Our Fascination with Superheroes

Robin S. Rosenberg

EDITOR'S NOTE

Superhero films keep being made and superhero stories keep being written because many people enjoy good superhero stories. In this essay, I draw on my knowledge of psychology and my research with superhero fans to explore why we are fascinated by superheroes—why their appeal is about more than good action stories or escapism.
—Robin S. Rosenberg

If you're reading this, it's probably because you have at least a passing interest in superheroes. You're not alone. Perhaps your interest in superheroes dates back to your youth, reading comic books or watching Saturday morning cartoons. Or maybe you watched a superhero movie or television show. In any case, there was something about superheroes—or a particular superhero—that piqued your interest and got you thinking or fantasizing. What is it about superheroes and their stories that captivates or intrigues us? Is it the underlying morality tales, the familiarity of the story arcs, the appealing characters, or the action? Different elements appeal to each individual. See whether any of the reasons I discuss below resonate with you.

A CALLBACK TO YOUTH

An adult experience with superheroes can remind us of our childhood: the ways that our imagination was so powerful that our fantasies seemed real. I think that superhero stories, particularly

films that have good special effects, a good script, and well-acted characters, create a bridge between our childhood fantasies and our adult realism. Consider that children are more hypnotizable than adults,[1] and can more readily and vividly go into their own world, shutting out external reality and creating a world limited only by their imagination. Live-action superhero stories allow us to recapture periods of our childhood when our imaginations were cranked up to the maximum—when we really *believed* we could fly or knock down the bad guy or save the city from disaster.

I suggest that superhero films in a darkened movie theater are most able to put us into this fantasied land. The darkened theater minimizes the viewer's visual awareness of anything other than the screen. It's easier to lose track of the person sitting in the next seat or the kids fidgeting a few rows ahead. We could turn the lights down at home when watching a DVD or television show, but unless the screen at home is a very large one, a movie theater viewing experience is still likely to be better because the screen fills the viewer's visual field. All these visual elements (and of course the surround sound) make it easier to immerse ourselves in the film. And with a superhero film, we are immersing ourselves in a fantasied world. As in the *Toy Story* films, previously static figures (in this case, of comic book characters) come to life before our very eyes.

SUPERHEROES ARE FAMILIAR AND COMFORTING

Superhero stories are familiar. The superhero is challenged by a moral dilemma, physical trial, or both (often instigated by a villain). The superhero triumphs, sometimes learning and growing in the process. Spider-Man must defeat the Green Goblin, and in doing so discovers his own strength of character. The Joker induces Batman to make difficult choices (such as choosing

whether to rescue Harvey Dent or Rachel Dawes, in *The Dark Knight*) and in doing so Batman learns something about his opponent and himself.

The stories generally follow the standard basic plots with which we are familiar.[2] In fact, we may know the form of the story arc even before the story begins. This is especially true of origin stories, which form the bread and butter of superhero films and typically conform to some version of the hero's journey in which the protagonist is, after some challenges and setbacks, transformed and dedicates his or her life to an altruistic purpose.[3] After all, that's what hero stories are about. In this way, the stories are, broadly speaking, predictable and formulaic.

Being formulaic isn't necessarily a bad thing. Research on readers' enjoyment of a related type of story—mysteries—indicates that people generally enjoy simpler stories more than complex ones.[4] We may prefer our superhero stories to be relatively simple. Their predictable, formulaic tales can also be reassuring: We can allow ourselves to become anxious on behalf of the story's characters because we know that all will turn out right in the end. Or if not at the end of one episode or comic book story, then in a subsequent one. (I am making a general statement. In comic books, some superheroes or their sidekicks have had long-term or seemingly permanent harm befall them, as when Superman dies in the *Death of Superhero* [1992], Batgirl becomes permanently paralyzed in *The Killing Joke* [1988], or when Captain America dies in *The Death of Captain America* [2007–2008]. These instances stand out because they do not follow the conventional pattern of the superhero always triumphing. William Goldman's wonderful novel *The Princess Bride* and the film version of his book play on the reader/viewer's expectations of the hero triumphing in the end.)

