are founded on sound logic. However, the subversion of this simplicity is why *Watchmen* was and still is so revolutionary. In order to really engage with the narrative, readers *are forced* to question everything they ever knew about right and wrong, all the rules and conventions which make genre so pleasurable. As a result, Deadpool embodies Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, the Comedian, and the like to become a fully-realized representation of the post-*Watchmen* superhero as inherent contradiction. His inability to concede to hegemonic dichotomy becomes a failure to locate identity, thus forcing him to manifest both *superhero* and *supervillain* simultaneously. Put simply, *Watchmen* gives us too many kinds of heroes and too many kinds of villains with too many opportunities for those categories overlap (when anti-social superheroes are placed in conflict with pro-social villains) to know for sure where we should stand as readers. But Deadpool, on the other hand, teaches us that moral relativism and ideological fluidity are all part of the game.

## The Death of Dichotomy

In *Watchmen*, readers are able to compare the superheroes in three stages of development: first in the Minutemen days of the 1940s, then in the 1970s, and finally in 1985, when any semblance of a superhero team has vanished and vigilante heroes have been forced into retirement by the Keene Act, with the exception of the Comedian (working for the government), Dr. Manhattan (also working for the government), and Rorschach (working on his own terms). In issue #2 “Absent Friends,” Sally Jupiter, alias Silk Spectre, remembers the Minutemen (4-8). The scene is set in the 1940s, which, though fictional, translates to the Golden Age or “experimental stage” of the superhero genre. As such, Moore and Gibbons depict the Minutemen in much the same way that Golden Age superheroes appeared, in that each of the Minutemen’s apparently homemade costumes harkens back to the kitsch and camp of the early period. Silk Spectre looks like a Bettie Page pinup in her teddy and fishnets. Dollar Bill brings to mind Captain America wearing a giant dollar sign on his chest (representing the conflation of patriotism and capitalism). Mothman wears over-sized wings and antennae and Nite Owl I wears a brave combination of classic Submariner (the same underwear and boots, but in orange) and a weekend golf shirt. No less than three of these heroes are wearing actual, old-fashioned capes. In conjunction, the dialogue reflects an uncomplicated group dynamic with statements like “Oh! Eddie! Give me a break!” Even a folksy pun makes it into the mix when Nite Owl I says, “Listen, everyone meet in the lobby in five minutes. We’ll go back to Owl’s nest for a beer.”

In the same issue, Adrien Veidt flashes back to an unsuccessful Crimebusters meeting in 1966 (9). Here, the costumes have progressed and a clear distinction is made between the heroes

stuck in the Golden Age, the heroes in transition from the Silver, and the heroes born from the Iron. Captain Metropolis is now noticeably heavier (with what appears to be a middle-aged potbelly) and stands out from the rest in his outdated jodhpurs. Nite Owl I (Hollis Mason) has been completely replaced with Nite Owl II (Dan Dreiberg), the costume shifting from briefs, boots, and a polo to an imposing, tail-like cape and a goggled mask reminiscent of a bird of prey. Likewise, the new Silk Spectre wears an updated and even more sexualized costume of lingerie, though more fetish now than pinup. The Comedian has replaced his yellow pajamas and cat burglar mask with a heavy leather combat-ready suit and bulging biceps. The entirely new heroes wear a costume either more functional for their skills (in the case of Rorschach's trench coat and fedora or Dr. Manhattan tiny black bathing suit) or more subtly indicative of their codename (in the case of Ozymandias's Greco-Roman toga hybrid). As if to clarify the distinction between these figures, the Crimebusters argue whether or not to involve themselves in social issues. Captain Metropolis sees the "social evils" of the time – "Promiscuity, drugs, campus subversion, you name it!" (10) – as the prime directive of the proposed Crimebusters. But the Comedian sees no point:

What's going on in this world, you go no idea. Believe me... You people are a joke. You hear Moloch's back in town, you think "Oh, boy! Let's gang up and bust him!" You think that matters? You think that solves anything? It don't matter squat. Here – Lemme show ya why it don't matter... [He sets fire to Metropolis's display of social evils] It don't matter squat because inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs... (10-11)

