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Spring 5-4-2020

The Comic Book Conundrum: Defining Comic Books as a Literary Genre

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Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The

Requirement of HON 420

Spring 2020

By

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Abstract:

The Comic Book Conundrum: Defining Comic Books as a Literary Genre

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Abstract:

Since the early 1900s, the world has seen the emergence, growth, and now boom of a new literary genre: the comic book. The comic book industry has existed for nearly a hundred years now as a subculture of American literature and popular culture. Initially gaining significant popularity during World War II, the comic book industry introduced the first "superhero" comics in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the decades to follow, the comic book industry would achieve significant milestones as they developed alongside the views and values of the American people. As comic books began to expand in both length and depth, these new works of literature have established themselves as a new genre of scholarly literature. Surrounding stigma and criticisms about the substance and form of comic books has kept them from receiving much attention in the academic setting. However, following the research done by numerous comic book scholars and critics, this thesis analyzes three main aspects of comic books as defined by the standards of traditional literary studies: form, content, and style. The analysis of these aspects and how they connect to the views of American culture as well as how they compare to other established literary genres will attempt to credit comic books as unique works of literature that should be considered independent of other genres.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my former professor and mentor Dr. Dominic Ashby, an Eastern Kentucky University professor from the Department of English. Dr. Ashby has been a tremendous help throughout this entire project. I want to thank him for his professional support as well as all the extra emotional support while I worked on this project.

You have been so helpful these past few months, and I deeply appreciate all the effort you put into assisting me. Thank you.

Introduction:

Since the late 1930s, the world has seen the emergence, growth, and boom of a new literary genre: the comic book. The comic book industry has existed for nearly a hundred years as a subculture of literature and American popular culture. But this unique genre has always offered a distinct perspective into the views and values of the American people. Comic books started gaining significant popularity during World War II, following the emergence of the classic "superhero" in the forms of Superman (first published in 1938) and Captain America (first published in 1941). Years later, during another pivotal time in American history, the Counterculture movement witnesses the birth of one of Marvel Comic's most prominent branches, the mutants known as the X-Men (first published in 1963). It is during events like the Civil Rights and Counterculture movements that the comic book industry would achieve significant milestones as they developed alongside the values of the American people, which will be discussed in further detail in the following research. These comic books offered an alternate method of media consumption for a growing portion of the American people. They offered engaging visuals and were also cheap, making them more affordable than other forms of literature in a time when financial situations were often struggling due to the war effort. The blending of art and writing in an affordable, easily marketable package made them an appealing new item for audiences as well as a distinctive medium for authors to express American values.

This new genre of literature has continued to grow and develop while staying relatively in the background of the popular culture scene. Although some titles such as Superman and Wonder Woman maintained popularity through the first few years of publication, many others struggled to stay on the shelves once the market lost interest in comic books. As with all forms of media, the popularity of comic books fluctuated and fell to the point of numerous titles being temporarily cancelled. These occurrences were partially due to stale art styles, dips in the market, and a general decrease in the popularity of the stories. Amazing Fantasy, Action Comics; even Captain America was cancelled in 1950 and again in 1952. Some of these title characters would be reintroduced in later incarnations, but others were written off with little remembrance. These early comic books mark the first major movement of comic book development and is primarily referred to as the "Golden Age" of comic books. However, it was not until the Silver Age of comic books, occurring between 1956 and circa 1970 that comic books began to expand in both length and depth as comic books do now. Research presented by scholars such as Scott McCloud, Will Eisner, and Tim Martin make it evident that elements within the structure and presentation of early comics serve as a foundation which can still be seen in modern day comic books, but the content and style of these texts have undergone substantial changes. These changes defined a new genre of writing, blended with visual art, based on the foundations of the original comic. The thesis and driving statement for the research presented in this thesis argues that through traditional literary analysis of the main characteristics of comic books: i.e. the form, content, and style shared by most all examples of literary works, comic books can be established as an independent genre of American literature.

The purpose of this thesis is to establish comic books as a genre of scholarly literature by analyzing the various structures that make up comic books and evaluating these structures from a

scholarly perspective. Although many critics such as Scott Smith and Andrés Romero-Jódar see comic books as a literary form or medium that exists as a subgenre of other fictional literature, there is more than a sufficient amount of evidence to advocate for comic books to be considered their own unique literary genre. John Story, Stephen Tabachnik, and Kym Sheehan, as well as many others, have done considerable research analyzing the credibility of comic books in terms of meeting the expectations and standards of any work of literature. As with any literary analysis, the majority of the research in this thesis is going to focus on three main aspects of a genre as defined by traditional literary standards: form, content, and style (Trudier). Form being the structure of the works and generalized writing techniques that comic book authors implement when creating comic books. Content will be focused on thematic elements, subject matter, and the reflection of societal values seen within the subject matter. Finally, style is going to refer to the more artistic elements that authors use, including forms of language used to communicate with audiences, the use of varied art styles, and how the incorporation of visual artwork makes each title unique. When analyzing these elements, there will be significant overlap due to the fact that literature is a complex system wherein each element in influenced by another. Alterations in form can affect the style of the writing, while changing the style of a comic book may also change the impact of the content on the audience and so on. Breaking down and analyzing these aspects will help define the limitations of comic books and establish clear definitions for the terms used to describe comic books.

