

The Superman Conceit

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Reprinted from *Seduction of the Innocent* (Main Road Books, 2004 [1954]), 94–102 by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

THE ATMOSPHERE OF CRIME COMIC BOOKS IS UNPARALLELED IN THE HISTORY OF children's literature of any time or any nation. It is a distillation of viciousness. The world of the comic book is the world of the strong, the ruthless, the bluffer, the shrewd deceiver, the torturer, and the thief. All the emphasis is on exploits where somebody takes advantage of somebody else, violently, sexually, or threateningly. It is no more the world of braves and squaws, but one of punks and molls. Force and violence in any conceivable form are romanticized. Constructive and creative forces in children are channeled by comic books into destructive avenues. Trust, loyalty, confidence, solidarity, sympathy, charity, compassion are ridiculed. Hostility and hate set the pace of almost every story. A natural scientist who had looked over comic books expressed this to me tersely, "in comic books life is worth nothing; there is no dignity of a human being."

Children seek a figure to emulate and follow. Crime comic books undermine this necessary ingredient of ethical development. They play up the good times had by those who do the wrong thing. Those who at the tail end of stories mete out punishment use the same violence and the same lingo as those whom they punish. Since everybody is selfish and force and violence are depicted as the most successful methods, the child is given a feeling of justification. They not only suggest the satisfaction of primitive impulses but supply the rationalization. In this soil children indulge in the stock fantasies supplied by the industry: murder, torture, burglary, threats, arson, and rape. Into that area of the child's mind where right and wrong is evaluated, children incorporate such false standards that an ethical confusion results for which they are not to blame. They become emotionally handicapped and culturally underprivileged. And this affects their social balance.

Whatever may give a child some ethical orientation is dragged down to the crime-violence level. Inculcation of a distorted morality by endless repetition

is not such an intangible factor if one studies its source in comic books and its effect in the lives of children. It is of course a question not of pious slogans like "Crime never pays" but of the emotional accents within the stories themselves.

In one comic an old man is killed during the hold-up of his jewelry store. He had not obeyed the order to back up against the wall quickly enough. After other crimes and murders the captured criminal says: "It was not right to kill him. . . . That man couldn't have obeyed me? . . . That old man was STONE DEAF!"

The moral principle is clear. If you hold up a man and he does not obey quickly enough because he is deaf, you are not supposed to shoot him. But if he is *not* deaf, shooting him is all right.

In one comic story called "Mother Knows Best," the mother advises her children: "I brought you kids up right—rub out those coppers like I taught you!"

One son answers: "Don't worry, ma! We'll give those flatfeet a bellyful of lead!"

Several boys have shown me this story. They themselves condemned and at the same time were fascinated by this anti-maternal story.

In the same comic book, a man attacks a high school girl ("All I want is a little kiss? C'mon!"), and chokes her to death.

What in a few words is the essential ethical teaching of crime comics for children? I find it well and accurately summarized in this brief quotation:

It is not a question of right, but of winning. Close your heart against compassion. Brutality does it. The stronger is in the right. Greatest hardness. Follow your opponent till he is crushed.

These words were the instructions given on August 22, 1939, by a superman in his home in Berchtesgaden to his generals, to serve as guiding lines for the treatment of the population in the impending war on Poland.

In modification of the Fernald method of letting children judge the severity of offenses, I have often asked them about punishment. Why do people get punished, what is just punishment, how does it come about that people get punished? Frequently the reply is that it serves the criminal right, whatever the punishment may be: "He got caught, didn't he?" My clinical findings leave no room for doubt that children learn from crime comics that the real guilt is getting caught. They have little faith in any ordinary public processes of having an offense evaluated and justly and humanely dealt with. The law enforcers are criminals in reverse. They use the same methods. If they are also stronger and there are more of them, they win; if not, they lose. In many subtle and not so subtle forms the lynch spirit is taught as a moral lesson. Many children have told me that lynching is all right and have shown me examples from their

comic books. In one such story the townspeople get together, hunt the criminal and he is finally shot and killed. The lesson is in the last sentence: "The story of Lee Gillon proves that fearless people banded together will always see that justice triumphs."

In the same book, a man slaps a girl's face and says: "Give me trouble and you'll have a board full of spikes smashed into your kisser!"

The form in which this distrust for democratic law and the morality of taking punishment—or rather vengeance—into one's own hands has done most harm to the ethical development of young people is the superman conceit. Analyzing children's fantasies and daydreams, I have often found in them a wish for overwhelming physical strength, domination, power, ruthlessness, emancipation from the morals of the community. It may show in various half-repressed ways or openly as admiration for these traits. Spontaneously children connect this with crime comic books of the Superman, Batman, Superboy, Wonder Woman type. In the individual case this superman ideology is psychologically most unhygienic. The would-be supermen compensate for some kind of inferiority, real or imagined, by the fantasy of the superior being who is a law unto himself. I have had cases where children would have had a good chance to overcome feelings of inferiority in constructive ways at their disposal if they had not been sidetracked by the fancied shortcuts of superman prowess.