A story's tension is thus cathartic.[5] We don't have to worry about getting too devastated, as we might with more realistic hero

stories that don't have a formulaic plot. In fact, *The Dark Knight* film took many of viewers by surprise *because* a main character dies. **[Spoiler alert!]** If you're like most viewers of that film, you probably thought that both Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes would be saved simultaneously. Similarly, *Star Trek* prequel viewers were likely surprised when Spock's mother dies because we know from previous *Star Trek* stories that she's supposed to live! Our complacency about predicting a happy ending was challenged in these films. This was also true toward the end of the film *The Dark Knight Rises*.

SUPERHEROES AS A SPECIAL KIND OF ESCAPE

Good fiction, and good storytelling of any kind, allows us to become immersed in someone else's world and in doing so provides us with both an escape and emotional engagement.[6] We can lose ourselves and temporarily forget our worries and woes, fears and foes. We also get drawn in to the characters' world and issues. Superheroes stories, even when stories take place on alien worlds—such as Green Lantern's Oa or Thor's Asgard—provide human dilemmas in different contexts, as did Greek myths and other enduring mythic tales. The stories' core themes of right versus wrong, personal choice, sacrifice for the greater good, finding purpose and meaning, resonate with readers and viewers. The way these themes play out in superhero stories can get us feeling and thinking,[7] as the stories explore potential dire consequences as a result of particular actions. A 1970 Green Arrow/Green Lantern story (issue #81),[8] for instance, was ahead of its time, exploring the theme of overpopulation; the two superheroes visit the planet Maltus and see the dire effects of overpopulation, yet there is no "villain" behind it. A life-and-death version of game theory is explored in the film *The*

Dark Knight (2008), when the Joker rigs two ships to blow up, with each ship holding the detonator to and fate of the other ship.[9]

Superhero stories also highlight current political issues by exaggerating them, providing moral and political commentary. X-Men stories in comics and film, for example, explore themes of prejudice and discrimination as well as institutionally sanctioned discrimination, such as state-sponsored kidnapping and experimentation on mutants. (Among the X-Men films, these issues stand out in *X-Men 2*, released in 2003.)

Above all, the stories provide drama, action, suspense, and romance. They present us with action, aggression, villains we love to hate, moral dilemmas, and protagonists who inspire us. There's something for most everyone, and always a different world into which we can, at minimum, escape for a while.

ROOTING FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF HOME TEAM

Superhero stories can tug at us the same way that local sports teams do—they give us a way to root for the home team unabashedly and without reserve. There aren't that many nonsport opportunities in which large swatches of society can be on the same side. Political parties and events often leave us divided, but superhero stories allow us to come together nationally and even internationally and all be on the same team—the superhero's team.

We seem to love to have heroes, and superheroes are not likely to let us down the way real teams or real heroes do. We elevate sports figures or politicians as heroes, but in doing so, we make them both more than human and less than human. We don't allow them to be actual humans. We raise them up and want them to be better than we are, to be flawless. It seems to me that we don't want to recognize that real heroes in our world are people, with

strengths and weakness, great courage, and often significant foibles or even vices. When we get a glimpse of their human side—their marital problems, substance use, financial troubles—we push them off their pedestals. They are heroes no longer.[10]

In this way we seem to propel our heroes onto a ridiculous roller coaster: We raise them up and imbue them with (or project onto them) attributes that are far in excess of their heroic actions. And when we find out they're only human—when we discover their "underside," their negative qualities—we demonize them. We push them from the heights of the rollercoaster to its depths. They—and we—scream and cry as they make their descent. We're disappointed in them, yet in most cases they never claimed to be more than they actually were. When we find out that they've got an unheroic underside we are surprised, though we shouldn't be. We may feel betrayed, but we shouldn't. Someone can be a hero in one context and be an awful person, or just an average person, in another context. These complex and nuanced aspects of our real heroes can leave us feeling unfulfilled, akin to eating a large bucket of popcorn: our bellies are full but we still crave something to eat.