The biggest challenge of this argument is encountered in the academic setting. The debate is whether or not comic books should be seen as substantial enough in their quality and scholarly applications to be considered their own genre of literature. One of the most prominent arguments that exists against the establishment of comic books as their own genre is presented in Scott

Smith's "Comic Book Kid". In this text, Smith addresses some of the controversy surrounding the comic book industry. He himself is a professor, scholar, and comic book reader, and he does in fact challenge the misconception that comic books cannot be considered scholarly texts. This analytic study brings into question the separation of comic books from other works of literature. Although the medium and style of comic books has earned them an adolescent connotation for many people, Smith rebuts that there are no strong, rational arguments that can be made for why they should still be considered "lower literature" (Smith). One of the interesting aspects of this text is how Smith bridges the gap between the identities of fan and scholar, which he considers critical to this argument. Smith's view is reasonably unbiased as even he admits that as he grew older, he grew away from comic books that he read during his adolescence and took up more "scholarly" literature as an adult. Although he argues that comic books should not be considered "lower literature", he does stipulate that comic books should not be seen as an independent genre. Smith is of the opinion that comic books exists as a sub-genre of sorts. He maintains that they are a sub-genre of fictional literature and should only be viewed as such. This is a common opinion for many who consider comic books to be more or less a literary medium. However, it is important to consider that not all comic books are fictional in nature. There are also many historical and non-fiction examples of comic books in today's market. One of the most prominent examples of this would be the line of *Classical Comics* that have been in publication since 2007. Classical Comics is a British publishing company that focuses on creating comic book adaptations of some of the great works of literature. Works from classic writers such as Shakespeare and Charles Dickens can be found in the form of comic books. Like these adaptations, there are also historical comic books which are based in non-fiction. With many examples of historical and non-fiction comic books available, can comic books be classified as a

sub-genre of fiction? Can they be considered a sub-genre at all if they fit under the umbrella of multiple pre-existing genres? At what point must critics recognize that they are too different from any existing genre to be classified under such umbrella terminology. The fact remains that comic books possess many fundamental differences from other genres to be considered a subtype of another genre.

Other scholars have acknowledged the difficulty in discussing whether or not works of literature can be considered scholarly and non-scholarly. This debate on the characteristic of comic books being literary leads to "bracketing", which "not only rejects the study of comic books as a medium in its own right but fractures it into 'literary' and 'non-literary' works" (La Cour). What La Cour is arguing in this statement is that bringing into question the "literariness" of a piece of writing implies that a text can be either literary or non-literary. When it comes down to it, another question must be answered before deciding whether or not comic books are a lower form of literature: can *any* piece of writing be non-literary? Are there forms of writing which cannot be qualified as literary text which hold some degree of substance?

Even though they only recently established themselves as an independent genre, comic books have always existed in the background of popular culture, with fans and audiences around the world who helped maintain the industry. Their place in the background of the American pop-culture scene is likely due to the original marketing scheme that targeted the youth of society. "In Western culture, the comic book's early association with the superhero genre brought with it a large, youth-oriented audience. Despite its immense popularity, the public perception for a long time was that comics were a kid's medium, or, more specifically, a young boy's medium. Because of this public stigma, comic books were "generally perceived as the lowliest of popular culture media" (Ndalianis). This perception has created a large amount of negative stigma around

comic books in general. Many people consider the stigma to be proof of comic books being a lower artform. Even though stigma and low status are closely related to one another, they differ in very distinct ways (Lopes). Nevertheless, the stigma surrounding comic culture became so adverse that it began to "rob" comic books of the pleasures that may have been contained for the scholars producing the work. It is important to recognize the separation of the scholar from the fan to demonstrate that the writer is, indeed, performing "serious" work (Greg Smith). According to teacher and comic book advocate Rocco Versaci,

> What happens is that many adolescents begin to see comic books as many adults
>
> do: subliterate, disposable, and juvenile. But this perspective is grossly inaccurate.
>
> Imagine, for example, meeting someone who disclaimed all film because he was
>
> no longer interested in Disney movies and associated all motion pictures with that
>
> one narrow genre. Just as misinformed are people who associate comic books
>
> with any one type, such as superhero comics. But many writers and artists have
>
> addressed topics relevant to all levels of English classrooms, making comic books
>
> an ideal and largely untapped source of enrichment. ("How Comic Books Can
>
> Change the Way Our Students See Literature" pg. 63)

It was around the year 2010 that the stigma surrounding comic book culture made an interesting development. In keeping with the celebration of individualism that has inspired much of literature since the age of European Romanticism, the popularity of comic books saw a dramatically unexpected boom. This boom was caused by the endeavor of the Marvel film saga produced by Disney that continues to run more than a decade later. The success of these films gained an overwhelming amount of support for comic books as they were able to appeal to people's romantic self-image and desire to achieve the impossible. It created a resurgence of

storytelling that has projected comic books into the foreground of popular culture and seems to be in the process of creating a home for the comic book industry as a permanent installment of mainstream literature. Unfortunately, research as to why the popularity of comic books surged so drastically in this specific scenario is lacking. Of course, there have been other instances of successful, comic book-based films, but even the most successful films failed to achieve the capacity of success that Disney has managed to achieve in their endeavor.

As comic books continue to grow in popularity and earn more attention from literary scholars, the question of where comic books should exist in the realm of literature becomes more and more frequent according to comic book scholar Paul Lopes. Despite the growing attention, comic books and other media types are still facing substantial resistance, "either because they are considered hybrid and therefore "impure" or because cultural gatekeepers define them as being lowbrow, if not utterly vulgar (Baetens). Paul Lopes, a comic book critic and author of books such as *Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books* and *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* reflects that in his experience:

> "Comic books have been stigmatized since their introduction in the mid-1930s, and this stigma has affected comic books as well as artists, readers, and fans of the comic book. I even experienced this stigma in the responses from colleagues when I chose to study comic books, and I found that other comic book scholars in America shared this experience… The most interesting aspect of the stigma experienced in the world of comic books in North America was how the stigmatization of comic books as subliterate and a children's medium prevented this art form from evolving into more adult genres" (Lopes 388).