Here we see the clash of Ages, Captain Metropolis on side of the Golden and the Comedian on the side of the Iron. Metropolis, a product of much simpler times who yearns for the glory days

of beating up petty criminals and seeing his picture in the morning paper, mistakenly identifies promiscuity, drugs, etc. as America's biggest conflicts because he, doesn't know of any other way to see the world and because of this, the qualities that once made him a great leader have decayed into impotent frustration and irrelevance. The Comedian realizes that the old gang-up-and-bust-'em "cowboys and Indians" approach to crime-fighting cannot possibly account for America's *real* problems – nuclear war, the ruination of any social order, and the end of days (10). Only the heroes who are willing to change with the times, who are willing to adjust the nature of their mission according to the symptoms of a changing social environment, are still able to function in 1965. In begging the others to stay ("Please! Don't all leave... Somebody has to do it, don't you see? Somebody has to save the world!" [11]), Captain Metropolis clutches for a time when the problems of the world were small enough that he could make a difference.

In inhabiting an always changing moral landscape, heroes must become less pro-social in order to maintain relevance. Indeed, the further these vigilante superheroes develop, the less *heroic* they become. More specifically, their identities as *superheroes* – and their primary concerns throughout the narrative – become less pro-social and more pro-self. The increasingly nihilistic psychopathy of Rorschach and the growing ambivalence of Dr. Manhattan further suggest that heroism, true heroism, died with the Keene Act. Laurie, on the other hand, appears to have never been interested in fighting crime at all, but rather took on the identity of Silk Spectre when her mother retired. Dr. Manhattan notes, "She herself has been forced to retire by the Keene Act, but having never really enjoyed the life, she doesn't mind. Her mother is more disappointed than she is" (IV 13). Dreiberg quit, predominantly because he felt impotent in the face of the increasingly impossible social problems of the 70s (II). Adrien Veidt turns his pro-social mission into a capital venture when his multi-national corporation begins producing action

figures of his friends, literally commodifying heroism (X). The Comedian becomes a hired gun for the US government in Vietnam, alongside Dr. Manhattan. “Blake’s interesting. I have never met someone so deliberately amoral,” Dr. Manhattan remarks, “He suits the climate here – the madness, the pointless butchery” (IV 19). In order for superheroes to survive in the modern world they must, according to *Watchmen*, stop being heroes.

## The Birth of Contradiction

If we define *what we are* by the qualities of our heroes and *what are not* by those of our villains, then it’s no wonder Deadpool is such a schizophrenic mess. He began circulation as a villain, having been hired by Mister Tolliver to attack Cable in *New Mutants* #98. Yet in becoming the central figure of his own mini-series *The Circle Chase* in 1993 and his own eponymous running title in 1997, he could no longer be perceived only as a villain. Superhero comics treat the hero rather than the villain as the central figure of their narratives – otherwise, wouldn’t we call them supervillain comics? – so the treatment of Deadpool as central figure indicates that he is a superhero. In accordance with Coogan’s distinction, Deadpool “cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions” and is therefore a superhero (40). Additionally, And yet the defining characteristics of his identity would suggest otherwise: he is a mercenary, a person who is definitively motivated by self-interest because he enacts violence for financial compensation. It follows, then, that Deadpool’s mission is anti-social because it does not intentionally serve the greater good or the community at large.

When considering the characters of *Watchmen* together, we see that they represent *problematized versions* of classic hegemonic superheroes. Deadpool, on the other hand, lacks the validity of placement normally lent by an origin story, partially because he's insane and partially because his origin has gone through the process of *retcon* too many times,<sup>19</sup> so he can perform neither *hero* nor *villain*. Each new writer who takes up the *Deadpool* title seems to completely ignore whatever history the previous writers developed. The one described previously in this chapter, from *Deadpool and Death Annual* #1998, is the origin story generally accepted as canon by fans, but other versions deviate from/conflict with each other significantly. In some versions, Deadpool was raised by an alcoholic and abusive mother (not unlike Rorschach), while in others, he was raised by an abusive military father after his mother died from brain cancer. In the mini-arc *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (2012), writers Gerry Duggan and Brian Posehn create a narrative in which Deadpool was forced to kill his parents via mind control. Furthermore, for some writers, Deadpool is Canadian, while others claim he hails from the Mid-West. In fact, Wade Wilson may not even be Deadpool's original name, as one issue suggests that Deadpool stole that identity from a character who would eventually become T-Ray.