Superhero stories can make us feel satisfied, like we've had a meal. We can applaud superheroes without reserve because even if they have an underside, we seem to allow them to have character flaws in a way that we don't necessary allow our real heroes. In fact, whereas flaws in our real life heroes serve to tarnish them, flaws in superheroes add character and depth. Green Lantern helps out those on other planets but doesn't help fix social ills on our own planet. Yet we don't hold it against him. Similarly, Superman saves kittens from trees but allows people to starve. Iron Man and Green Arrow are both full of themselves and horrendous womanizers, often cheating on their girlfriends (or wife in Green Arrow's case). Wolverine is impulsive

and prone to anger, but we forgive him. Iron Man goes through a period of alcoholism. We allow superheroes their humanity in a way that we don't allow real heroes. As Carroll wrote, "the contemporary hero [exists] in an instant-media-driven society in which we seek to raise people to impossible heights and then inevitably wait for the fall."[11] Superheroes don't fall—at least not permanently. This is part of the unspoken promise of superhero stories.

FROM MORE PSYCHOLOGICALLY COMPLEX STORIES, EXISTENTIAL CRISES

Until the dawn of the 1980s, superheroes weren't generally part of the adult mainstream. Kids had a slew of Saturday morning superhero cartoon and comic books. Occasional family-centered live-action superhero stories graced the small screen: Superman in the 1950s, Batman and Robin in the 1960s, and Wonder Woman in the 1970s. Then superheroes came to film: Christopher Reeve's Superman films in the 1970s and 1980s and the Batman films in the 1980s and 1990s. (Note that *Superman I* wasn't the first superhero film. Among earlier releases was *Batman: The Movie*—a film extension of the Batman television series—released in 1966. The Superman film, though, was the first superhero feature film specifically aimed for a general audience. No prior superhero familiarity needed. Other superhero films released in the 1980s and 1990s didn't make the same splash, such as *Supergirl* [1984] and *The Phantom* [1996]). While Christopher Reeve's Superman and Tim Burton's Batman were captivating mainstream audiences, superhero comics with darker themes—for adults—were published, such as Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (1986–1987) and *The Killing Joke* (1988), and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).

As writers have aimed their stories at adults, the plots have become more complex, and superheroes have become more three-dimensional and prone to existential crises, often provoked by the increased sadism and violence in their villains. They come to struggle with the issues with which we struggle. In this sense, they've become more like us.

Granted, Marvel superheroes have always been more "human" and relatable, with everyday problems such as financial troubles (Spider-Man), family squabbles (Fantastic Four, Thor), relationship issues (Spider-Man, Iron Man, Daredevil, to name a few), work issues (The Avengers), assimilation issues (Thor), and even alcoholism (Iron Man). DC may have come late to having their superheroes struggle with real issues, but their superheroes do: drug abuse (Speedy, Green Arrow's sidekick), prostitution and HIV infection (Mia Deardon, before she became Green Arrow's subsequent Speedy), philandering (Green Arrow), the desire for official recognition (Wonder Woman), loss and guilt (Batman), and dealing with losing the respect of others (Superman). Nonetheless, the psychological nuance to the characters seems to have increased over the decades.

As our problems have become their problems, we are fascinated to see how the issues play out in the funhouse mirror of superheroes' worlds. In Superman stories, for instance, we get to see the consequences of electing a megalomaniac for president (Lex Luthor). In Batman stories we see how he handles grief and guilt after the murder of the second Robin, Jason Todd. (In the story "A Death in the Family" [*Batman #426–429*, 1988–1989], the Joker beats Jason Todd mercilessly, ties him up and sets a bomb to go off. Todd dies soon after the bomb explodes. A version of this story is recounted in the DVD movie *Under the Red Hood* [2010].)

In X-Men stories we see how racism and discrimination harm both the group doing the discriminating as well as those on the

receiving end. Spider-Man shows us the personal cost of spending all your time helping others.