The people who Lopes references who hold such stigmas argue that there is a lack of substance which makes them more of a commercial product rather than examples of more respected literature. However, more and more scholars are coming to the defense of comic books as their own genre, including Jason Dittmer and Katherine Roeder. The growing presence of the comic book culture has been increasing since the 1980s according to Angela Ndalianis. This is in part due to the success of mange and anime in America and the rise of comic book creators like Alan Moore and Frank Millar. This growing visibility and the introduction of the graphic novel has created a growing sense of comic book legitimacy. Comic book advocates such as Rocco Versaci claim that comic books not only possess enough credibility to stand on their own as a higher form of literature but that they also possess scholarly aspects which make them applicable for academic settings. Not only do they meet the same criteria and establish the same boundaries as other genres, creating unique literary works which present academic ideologies and scholarly applications, but they present these ideologies and methods of writing in a way that other genres cannot. Comic books blend visual art and literature into a unique genre which has the same versatility as poems and novels. It could be argued that they possess more range for content and style in a similar way that film does, due to the incorporation of visual art. Thus, establishing themselves as their own genre with the same capacities and boundaries as other genres.

In order to accurately discuss comic books as a genre, it is critical to first establish what a genre is. The majority of literary critics agree that a genre is comprised of three major aspects: form, content, and style (Trudier). By looking at these three parts of a piece of literature, readers can discern what genre a piece of text could be classified as. Every work existing within a certain genre will maintain common elements within each of the aspects. Of course, there are variations to the formula, such as formatting, as seen in genres such as poetry. Poems can be written in

numerous meters, rhyme schemes, and structures, but overall, the form of a poem is easy to point out when compared to works of prose. Studies suggest that genres have an ontological status that is manifested in both the activity of the work and its signification, or the "activity of artistic creating and the signification which is the essential function" of the writing. Therefore, meaning within the piece is drawn from the function of the conveying meaning (Buesch). It is also going to be important to clarify the terms that will be used frequently within this research. Although comic books are most often referred by the reduced name "comic", this term actually describes the medium in which comic books are written more so than the objects themselves. (McCloud). Some critics argue that comic books in fact *are* an artistic medium and fall into the category of a sub-genre (Smith). But, according to Scott McCloud, a respected scholar and advocate for comic books, the term medium refers to the "vessel" that is used to convey ideas and images. He states that to consider comic books a medium or form of another genre is to "mistake the message for the messenger" (*Understanding Comics*, pg. 6). Therefore, "comic book" will refer to the object being discussed, while terms such as "comic" and "cartoon" will refer to the style/medium being used. The term "form" is also going to be used to refer to the elements of structure which will define the overall genre. Other terms and definitions will be discussed as they become relevant according to the research.

 Another important part of this research is going to focus on comparing comic books to other, more widely accepted, genres such as: poetry, folktales, epics, and novels. When you look closely at the structure and impact of comic books, they follow similar patterns to other genres. They maintain certain patterns in development, breaks from normalized writing conventions, and conventions in storytelling just like novels and poems. Comic books even incorporate thematic elements that are comparable to advanced literature. However, many people do not attribute

these characteristics as enough to qualify comic books as holding any literary value. This is largely in part to the original marketing campaign of comic books. When they first started, circa 1940, around the time Captain America, Batman, and other debuting superheroes were getting published, companies were marketing them towards young people. By making young people the primary target audience for their product, comic book companies created an immediate stigma that comic books were childish. Of course, there have always existed markets for adult buyers and cult comics. Comic books are most popularly remembered for their start in the superhero category, but there were plenty of others to entertain audiences of all ages: horror, fantasy, history, historical fiction, and several independent titles. Perhaps what helped keep the industry alive in its developmental years is the fact that even then, there were mature audiences who appreciated the value of this new brand of literature. It could be asserted that these niche markets allowed the comic book industry to grow beyond its original marketing boundaries and achieve the success that they have today. That being said, this research is going to focus primarily on Marvel Comics and DC Comics, the two largest publishers of superhero comic books and pioneers of the comic book industry.

To give a brief history of these two companies, Marvel Comics was originally started as Titan Comics and began producing comic books in 1939. By 1951 they have changed the name to Atlas Comics. It was not until 1961, when comic book legends Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko began taking over the company and dominating the comic book industry that they became known as Marvel Comics. Similarly, DC Comics underwent a few changes of its own throughout the years. They began under the title New Comics, which is when they began publishing what would later be known as the "golden age" of comic books. This name would change to Adventure Comics, and later, around 1963, Detective Comics. DC originally served as an

abbreviation for Detective Comics but was popularized and eventually made into the official title for the company.

<u>Form & Structure:</u>

One of the primary aspects that this research focuses on is the form, or structure, of the comic book genre. Analyzing these structures that exist within comic books serves two main purposes: they help us as readers understand how comic books are meant to be read, and they exemplify a specific commonality that almost all comic books share. Following this idea that all literary genres can be classified by the elements that they consistently share, understanding the structure of comic books is key to understanding how they exist as their own genre. Although comic books are a genre that have only fully developed in the past few decades, they are by no means new. The inspiration and fundamental aspects of the comic book can be traced back as far as early Egypt. Hieroglyphics were one of the first forms of communication through pictures and symbols. Their manipulation of images and text in such a particularly structured format is a clear influence on modern art forms as presented by Scott McCloud. A few hundred years later, and this pattern of picture and text is still being used as a literary medium. Newspaper "funnies", political cartoons, and early comic books are in regular production. These are primitive examples of what comic books represent, but they did influence the format and structure that comic books still use, namely the artistic psychology that illustrators use to communicate with audiences and the formatting styles used to convey movement between panels.