To make it even more difficult, through the majority of his arcs, Deadpool either doesn't remember his past or he chooses to invent a version of one that best suits his needs. In some issues, we are told that Deadpool has been too frequently kept under sedation by Butler, a member of Department K, in order to keep him docile during experiments, therefore causing his memory to malfunction. In others, the cancer in his brain has been exacerbated by the activation

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<sup>19</sup> "Retcon" originates in the field of computer science, but is commonly used as a slang or colloquial term for "retroactive continuity." To retcon something would be to alter previously established facts in the history of a superhero character, though the term can be applied to any work of fiction.

of his healing factor, accounting for both his psychosis and his memory loss. All in all, through each retcon, Deadpool's origin story, and the *transformative event* which would justify his particular characteristics, becomes more nebulous and less concrete. Put simply, neither Deadpool nor his readers can know for sure *who* or *why* Deadpool is.

That Deadpool is a product of the Weapon X program, one of the few backstory details upon which we can firmly rely, further adds to his ambiguity. Weapon X has been known to create both heroes and villains, so Deadpool could feasibly align with either side. Similarly, the government-induced superpower trope is referential to heroes like Captain America and the Hulk, while the disfigurement of the face and body seems to allude more to villainous characters like Two-Face, the Phantom of the Opera, or even Darth Vader. In works of fiction, physical deformity often signifies internal moral corruption – heroes are handsome, villains are ugly – and, similarly, it is through the same transformative event (Weapon X) that Deadpool develops both his physical scarring and his morally suspect outlook on life. Typically, the civilian identity of a hero or villain acts as the last connection between the super-identity and the character's humanity. Deadpool, lacking both the civilian identity and the "normal" physical form to retreat into at the end of the day, is left only with the super-identity. He cannot hold himself to the moral code of normative society, nor can he understand the true impact of his transgressions, because, like Dr. Manhattan, he is so far removed from the world around him that its rules no longer seem to apply.



## Picking a Side

In the first issue, we are encouraged to understand *Watchmen* as a rumination on the superhero-supervillain (Good vs. Evil) dichotomy. The initial conflict of *Watchmen* seems simple enough – someone has murdered the Comedian just before the beginning of the story. In “At Midnight, All the Agents,” Rorschach tracks down Nite Owl II to inform him of the Comedian’s death:

**Nite Owl:** Might it just have been an ordinary burglary or something? Maybe the killer didn’t know who Blake was...

**Rorschach:** An ordinary burglar? Kill the Comedian? Ridiculous.

**NO:** Hmm. I guess it doesn’t seem very likely. I heard he’d been working for the government since ’77, knocking over Marxist republics in South America...  
Maybe this was a political killing?

**R:** Maybe. Or maybe someone’s picking off costumed heroes. (12)

As Rorschach notes, the Comedian couldn’t have been taken out by just anyone. His killer must have been *powerful enough* to kill a superhero, and genre convention dictates that only a supervillain, as the inversion of the superhero, could do such a thing. Therefore, readers are encouraged to initially assume that the killer must be a supervillain. But in actuality the series provides no less than *three* ideologically complex parties (and arguably, even more), all of whom are in conflict with each other. The first party is the simplest: a disintegrating, fractured society wages war against the superheroes. The title *Watchmen* refers to statement “Who watches the watchmen?” that appears scrawled across back alley walls throughout the series. “Who watches the watchmen?” comes from the Latin “Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet” from Jevenal’s *Satires*,

and is used colloquially to acknowledge the difficulty subordinate classes often face in controlling those in power or in shaping hegemonic policies. When contextualized in *Watchmen*, the statement becomes an anti-vigilante expression. “We don’t want vigilantes! We want real cops!” shout the protestors in “Absent Friends” (17). The American people express their growing distrust of authority following Vietnam by resisting those who would seek to uphold authoritative dominance. The eventual passing of the Keene Act forces superheroes into retirement and obsolescence. Perhaps the American people become the villain of the story, both because they interfere with the pro-social mission of superheroes and because it is their own disobedience that creates the need for masked vigilante heroes in the first place.