Superhero stories also present us with moral dilemmas. Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, and other superheroes have villains who create the horrible but classic dilemma of forcing the hero to choose whom to save: a loved one or a group of innocents about to be killed by the villain. Although most of us, fortunately, won't have to face this dilemma ourselves, in watching our superheroes struggle with this no-win conundrum, many of us ask ourselves "what would I do if faced with this horrible choice?" Moreover, since the 1980s, the villains in superhero stories have become increasingly twisted and sadistic—think of recent versions of the Joker—at least in the stories targeted at adults, putting our superheroes in even more intense and challenging situations. In turn, Batman stories targeted to adults repeatedly challenge the reader or viewer to entertain the question of why Batman doesn't just kill the Joker, given all the innocent lives that will likely be saved in the future were the Joker to exist no longer. Such stories can induce us to wrestle with issues about justice, the death penalty, and the question of rehabilitation for certain types of criminals, among other issues.

Here's another effect of the more psychologically complex stories: when we identify with the character, we may experience more emotions while watching or reading the story. Research on stories that are written with the use of first-person narration suggests that this literary device leads people to experience more emotion in response to the story.[12] In fact, superhero comic book stories have included first-person narration for decades in the form of thought bubbles and, more recently, with the shift in the narrator from an anonymous third-person to the first-person of the superhero. It makes it easier to put ourselves in their shoes.

A SUPERHERO FOR EVERYONE

Superheroes are not monolithic. Like us, each superhero has his or her own unique constellation of personality traits, abilities and vulnerabilities, desires and demons. In turn, a superhero's character is nudged in one direction or another by each writer. Some superheroes are not even conventional heroes; they are "antiheroes" who fight crime for selfish, not altruistic, reasons that involve revenge. The Punisher, a vigilante, is an example; his wife and children, who witnessed a Mafia hit, were then killed. He vowed revenge on the mob and all criminals.

In general, superheroes are alike in some key ways: they each have at least one enhanced ability, they each are committed to doing "good" in some way that involves physical battles, and they each wear a costume or uniform. (A notable exception: The DC superhero Batgirl [Barbara Gordon] was paralyzed by the Joker in *The Killing Joke*, and for decades had been wheelchair-bound and so did not engage in physical battles nor wear a uniform. She worked behind the scenes. When DC relaunched their universe in 2011, Barbara Gordon became fully mobile as Batgirl, despite protests from fans about the change.)

A Personality for Everyone

Just as we are drawn to some people because of their personality, we are drawn to some superheroes but not others. We identify or aspire to be like some and not others. When I am at a comic convention, I walk through the exhibit halls, interviewing attendees. Among other questions, I ask them who their favorite superheroes are and why. Some people say that Batman is their favorite, but their reasons vary. Some identify with his traumatic history from childhood, others take comfort from the way he has made

meaning of his adversity ("if he can pull through and help others, it inspires me to do the same"). Some Wonder Woman fans aspire to be like her—confident with herself and her body. Still others identify with Spider-Man, who juggles multiple real life problems, fights crime, and tries to do the right thing in all spheres of his life.

The Coolest Power

Superheroes don't all have the same powers (except perhaps for persistence in the face of adversity). We can be drawn to or fascinated by a given superhero because we are captivated by his or her power or ability. We may wonder what it would be like to fly, or how we might use a spider-sense. Or we may be awed by the human superheroes, who use their human talents to maximal advantage. Whatever our favorite power or ability, the idea of it gets us thinking about how it could be used. Superhero stories offer us models.

Resonating with Superhero Themes: Dual Identity and Being Different

Most of us can resonate with at least two aspects of the dual identity of many superheroes: that we are different people in different contexts (how we are with a romantic partner may be very different from how we are when relating to a boss) and that in our daily lives we feel that people don't accurately see our real selves and all of our potential. In the film *Batman Begins* (2005), Bruce Wayne tries to convey to Rachel Dawes that he is more than the playboy he appears to be: "all of this [referring to the women and his opulent lifestyle]…it's not me…inside. I am…I am more." Just as people look at Bruce Wayne and see a rich playboy (though he is anything but a playboy), we too may feel that people see only

a superficial persona. But we know that there is more to us than meets the eye.