The superman conceit gives boys and girls the feeling that ruthless go-getting based on physical strength or the power of weapons or machines is the desirable way to behave. When I have had to examine young adults at the Clinic off and on for driving recklessly, I was interested to find the same attitude. Particularly dangerous is the superman-speed-fancy in girls who in turn influence boys. One young girl told me that she would only go out with boys who would not let other cars pass them on the road. That was the idea of the proper male behavior that she had got from comics.

In these children there is an exact parallel to the blunting of sensibilities in the direction of cruelty that has characterized a whole generation of central European youth fed on the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil. It is an ethical confusion. If such persons are analyzed psychiatrically, it is found that the trouble lies not so much with the impulse to do the wrong thing as with the false rationalization which permits the impulse to grow and to express itself in deeds. The very children for whose unruly behavior I would want to prescribe psychotherapy in an anti-superman direction have been nourished (or rather poisoned) by the endless repetition of Superman stories. How can they respect the hard-working mother, father, or teacher who is so pedestrian, trying to teach common rules of conduct, wanting you to keep your feet on the ground, and unable

even figuratively speaking to fly through the air? Psychologically, Superman undermines the authority and the dignity of the ordinary man and woman in the minds of children.

When I described how children suffer in their ethical development through the reading of comic books, the industry countered by pointing with pride to the "moral" lesson imprinted on many crime comics, that "crime does not pay." In the first place, this is not true. In comic books crime usually does pay, and pay very well, until the last picture or two. The crimes are glamorous; the end is dull. Frequently the ratio of "crime" to "does not pay" is as high as fifty to one. More important, the slogan "Crime does not pay" is *not* moral, but highly immoral. It is strange how responsible adults have accepted this slogan and refer to it on platforms, over the radio, and in articles as admirable. Great harm has been done by teaching children that they should not play hookey, that they should not steal or lie, that they should not hit girls (as comic-book figures so often do)—*because it "doesn't pay"*! I have seen many children who were confused by this vicious crime-comic-book morality. The reason why one does not hit girls, even if comics have made it so attractive, is that it is cowardly and that it hurts them; the reason why one does not steal or break into stores is that that is not how one lives in a civilized community; that whether crime pays or does not pay, it is not what a decent person wants to do. *That* should be the lesson for children.

When I pointed out the hypocrisy of the "Crime does not pay" slogan and its bad effect on children, the industry accused me of "unfairness" in attacking their highest endeavors and introduced some more slogan morality. In one comic book are two pages by a police captain attacking me: "Don't let reformers kid you!" He is "shocked by what I read today about the people who condemn crime comics. These people are the menace." He goes on: "Children don't like to be kicked around by reformers who want to decide what's good for them to read." And he extols "the strong moral force" that comics exert on children.

Frequently I have been in the position of having to defend children who have received harsh judgments in courts and on psychiatric wards and equally harsh treatment in places of detention and reformatories. There is no better illustration of the state of affairs where we first victimize children and then put all the responsibility on them, the victims, than this same comic book. It has a story where two policemen are killed—and a real police captain pointing out what a "strong moral force" such a book is!

In the midst of bloody scenes in another book are two full-page announcements, one advocating "better schools" and the other with an oversized headline in capitals: WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE! advocating "a new way of prayer." If one tried to set out deliberately to create ethical

confusion in children, better ways could hardly be devised. No wonder that a minister heard his young son exclaim: "Hands up, in the name of the Lord!"

The detrimental effect on character is if anything worse on girls than on boys. Their ego-ideal formation is interfered with by the fascination of the sadistic female comic-book heroines. Comic books do not permit these children even in their imagination to view a non-violent life. A girl of eleven examined because of stealing showed in her Thematic Apperception Test a profusion of stories with murder and hostility. Her drawing of a woman showed a masculine type with violent aggressivity. Of average intelligence, she had a reading retardation undoubtedly caused by constant reading of comics. She had incorporated the comic-book morale into her character.

"I read about ten a day," she stated. "I like the stories when you get in trouble and everything. You learn like it does not pay if you kill a person for nothing that isn't right[!]. They have to go to prison for a certain length of time, then they come out and do it all over again. Then they go up the river again."

Without rationalization and without an ideal image of oneself one cannot learn to exert self-discipline. That is why good reading is such a character-building influence. Comic books work in the opposite direction. A thirteen-year-old girl examined because of "truancy and disobedience" said about her reading, "I used to buy a love comic every day. I like to read *Sheena* because I like the way she fights. She fights like a man, swings on the vines, and kicks people in the face."

Ethical development of children, so intimately bound up with their mental development, has to do not only with relations with an individual but also with integration in groups. The development of the superego, of conscience or, more simply, the sense of decency, takes place not only on the basis of identification with parents but also with successive parent-substitutes who are at the same time representatives and symbols of group demands and group responsibilities. In this sphere, comic books are most pernicious. They expose children's minds to an endless stream of prejudice-producing images. This influence, subtle and pervasive but easily demonstrable by clinical psychological methods, has not only directly affected the individual child, but also constitutes an important factor for the whole nation. It is currently fashionable to speak of "inter-group tensions," "group adjustments," and so on. The old term *race hatred* (or *race prejudice*) is more honest and more to the point. What we call "minorities" constitute the *majority* of mankind. The United States is spending at present millions of dollars to persuade the world on the air and by other propaganda means that race hatred is not an integral part of American life. At the same time, millions of American comic books are exported all over the world which give the impression that the United States is instilling race hatred in young children.