To begin with, the formatting of comic books is well-known and not unfamiliar to most readers. These formatting elements are primarily focused on the structure and placement of the panels within each page. The formatting of these panels contributes to the pacing of the story as

well as the psychological response that the illustrator is attempting to achieve from the readers. Comic books pull a lot of their structure from prior versions of cartoons and comics. These two mediums have existed for hundreds of years and have taken many different forms in many different cultures. Some comics rely more on the artistic element to convey their message instead of balancing the use of cartoons and writing. Although previous incarnations of both cartoons and comics have influenced the basic structure of modern comic books, comic books took an additional step forward by blending visual art with written art. They present one of the most prominent examples of balanced visual and verbal rhetoric. This form is often compared to the film genre and its use of both literary writing elements and artistic photography-based art. Some may interpret this point to argue that comic books should be considered a genre of art instead of literature. Although comic books do rely substantially on the art and the coinciding artistic elements, the primary purpose of the work lies in the text, not the images. Many graphic novels, such as Marvel's *Civil War*, have actually been adapted into full text novels. This shows that if one was to remove the art from the story, the purpose of the piece still stands. However, if you remove the text from the story, it becomes much more difficult to interpret and loses its primary purpose. Perhaps this argument lies in the intended purpose of the piece as well. Comic book creators write these as stories, intended to be visualized but not required to be, while a genre of art would be created with a visual purpose at the root of its meaning.

Like other genres of literature, it is important to understand that this structure is consistent and contributes greatly to the creation of the comic book overall. Scott McCloud, who is well-versed and highly credited for his work in comic book studies, begins by defining comic books as a medium, made up of pictorial images in a deliberate sequence which is intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. However, he clarifies that this

definition only identifies the medium which the author is using, and that this has no actual effect on the style, quality, content, or subject matter of the piece of work. In other terms, a similar definition could be applied to numerous genres of literature without *really* defining the genre itself. Therefore, this definition, while important, is not accurate to describing the form of comic books. After much deliberation and critical refinement, McCloud settles on the following definition: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). To clarify, the "other images" that McCloud mentions refers to words, since they would technically be considered static images on the page. Although this definition is admittedly lengthy, it is important to providing a clear, detailed assertion for what a comic book actually is.

As stated above, form, content, and style often influence one another to create a unique experience for the reader and comic books are no exception. The structure of comic books serves a critical purpose to the reading experience. It does not simply provide a place for the art to exist, but it helps the art, and subsequently the story, "move" so to speak. Since comic book writers lack the available space needed to go into expansive detail explaining the setting and action that occurs as other writers do, they rely on the artwork and subliminal text to convey the action of the story. Novelists and poets will often control the pace of the reader by manipulating the type of language and grammar that they use. Since comic book writers must focus on the dialogue and narration instead, they rely on the paneling and frame structure to control the movement of the

Illustration 1. Captain America, circa 1944

story. Notice how in *Illustration.1*, the images are placed very close together. There are numerous panels occurring on a single page, letting the reader know that the depicted events are occurring rapidly, or in the same moment. The eye is drawn quickly to each image which helps match the anticipation and sense of anxiety present in the story. Small, quickly occurring panels such as this are often used to focus the reader on quick-moving actions such as fight scenes or chase sequences. Meanwhile, large, sometimes one- to two-page panels draw the reader into dramatic or emotionally intense scene, as seen in *Illustration.2*. In *The Death of Superman*, the writers dedicated an entire page to the emotional, climatic death of a major character. This type of panel structure slows down the pace of the story, making the character's death dramatic and appearing to last much longer than other scenes due to it being the single image on an entire page.

This can also be done through spacing. Overlapping and cross-cutting panels blends scenes together to make it clear that they exist in a singular moment, while spreading panels further apart can draw a scene out or show that figurative distance between scenes. What many people do not realize is how important the space between the panels can be to a writers. Many have come to refer to this space existing between each frame as the "gutter" (McCloud). Although

Illustration 2. Superman Vol. 1, The Death and Return of Superman. 2013

there is nothing perceptible happening in-between frames, writers use this empty space to engage with the reader's imagination. When reading, people fill in the blanks between panels to contribute to the movement of the characters and subsequently the movement of the scene. We fill in the gaps of what happens from page to page, which allows the writer and illustrator to focus on the most crucial parts of the story. This is a unique element of comic books that is often referred to as "imaginative interactivity" (Tabachnik). Instead of the author being in complete control of the world the reader sees in their mind, there is a cohesive relationship involved in creating the comic book world. Comic book illustrators create the most important aspects of the world, and suggest other elements to the reader, who uses this subliminal context to piece together any additional elements on their own.

Comic book creators may also choose to overlap panels to let the reader know that certain scenes are connected or are occurring in rapid succession. The overlapping, jumbled-up appearance of the panels creates a sense of controlled chaos on the page, as if the events in the comic book are occurring simultaneously. What many people have noticed over the years while studying comic books is that something "miraculous" came out of this seeming chaos. "Comic books did become more serious, more complex, and more respected. And this was true from the most pulp to the most literary of comic books" (Lopes). So, the format and writing techniques of comic book authors is significant to the credibility of the genre. This particular writing technique is used to control how much the reader is having to imagine on their own. The less space left between panels means that authors are providing more detail for the reader, leaving less up to the imagination and making the reading faster paced. It also helps build suspense for the reader as they quickly piece together the many fragments of the scene. "Thus, [comic books] routinely

manage to provide a powerful interactive experience, and manages to offer a new, hybrid form of reading that combines visual and verbal rhetoric" (Tabachnik).

Another important key element in the form of comic books is the use of the art within the panels. The incorporation of artistic elements is one of the defining characteristics of comic books in general, and while this is often looked upon as a matter of style, it also contributes to the form of the comic book. In a way, the art within a comic book communicates more with the reader than the text does. The artwork not only provides readers with visual depictions of the story being told, but it calls readers' attention to significant aspects of the story. This has also come to be known as iconical text. Romer-Jodar asserts that comic books exist as a type of narrative iconical genre, "created in and by the discourse community that employs iconical language" (133). The iconical language and the type of art that is used, along with the way that it is formatted has a custom-tailored impact on what kind of story is being told. As McCloud describes it, the process of taking an artistic representation and breaking it down into its most abstract components allows the illustrator to communicate more specific ideas to the reader. From a psychological lens, making something more abstract with less realistic detail allows us to focus on specific details within the piece. By stripping the artwork and subsequently the characters down to their essential meaning an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that other literature/art cannot. This contributes to many comic books being read in an allegorical sense. Fantasy stories containing heroes and monsters suddenly become stories about the struggles and hardships of our own private lives. The variation in style and structure is the comic book equivalent to altering the type of language used in a novel or poem. Whereas comic book writers are only primarily able to change the dialogue that is being used by the characters or the accompanying narration, the artists and illustrators can alter the character itself in a much deeper

way. Choosing a specific art style can deciding which scenes to create as well as which element of the scene to focus on or leave out amplifies the intended purpose of the story.