Another theme in superhero stories with which many can identify is that of *being different*. In such contexts, different means "not good," even for superpowered Superman, who struggles to find a comfortable way to live as an alien among humans. To be different and not feel alone. The theme of being different is perhaps most prominent in X-Men stories, in which we learn that many mutants were made fun of, harassed, or nearly killed because of their abilities. Like Superman, Marvel's mutants learned at a young age to hide their abilities. It is only at Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Children that the mutants are able to feel truly comfortable with themselves because they are with people who are also different. This relief at finding other "different" people is portrayed in the film *X-Men: First Class*, when the young mutants sit around showing each other their powers and are applauded rather than ridiculed. In our world, people can feel the same relief at finding a group of like-minded but "different" folks in college (perhaps through activity groups that share the same interest, such as an anime club) or in online chat rooms or forums. Interests or problems that we'd been hiding from others can at last be shared with folks in a similar boat. What a relief!

INSPIRATION

Superheroes inspire us. They are engaged in a never-ending fight against crime and villainy. They fight the good fight even when they're tired, burned out, or have crises in their personal lives. When it's hard to know what the "right decision" is, they generally don't get flummoxed. They are decisive. In these ways, they are like real soldiers. Their exploits and dedication are inspiring. Moreover, they have a clarity of purpose, and a

moral compass that is usually enviable, even if we don't agree with the specifics.

From time to time they have existential crises and question whether all their efforts and sacrifices are worth it. This happens to Superman in the graphic novel *Kingdom Come* (1996), Peter Parker in various comics and in the film *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and Batman in the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) and in the Batman graphic novel by Kevin Smith *The Widening Gyre* (2009–2010). When the superheroes come out the other side of their crises, they come back to their superhero work with renewed dedication.

A WISH FOR A RESCUER

Superhero stories call us back to our youth, to a time when right and wrong seemed simpler and easier to discern. Many children's stories are filled with heroes who save the day. Such stories reflect a common wish or fantasy that when bad things happen or are about to happen, someone comes to help. Superhero stories tap into this wish. Superheroes protect the defenseless, round up criminals and evildoers, and put themselves on the line for others. As children, we both wanted someone to do that for us and wanted to be the superhero.

Superhero stories may have been around for decades, but the characters and stories picked up steam in the adult mainstream in the new millennium. Why the sudden explosion of superheroes everywhere, and our fascination with them? A confluence of events may have played a large part. First, the events of September 11, 2001 (and the anthrax scare days afterward). This event—the first such major tragedy on American soil essentially unfolding live on the Internet and television—led Americans as well as people in other countries to feel more vulnerable. Common reactions, aside from horror, anger, and sadness, were "this could

happen anywhere," "this could happen to me," and "is there no way to stop this?" In a sense, we all became terror's victims.

Collectively, we began to yearn for larger-than-life heroes—to be inspired by them and to be rescued by them. Coincidentally, within a year of 9/11, the first *Spider-Man* film was released; it did fantastically at the box office. Similarly, the television shows *24* and *Smallville* (about Superman during high school years) launched to commercial success. (Although *24*'s Jack Bauer isn't technically a superhero, the show portrays him acting heroically, and he seems to have some "super" abilities, including his ability to tolerate and inflict pain.) Superhero stories thus provide us with a fantasied rescuer at a time when we, as a society, really want one.