Yet, if the central conflict of the story is the eventual destruction of New York, perhaps the villain is Ozymandias, who perpetrates a terrible act of violence (affectionately referred to by fans as “Squidgate”) in order to achieve world peace. By inventing a common enemy (a giant dimension-traveling space squid) to destroy half of New York City, Ozymandias hopes to effectively drag humanity away from the precipice of nuclear war. Indeed, it seems as though his plan may come to fruition. In issue #11 “A Stronger Loving World,” Rorschach, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl II, and Dr. Manhattan look on as a wall of television screens broadcasts Ozymandias’s achievement. The numerous voices of international news anchors intermingle, interrupting and overlapping each other, constructing a narrative of Squidgate: the death toll in New York City is over three million after a possible alien invasion, panic has swept the world, the Superpowers are cooperating under a cease-fire, the war in Afghanistan has come to an end, Russia is sending aid to New York (19-25). As a superhero, Ozymandias maintains a pro-social mission of world peace, yet his execution of that mission violates the no-kill rule – and it does so on a massive scale.

Or perhaps the villain is Rorschach, whose journal may posthumously reveal the entire Squidgate plot to a journalist, thus threatening the world peace tentatively achieved by Ozymandias. Dr. Manhattan explains that they can never reveal what they know, “I’m afraid he’s right. Exposing this plot, we destroy any chance of peace, dooming earth to worse destruction” (20). But Rorschach’s mission, his moral retributivism, won’t allow for compromise. He would rather die than deviate: “No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise” (20). The execution of Rorschach’s mission is pro-social in that he attempts to reveal and therefore punish an act of Evil, yet this mission could return humanity’s focus to the Cold War, potentially destroying peace.

Despite what the title might suggest, *Watchmen* is not about a team of plucky superheroes who, like the Avengers or the Justice League, combine their unique talents through teamwork and perseverance. Even though the characters of *Watchmen* may bear all the traditional hallmarks of a superhero team, we find that they are just as problematic as the corrupt politics and social behaviors against which they supposedly fight. In this way, *Watchmen* blurs the lines between heroism and villainy by asking, “At what point does the superhero fall from grace?”

## Teaming Up

Because his origin lacks clarity, we cannot know if Deadpool’s reaction to the transformative event created a *superhero* or a *supervillain*, and this uncertainty manifests in a continuous identity crisis. Yet, Deadpool seems fully cognizant of this problem. Over the course of his many titles, Deadpool attempts of his own volition to align himself with teams of both heroes and villains, including the X-Men and Kingpin, but he is never truly able to succeed in

any specific “super” affiliation. In the end of Deadpool’s 3-issue Hit-Monkey story arc (“Whatever a Spider Can”), the Merc finds himself locked up in Riker’s Island after helping Spider-Man defeat a psychotic monkey assassin. When Spiderman arrives to break him out as repayment for his life debt, Deadpool laments, “Kinda ironic, isn’t it? This town loves you so much, they’d let you get away with murder, but me...? ... Y’know, I never assume that this whole ‘hero’ thing would be easy... Kinda disappointed to find out that it’s actually impossible. For me, at least...” Even though Deadpool has performed a pro-social action by saving Spider-Man, he is still unable to fit the classification of *superhero*. The final page of the issue features the continuation of this scene, in which Spider-Man reminds Deadpool of the difficulty that comes with superheroism. “I just wanna be the good guy,” Deadpool says. As he swings out the crumbled cell wall on a Spidey-web, Spiderman responds, “No, you want people to love you for being the good guy. It’s not the same thing.” The final panel of the final page of this issue ends with a close up on half of Deadpool’s face with text reading, “Yeah it is.”