The depth shown by the artistic and literary forms identified in comic books make it evident that comic books are more than a mere sub-genre of fictional literature. These concepts can also be explored within an academic setting. The cross-disciplinary implementation of artistic and literary forms makes it ideal for educating new readers on advanced reading concepts. By incorporating visual elements and more digestible, less daunting, stories in the classroom, teachers can add an entirely new level of understanding to analyzing texts (Sheehan). The artwork offers excellent visual aids that appeal to the younger demographic, while the stories themselves can be taught as allegories and examples of how literature works to communicate with readers. The use of panels and varied structural forms can also be used to teach students how authors manipulate the speed at which readers read to control the pace and suspense of a story.

Content & Subject Matter:

Another crucial element that scholars John Storey and Jonathan Gray study when attempting to credit comic books with scholarly credibility is the actual content that is being presented. Before going forward, it will be important to note that there does exist a substantial contrast in the content and subject matter of a comic book. The subject matter refers to the situation, the characters being used, the setting, and other, more tangible elements of the story. However, the term content will be used to refer to the conceptual elements of the story: themes, motifs, reflections of social perceptions, etc. this research is focused on analyzing the subject matter of comic books in order to discern the content and how it relates to other literary genres.

Throughout history, literature has been used to reflect social values and challenge people's ways of thinking. Comic books are no different. One of the interesting things about comic books is that there are very few limits to what subject matter can be explored. As stated above, comic books can be about history, fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, horror, and whatever else a writer can think of. This flexibility and range of subject matter gives writers plenty of room to explore various themes and motifs that are reflective of social values.

   One character in particular who exists as an excellent example of how the content of comic books interacts with social views is Marvel's Captain America. Throughout his numerous years under Marvel Comics, Captain America has transformed from the embodiment of American nationalism to a complex character who changes along with the identity of the America people. During World War II he was presented as a national hero who went to war in the name of justice and exemplified the spirit of the American people during a time of great hardship. Literature is

usually written with a purpose in mind, and Captain America's early years were written to inspire the American people by showing them the strength of the American spirit. The cover of his very first issue, as shown in *Illustration.3*, is illustrated as though it were a piece of American propaganda, with Captain America, in full red, white, and blue garb, punching Adolf Hitler in the face. This was meant to portray the Captain as an American hero and who the people's ability to prevail in their fight for righteousness. Jump ahead a few decades,

Illustration 3. Captain America Issue #1. Published 1941

and we see Captain America take on another significant role, this time on a different front on

American soil. In Captain America issue #117 (published in September of 1969), we see the first appearance of Sam Wilson, aka The Falcon. The Falcon is one of the first African American superheroes to be presented in mainstream comic books. At this point in American history, the Civil Rights Movement was in motion, and the nation was calling for equal rights among African American citizens. Stan Lee, the creative head of Marvel Comics, wanted to be at the forefront of facing political issues in his work. Character like The Falcon, and later Black Panther and the X-Men, were the comic book industry's answer to the desire for more progressive ways of thinking. And as the minds of the American people changed, Captain America changed as well. Similar to how his early debut showed the patriotic spirit of the people in the face of immense struggles, his new adventures and team-up issues pushed fans towards political progression. Now, not only are African America fans of comic books able to see themselves be part of the adventure and part of the comic book culture, but all fans are being exposed to positive representations of African American characters. With these characters Marvel gave a voice to the African American community and contributed to a positive image for the African American community. This had a huge impact on people growing up during this time. In a sense, it is still the American people, embodied in the character of Captain America, who are learning to adjust to new times and accept people who are different from them. The writers did not use Captain America as a weapon to attack political topics, but as a tool for growth. For those steeped in the culture of comic books, Captain America serves as a bridge and advocate for the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement, showing us that we are capable of working together to bring about change and acceptance.

Make another jump a couple of decades to the early 2000s, and the image of Captain America undergoes another major change. During this time of war and controversial political

engagements, the American people are now questioning the acts of their own government. It was around this turn of the century that America was undergoing a speculation of its own identity as it was involved in war and other political affairs across the globe. These doubts and uncertainties about the future of politics were excellently captured in one of Marvel's most popular comic book series, *Civil War*. In this event, two of the most influential characters in the Marvel universe, Captain America and Iron Man, are at odds on how to deal with unorganized superhuman groups. After a major catastrophe caused by untrained superheroes which resulted in the death of thousands, the superhero community is faced with rigid structural reform. The international governments of the world pass a bill that requires all active superheroes to register their identities and abilities with the national government. The bill essentially forces superheroes to become government-sanctioned agents who would operate in a limited capacity in accordance with world government or retire. Many saw this as an opportunity to create a safer method of superheroes to operate and earn back the trust of the citizens. Supporters sought to protect the world in a controlled, trained manner that would prevent recklessness and public endangerment. However, those who were against the bill see it as an infringement upon their rights. They believed that publicizing their identities would not only make them more vulnerable to villains and corrupt government agendas but would also endanger the lives of their families. This takes place not long after the events of the comic book series *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, in which the biggest villain is revealed to be a covert agent operating within a major government security organization. *The Winter Soldier* shows that government agendas cannot always be trusted, and this idea is carried forward as the same government attempts to gain full control over the superhero community. In their minds, what happens if corrupt government agendas come to light once again, only this time the identities and weaknesses of every superhero are a matter of