POWER OF THE MEDIA TO PERSUADE

Here's one final reason why I think we're fascinated by superheroes: They are everywhere. On screens big and small, on billboards and buses, on lunchboxes and T-shirts. Hollywood studios invest heavily in superhero films (after all, it costs a lot of money to make the CGI scenes live up to our imagination). They advertise so heavily that it's hard to avoid being exposed to superhero films. This blanket of advertising and merchandising provides a *mere exposure effect*, in which by becoming familiar with something, we come to change our attitude toward it, generally in the positive direction.[13] People see ads for the superhero films, and if they weren't already inclined toward superheroes, they become at least somewhat curious to see what "all the fuss" is about, unless they are resolutely not interested in superheroes. If the film's story and character development are good, it seals the deal, accounting for the phenomenal popularity of the *Batman* films (the Christopher Nolan films as well as the Tim Burton ones), the *Iron Man* films, the *Avenger* film, and the *Spider-Man* films.

CONCLUSION

Superheroes can be fascinating for a multitude of reasons: they provide escape, their familiar storylines are comforting, they provide us with a person or team to cheer on, they allow us to see issues, existential crises, and our own problems in displacement. Moreover, the variety of superheroes—of powers, of personality, of personal dilemmas—lets our fascination fall on the superheroes who are the best "match" for us.

Superheroes—in contrast to heroes or other protagonists—are simultaneously like us and not like us. Their superpowers can make us fantasize what it would be like to be them, while at the same time wishing there were *someone* who was like them in real life.

NOTES

1. Ward, C. (1994). Culture and altered states of consciousness. In W. J. Lonner & R. S. Malpass (Eds.), *Psychology and culture* (pp. 59–64). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
2. Booker, C. (2004). *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories*. New York: Continuum.
3. Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York: New World Library.
4. Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Keplinger, C. (2008). Murder for pleasure: Impacts of plot complexity and need for cognition on mystery enjoyment. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, *20*(3), 117–128.
5. Zillmann, D. (2000). Humor and comedy. In D. Zillmann & P. Vorderer (Eds.), M*edia entertainment: The psychology of its appeal* (pp. 59–72). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
6. Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., Djikic, M., & Mullin, J. (2011). Emotion and narrative fiction: Interactive influences before, during, and after reading. *Cognition and Emotion*, *25*(5), 818–833.

7. Sriraman, B., & Adrian, H. (1999). The use of fiction as a didactic tool to examine existential problems. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, *10*(3), 96–106.
8. Story by Dennis O'Neil and art by Neal Adams.
9. For more on the specifics of the game theory of this part of the film, go to http://www.quantitativepeace.com/blog/2008/07/the-dark-knight.html.
10. Carroll, L. (2011). America's hero problem. *The Atlantic*. September 7. Accessed on December 18, 2011, at http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/print/2011/09/americas-hero-problem/244659/
11. Carroll, (2011).
12. Gholamain, M. (1998). *The attachment and personality dynamics of reader response*. Toronto: National Library of Canada.
13. Zajonc, R. B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *9*(2, Pt. 2), 1–27.

TWO

Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography

David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister

EDITOR'S NOTE

Superheroes aren't the only "super" people we're fascinated by. We're also fascinated by supervillains. To understand this fascination, David Pizarro and Roy Baumeister apply psychological research from a variety of areas including the appeal of pornography, moral judgments and decision-making, and why "evil" is perpetrated. Pizarro and Baumeister are a perfect duo to discuss this topic; their research includes work on moral judgments, aggression, and self-defeating behaviors.
—Robin S. Rosenberg

Stories about good and evil are among the oldest stories told. These moral tales often describe a hero who struggles against the forces of evil in its various guises. In these stories, evil is often personified as an enemy for the hero to overcome. For instance, in the oldest work of literature known to exist, the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh battles a giant who has the face of a lion and whose "roar is a flood, his mouth is death, and his breath is fire."[1]

Modern superhero comics (and the films they've inspired) are moral tales on steroids. While they present variations on the theme of good versus evil, these stories describe individuals who commit moral deeds of global (and often cosmic) significance on a weekly basis. In this chapter we will argue that superhero comics, like other moralistic tales, are popular in part because they satisfy a basic human motivation: the motivation to divide the social world into good people and bad, and to morally praise and condemn