First, the physical similarities between Spider-Man and Deadpool are immediately noticeable, similarities which clearly extend beyond a possible lack of creativity on the part of the artist. Not only do the predominantly red costumes of both characters stand out but the particular way in which the eyes of both masks are drawn and shaped becomes homogeneous. In the second panel at the top of the page, showing both characters on opposing sides and both in facial profile, there are very few anatomical differences between the two bodies. In fact, it is conceivable that the same male figure could be hidden under those costumes (an idea which is supported retroactively in the issue, when Deadpool impersonates Spider-Man by hiding in his coffin). In this same panel, Spider-Man says, “I’ve been where you are, Deadpool – I could’ve been you. It would have been easy to be you.” Using his status as *superhero*, Spider-Man

distinguishes himself as *different* from Deadpool. Comparatively, Deadpool cannot align himself with his fellow mercenary Hit-Monkey, who is established fully as *supervillain*.

Secondly, as Spiderman swings away, towards freedom and open space, he is literally leaving Deadpool behind within the cell. Spider-Man's pose here is one of his most iconic and suggests dynamic movement. He becomes the largest figure on the page, the focal point for readers. In contrast, Deadpool stands with his fists clenched impotently, still within the prison cell, and he is nearly eclipsed by Spider-Man's "heroic" exit.

Finally, the last panel of this page literally divides Deadpool's face into two halves. Because Deadpool's mask design becomes the insignia or logo by which he is known as a character, the bisected face represents an *internal* division of identity. This split recalls the superhero-supervillain dichotomy as well as the duality of ordinary and extraordinary identities. The clear-cut identities of the heroes and villains who often surround him in his "team-up" issues perform hegemonic convention, while Deadpool serves as the new mutation in the genre: the subversive hero-villain.

# Conclusion

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“Everybody wanted to be the hero of their own story. Nobody wanted to be the comic relief.”  
- Lev Grossman, *The Magicians*

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In discussing the concept of *genre* as cultural consensus and *generic convention* as propriety, expectation, and verisimilitude, it is evident that genre acts as a hegemonic mode of fiction. When a text submits to and engages in generic convention, it upholds hegemonic ideology. However, when a text exists within genre and builds upon but also intentionally alters its conventions, the text becomes subversive. Therefore, if the superhero genre is defined by dominant ideologies of morality, then the hegemonic superhero, as an American product, upholds and reinforces specific hegemonic notions of capitalism, democracy, and collectivism – better known as Truth, Justice, and the American Way. Hegemonic superhero comics offer a way to understand the difference between Good and Evil by pitting the superhero against the supervillain. In reading these stories, we can satisfy a nostalgic craving for simplicity, for seeing the line between Good and Evil and knowing we haven’t crossed it.

But subversive superhero comics deny us that comforting closure. They force us to consider the gray areas in morality and make us realize that there isn’t always a clear distinction between the right choices and the wrong ones. Subversive superheroes are characters who aren’t always likeable, who we don’t usually want to identify with, and they represent who we *really are* rather than who we *want to be*. And they prove that sometimes, when faced with the impossible choices of a chaotic world, we must echo Nite Owl II and ask, “How can humans make decisions like this?” (“A Stronger Loving World” 20). In subversive comics, readers are left alone to navigate complex moral politics and reconcile heroic behaviors with villainous

behaviors because our superheroes no longer have all the answers. Ultimately, in moving from hegemonic superheroes to subversive superheroes, we shift from simple idealism to complex realism.

*Watchmen* offers a preponderance of different types of villains and heroes, the roles of which fluctuate and overlap. By challenging the established conventions of the genre, particularly the significance of the mission-identity-power triumvirate, *Watchmen* opened up new space for creators to ask difficult questions about accepted constructions of morality and demonstrated that it is sometimes best to oscillate between the poles of the superhero-supervillain dichotomy. Deadpool as the post-*Watchmen* superhero explores that new space by turning the hero-villain binary into a hero-villain spectrum.

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