public domain? As stated in an analysis by a film and comic book scholar, "As most who have written about the comic book and the film have suggested, it is not inherently unreasonable that there should be some form of oversight concerning superheroes and their relationship to society, but the *way* it is framed in both versions and *who* it is framed by, proves significant" (McSweeney). What is really interesting in terms of the social reflection of this issue is which side Captain America finds himself on. Up to this point he has always served as an example of the power of the American spirit and a pinnacle of truth and justice. Those who fight the good fight fought alongside Captain America. But in this comic book series, he becomes one of the most wanted criminals in America. He refuses to give up his freedom by registering and builds an insurgency to fight against those who would force superhumans to register. This shows the significance of how much the American people were questioning the acts of their government during this time. Literature is constantly influenced by the concepts being addressed in society, and Marvel has always tried to be at the forefront of societal changes. As McSweeney argues, "In the early years of the 'War on Terror", as once again large portions of America felt convinced in their moral superiority and the righteousness of their cause. Yet, this certitude was unable to be sustained as the reality of the conflict became apparent (202). Writer Mark Millar utilized the unstable trust in the American government to showcase an event centered around the vagueness of morality in a modern world. Readers are forced to wonder which side they would choose and what set of values they deem more important.

Understanding the reflection of content within society is rooted in understanding the relationship that authors build with their audience. John Storey is regarded as one of the leading experts in the field of cultural studies. In his book *Inventing Popular Culture: from Folklore to Globalization*, he offers a critical analysis of what constitutes popular culture and how it has

evolved since the eighteenth century. His primary focus in this text is the relationship between the concepts addressed in popular culture media and the cultural views of the time including identity and social values. In his opinion, popular culture is an invention of intellectuals, and popular culture changes as the intellectual way in which we create it changes (Storey). Therefore, examples of popular media, literature, art, etc. changes as the culture itself changes. Likewise, these concepts influence how audiences digest and receive comic books. Namely, how the content reflects societal values. Every genre of literature is influenced by the political and idealistic views of the time and comic books are no exception. In fact, some scholars believe that comic books have a certain source of "self-consciousness and reflexivity" that allow them to be an extremely dynamic form of literature, able to adapt and develop in a way that impacts readers. This sense of reflexivity works with social views to build upon the values of the people and helps authors establish a connection between their work and the audience. Much like other popular genres throughout history, popular works are also topical. Studying the historical and psychological aspects of a piece of writing connects the work to the identity of the people at the time it was written. According to one scholar's study of Captain America,

> "Captain America is an example of popular culture's role in this process [of connecting with audiences]. Significant to this role is Captain America's ability to connect the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy with the scale of the individual. The character of Captain America connects these scales by literally embodying the American identity, presenting for readers a hero both of, and for, the nation (Dittmer 627).

It is this symbolic meaning and the internalization of mythic and symbolic aspects of the national identity of the people that connects people with comic book characters and helps

people understand their position "both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative" (Dittmer).

Another popular comic book character that has connected with readers over the years since her original debut in 1941 is DC's Wonder Woman. Like Captain America, Wonder Woman became an embodiment of the views of the American people. But Wonder Women's evolution throughout the DC continuity has been rather complex compared to her male counterparts. Often times, especially in modern times, she is celebrated as a figure of female empowerment. But there also exists an element of kink ever since the creation of her character. Wonder Woman's creator, William Marston, was an advocate for women being in a dominant role. He believed that there were social benefits to placing women in charge of social roles. What many people do not know is that Marston also enjoyed the company of dominant women in a much more "personal" way. Those who study Wonder Woman comics indicate that this fascination with dominant women came across in his writing. Although she did maintain a prominent presence as a figure of female empowerment, she circumstances of her adventures were slightly suggestive. It was not unusual for her to be captured at some point and bound and restricted, often by rope. It is understood that her capture and binding was influenced by Marston's fascination with the female kink. It is interesting to consider how this element may have played a role in Wonder Woman's popularity over the years. It is also hard to ignore the fact that the superhero costume often consisted of short skirts and sleeveless tops. One has to wonder how her character would have developed differently had she not been sexualized in such a way. This was not an uncommon occurrence for women in writing considering it was still in the early- to mid-1900s, but did playing to the to the opinions and pre-existing notions of the American people contribute to her character's popularity and success in the industry? Perhaps Marston intended for all of these

elements to further push progressive thinkers and make Wonder Woman a feminist figure. Since he found these characteristics to be wanted in women, maybe he wanted to show that powerful women could persevere beyond social stigma and be powerful feminist figures in spite of the ideas that the rest of society projected onto them. Afterall, he did not seek to demean women in his life. He genuinely believed his quality of life was improved when women were placed in charge both in the personal and professional setting. Whatever your standing on the subject, Wonder Woman is heavily connected to the values of the American people. Even today, though her wardrobe and character have remained the same, she is still one of the most popular selling titles under DC. Following Storey's concepts that popular culture reflects the topical issues and values of the society it is created in; Wonder Woman holds a special place in the world of women's rights in literature. It could be argued that she served as the bridge connecting the early stages of the comic book industry to bigger audiences. DC Comics could now market towards the female perspective and explore a deeper level to its continuity that other heroes like Superman and Captain America could not allow them.

Resulting in Stan Lee's desire to be at the forefront of social change in America, the X-Men were also introduced in 1963. This superhero group, full of societal rejects who were outcast from society due to judgements regarding their latent superpowers and abilities, was meant to connect with the societal "rejects" of the Counterculture Movement. It was at this time that society was experiencing a pivotal "punk" phase. This led to protests against the concepts of authority and oppressive establishments. Anyone who is familiar with this period in American history knows how critical the punk generation was to the Counterculture movement. And no superhero group captured the essence of this generation better than the X-Men. At the core of the early storylines involving these characters was their rejection from society. The social

infrastructure feared this new rise of superhumans, born with special abilities which usually revealed themselves during the teenage years. The powers could often be violent or difficult to control. Because of this lack of control and potential for chaos, the general population deemed these superhumans "mutants" and drove them from their homes. Mutants are often met with violence in social situations, and one of the primary conflicts in any X-Men storyline is maintaining peace between mutants and humans.