If I were to make the briefest summary of what children have told us about how different peoples are represented to them in the lore of crime comics, it would be that there are two kinds of people: on the one hand is the tall, blond, regular-featured man sometimes disguised as a superman (or superman disguised as a man) and the pretty young blonde girl with the super-breast. On the other hand are the inferior people: natives, primitives, savages, "ape men," Negroes, Jews, Indians, Italians, Slavs, Chinese, and Japanese, immigrants of every description, people with irregular features, swarthy skins, physical deformities, Oriental features. In some crime comics the first class sometimes wears some kind of superman uniform, while the second class is in mufti. The brunt of this imputed inferiority in whole groups of people is directed against colored people and "foreign born."

When the seeds of prejudice against others first appear in a child, or when he first becomes aware of belonging to a group against which there is prejudice, depends on many diverse factors: family, education, community, social stratum. From my studies, the second apparently appears later. But in general both feelings appear much earlier than is commonly supposed. A four-year-old can imbibe prejudice from comic books, and six- or seven-year-olds are quite articulate about it. Sometimes their feeling of dislike for a group ("They are bad." "They are vicious." "They are criminals." "They are dirty." "You can't trust them.") is derived from crime comic books. In other cases, distorted stereotypes acquired at home, on the street, in school, are given new nourishment and perpetuation by comic-book reading. These conclusions are based entirely on *what the children themselves say*.

The pictures of these "inferior" types as criminals, gangsters, rapists, suitable victims for slaughter by either the lawless or the law, have made an indelible impression on children's minds. There can be no doubt about the correctness of this conclusion.

For example, when a child is shown a comic book that he has not read and is asked to pick out the bad man, he will unhesitatingly pick out types according to the stereotyped conceptions of race prejudice, and tell you the reason for his choice. "Is he an American?" "No!"

Attacks by older children on younger ones, inspired or fortified by the race prejudice shown in comic books, are getting more frequent. I have seen such cases (which do not always come to the attention of the authorities) with victims belonging to various minorities. For the victims, this is frequently a serious traumatic emotional episode. Some juvenile gangs make it a practice to beat dark-skinned children, and they do it with comic-book brutality. So comic books provide both the methods and the vilification of the victims.

Comic books read with glee by many children, including very young ones, teach the props of anti-Semitism. There is the book with the story of the

“itch-ray projector,” with illustrations that might be taken directly from Nazi magazines like Streicher’s *Stuerner*. One particularly popular comic book features the story of “Mother Mandelbaum, A True Story.” Depicted as an unmistakable and repellent stereotype, she “aspires to be the biggest fence in New York.” She finances bank robberies, starts a school for pickpockets, and also has a class for safecrackers and another to teach assorted kinds of violence. She personally orders and supervises the beating up of “slow payers.”

When you see groups of children reading this and hear them chuckle and fill in the derogatory epithets and appellations, the result of the indoctrination is clear. It partially explains some recent episodes of vandalism and attacks on children.

The Great Women Superheroes

TRINA ROBBINS

Reprinted by permission of the author from *The Great Women Superheroes* (Kitchen Sink Press, 1996), 2–14.

IN 1938 TWO TEENAGE BOYS, JERRY SIEGEL AND JOE SHUSTER, INTRODUCED their creation, Superman, in *Action Comics* #1, and superheroes entered the world’s consciousness. Their story of a superpowered foundling from another planet had been rejected by every comic strip syndicate and comic book editor to whom it had been submitted before being accepted by Harry Donenfeld for publication in his new *Action Comics*. Inspired by the energetic leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the attempts of the government to alleviate the Depression through the programs of the New Deal, the Superman stories struck a chord in the minds and hearts of Americans. Within a year, Superman had his own comic book; within two years, Siegel and Shuster’s oft-rejected creation was also a syndicated comic strip appearing in over 250 newspapers, and the comic book was selling a million copies per month.

The success of the Superman character naturally led to imitation, and new superheroes popped up almost faster than a speeding bullet. In 1939, Batman emerged from his batcave to avenge his murdered parents in *Detective Comics* #27, and within a year he had his own book. By 1940, National Periodical Publications had concluded that superheroes were here to stay, and introduced the Flash, the fastest man alive, in his own title, while DC featured superheroes like Hawkman, who dressed like a hawk and spoke to birds, in features in anthology books like *Detective Comics*.

1940 saw other comic book companies create their own superheroes. The Fawcett Company was the home of Captain Marvel, really a twelve-year-old boy who said the magic word “Shazam” to become invincible. Timely Comics followed suit with the Human Torch, who possessed the unique ability to burst into flame, and Sub-Mariner, who swam up from the depths of the ocean to fight humans, but later switched his enmity to the Axis.

Accompanied by colorful sound effects like *Bam*, *Crash*, and *Pow!*, scores of other costumed heroes flew, swam, raced, and punched their way through