It is clearly evident that the struggles of the mutants and the basis of the characters themselves are rooted in the punk generation. At this time, much of the rebellion spirit stemmed from society's youth. They sought to rebel against the authority of parental figures and other authoritative establishments. Like the "mutants", the stereotypical "punk" began their rebellious phase during their teenage years. They felt cast out, abandoned, and unwanted in modern society. Thus, Stan Lee created the X-Men to reach out to the outcasts of society and give them a superhero they could relate to. The X-Men clearly exhibited the sentiment of what life is like on the outskirts of social convention. It not only captures the violence and cruelty of such a world, but also the challenge to establish peace between these two groups.

Once again, comic books were acting as a bridge to connect and unite people at a common front. These comic books did not encourage rebellious youths to become violent or cold to those who cast them out. Instead, they showed a group of people working to re-establish that lost connection and find a way to coexist peacefully. This is the root of the message for readers and fans of the X-Men. Find a way to resolve your differences. Try to find a way to use what makes you different to create a better world for the generations to come. And many members of the Counterculture movement sought out this very goal. In the years to come, the sense of rebellion that once resulted in outcasts across the country, created a new cultural identity within the

mainstream. New forms of media, modernized social conventions, and outreach for people who felt like they did not belong anywhere took the place of the violent "punk" era that had been there initially. This further demonstrates how comic books connect to people throughout the world and serve a significant purpose in the realm of literature.

This has also proved useful in the field of education. Many students who are struggling to reconcile their personal identities with that of their social presence have shown improvement through the study of comic books such as X-Men. One of the most important factors in effective teaching is connecting with students. If a teacher is able to establish a meaningful connection between content and students, then the education process become much easier, and the learning that occurs as a result is much more significant. Therefore, X-Men and other comics that present struggling youths and conflicts of personal identity can be used to create meaningful lessons for young adults. When it comes to image motifs and themes of an individual struggling with identity issues, comic books can be some of the most effective young adult literature available.

Style:

The final element that is covered in this research is the varying style of comic books. Like all genres of literature, the way each story is written and/or constructed can vary in terms of style. There are so many instances of literary forms and genres that are born from breaking normalized writing conventions that each genre has developed variations of itself. Comic books have grown to be such an expansive genre that they too can be broken down into sub-genres with variations in style. One of the most unique stylistic elements about the comic book genre is the establishment of a universal continuity. Though other genres – namely novels, plays, and folktales – often set up contained "worlds" and fictitious settings that expand beyond the

confines of a single text, none do it to the degree of comic books. Still focusing on the primary comic book publishers in North America, Marvel and DC have created their own fictitious universes that have consistently existed for decades. This style of writing and world-building gives authors the very unique ability of writing characters that already exist. Instead of having to create new characters with each new title or re-tell the same stories, comic book authors can take a pre-existing character and expand upon their adventures and character development. Characters created in such a setting can be built upon over the course of decades, with multiple writers contributing to the depth and dimension of each character's personality/identity. Since the development of the comic book, the boundaries of world-building and character development have been conceptually erased.

   Stylistic choices also affect the figurative way that people read literature. One such element that this research briefly touched on before is how comic books can be read in an allegorical sense. There are many renowned stories and novels that are critically analyzed for their ability to be read on multiple levels. It is this sense of allegory found in great literary works that has made them relevant far beyond their years. The interaction and connection to the values and morals of society as both a whole and individually allows comic books to also be scene in an allegorical context.

Take for instance, the so-called "trinity" of the DC universe, as seen in *Illustration 4*:
Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. These three figures have come to represent some of
the core values of heroism and righteousness. Superman is an
example of other-worldly strength and a figure of hope.
Nicknamed the "Man of Tomorrow", he never stops fighting
for the innocent and his seemingly limitless strength is meant
to inspire the belief that we should never stop fighting for a
better tomorrow. Wonder Woman, the daughter of Zeus,
goddess of truth, and ambassador of peace is one of the most
prominent female superheroes that comic books have to offer.
Her fight for truth and mission of peace among all men
represents a spiritual strength in people. Her inspiration from
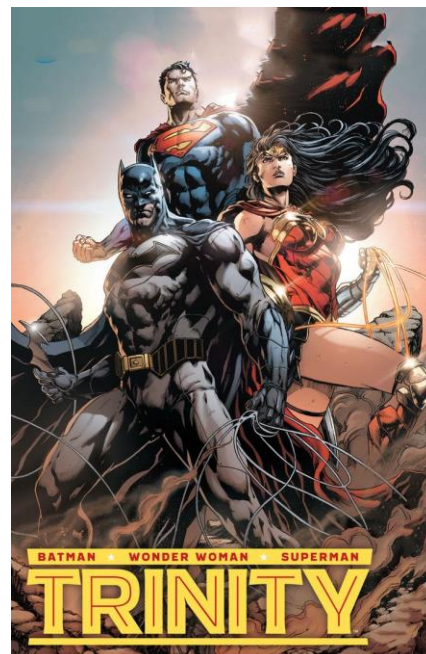

Illustration 4. Trinity vol. 2 #1. 2016

Greek myths portrays her as a mediator among all races of mankind. At the core of her character
is the sense that no man is above another, and as long as people have the spirit to bring about
change then they are never beaten. Last but not least, we have the Batman. Unlike the others,
Batman is one of the most revered heroes in the DC universe and possesses no superpowers or
enhanced abilities whatsoever. He is the pinnacle of human achievement in the face of injustice.
Driven to bring justice after his own personal tragedy, he embodies the idea that men are only as
weak as their will. It is interesting to think about how comic book writers have created these
characters over the years. More interesting is the fact that these three heroes have remained some
of the most popular, even since their original publication. They reflect a part of ourselves as both
individuals and as a society. They inspire the best parts of ourselves and are meant to push us
into being more than just members of society. Superman inspires strength and hope. Wonder

Woman pushes for equality and peace. And Batman shows us potential of our own will and the need for justice. Characters like this have taken comic books from a new consumer product to a new genre of literature that influences the lives of readers all over the world. According to Jonathan Gray, part of people's fascination with comic books and the characters in these books is the projection of the "Other" that we often find within ourselves. He states,

> "As the wealth of literature on Othering makes clear, the Other is always a reflection and a projection of ourselves. Moreover, frequently our gaze at the Other is imbued with significant desire and longing. This, however, still applies to media as well as scholarly representations of fandom" (Gray 160).

It is this fascination with the Other which is presented to us in the form of superheroes and other comic book characters which makes the impact of comic books so substantial. They help to connect us to a part of ourselves fill with "desire and longing" and encourages us to look at ourselves from a new perspective.

Of course, one of the primary arguments of this research is that comic books are different enough to be considered entirely separate from other literary genres, while maintaining enough in common with one another to be established as a unique genre of literature. Although comic books can be compared to other genres, they do not fit into the parameters of any other existing genre. Perhaps the closest thing in the realm of literature that resembles comic books are folktales or myths. There have been instances where people have commented that comic book heroes resemble "modern-day" myths. Both genres are centered around a tradition of storytelling, they create a continuity which serves to connect numerous tales into one ideology, and neither obeys the traditional norms of other writing conventions. While folktales also originate in popular culture settings, they are traditionally passed down orally from one

generation to the next. Also, many ancient myths were rooted in traditional religious beliefs. Many comic books still draw inspiration from myths, religions, folktales, and other sources of cultural storytelling. As stated above, they can be read as allegorical stories which teach younger generations "heroic" values. However, those who are familiar with comic book studies agree that, "one thing that has become especially evident over the past decade is that despite the ease with which their stories, characters, and style can be translated into other media, comic books retain a style, an approach to narrative and "reading", and a history that is medium specific" (Ndalianis).

Conclusion:

Since their creation, comic books have progressed substantially in their development as a new literary presence. From their original start as single issues stories and contained worlds, they have grown into a massive part of American popular culture. The fictitious worlds that superhero comic books create have expanded beyond the imaginations of their creators and have developed into full-fledged works of literature. In spite of the impacts that negative stigma and social perceptions about comic book culture have had, these comic books have continued to grow in complexity of language, content, and artistic elements that are still being used and developed today. Still today, comic books are receiving more and more attention in the literary field of studies. "While comic books originally were based on short stories in serial format, now comic books present long-arced narratives with complex story lines", states Paul Lopes. There are still many who assert that comic books are no more than adolescent in nature as well as execution and refuse to credit them with scholarly standing in either the literary or academic world. However, more and more critics are realizing that in the past few decades, "comic books did

become more serious, more complex, and more respected" (Lopes). The argument has been

made several times over the years, and each argument has met some form of rebuttal. There will

always be people who argue in defense of comic books for their ability to exemplify the same

literary conventions that all other literature is revered for. It is not difficult to find research

showing the complexity of graphic novels and the superhero world that has been created in the

past century. This particular research was limited to superhero comic books within North

American popular culture, but there is a plethora of other comic book areas that are gaining more

traction in literary studies as well. Likewise, there is an abundance of research which attempts to

make it evident that the medium which comic books employ is too reminiscent of its cartoon

ancestry to be considered anything more than adolescent media, or, at best, a sub-genre of a more

over-reaching literary genre. But what stands to reason as the most significant aspect of comic

books is the uniquity with which they present the literary form.

　　The fact remains that there is no literary genre quite like comic books that exists in today's

world. The complexity of issues, the blending of visual and verbal rhetoric, the literary forms

exhibited in the structure of characters and storylines, the connection with social conventions and

reflection of values that connects each issue with the hearts and minds of the American people

makes comic books a truly unique experience for readers of all ages. Despite the view that any

form of literature could be assessed as "less-literary" or a lower form of literature ignores the

purpose of said literature and the potential of the work as a literary form. "The rich content of the

exhibition demonstrated conclusively that comic art is capable of expressing complex aesthetic

and intellectual ideas, holding its own in the company of more highly regarded art forms"

(Roeder). The point that Roeder is trying to make with this statement is that there is a certain

depth and substance found within comic books that makes them comparable to any other form of

literature. What many people are acknowledging when discrediting comic books as a literary form is not the content of the comic book, or even the structure which it is written in. It is the negative stigma that has surrounded comic book culture since its early debuts that motivates people to consider it a lower art form. Therefore, this research makes it evident that comic books have expanded and evolved beyond their original capacity, and through the analysis of comic book's form, content, and style, in regard to the conventional analysis of literary genres, credits comic books as a unique and independent genre of literature.

Perhaps what is most important in studying comic books is the impact that they have had on the American people over the past several decades. They have inspired generations, influenced social prejudices, and offered safe havens for people who feel they do not fit within conventional society. It is the purpose and passion of which comic books have been created that makes them so significant. Though they have only recently achieved such astounding levels of popularity in the American mainstream, they have always been works of art for most people. Literature has always provided us with a reflection of the world, both past and present. No matter the form or style, storytelling has connected people and cultures with a part of themselves that no other form of communication could. Comic books are an extension of this sentiment. They represent a resurgence of the storytelling process that have excelled in times of hardship and social controversy. They connect people by showing them a reflection of the world they live in and inspiring them to be more like the heroes they see on the page. All literature is about connection and communication, and comic books are the most recent installment in the storytelling process which allows people around the world to take part in that connection.

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