

Superheroes and Their Underlying Humanity Within Them

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Capstone
14 December 2022

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Throughout history we have had various kinds of mythical and fantasy-based characters that left a mark on the cultural zeitgeist. Whether it was Greek mythology or King Arthur, these kinds of stories provided mass entertainment for the masses, and still are today. Despite being over thousands of years old these stories are still being studied and analyzed. However, what many people don't realize is that we are currently living under a new literary renaissance that is our modern-day equivalent, and that is the rise of the superhero. The creation of the superhero started when the character of Superman debuted. He was written in the 1930's when the country was in a dire state. We were deep into the Great Depression and we're starting to get involved in World War II. Our morale was at an all-time low and the country needed a symbol to inspire them. This is where Superman came in, he was the perfect character to push against the problems facing society at the time. He exemplified virtues like kindness and bravery and was a role model that several men, women and children wanted to emulate. After his debut the superhero genre exploded, and countless different and unique superheroes started to appear. All of them with different looks and personalities. However, to me the best superheroes were the ones who had to struggle with different human trials and tribulations, just like the heroes in myth. Characters like the Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, the superhero team the Fantastic Four and The Amazing Spider-Man all have very unique human attributes which made them very fascinating to follow. Despite being superhuman, these characters have to overcome adversity, which makes them inherently more interesting to read.

In a world filled with all-American handsome looking characters, The Incredible Hulk is an anomaly. He is an ugly green monster, who is scary and destructive. However, beneath all of that anger lies a deeply troubled man with a traumatic past. The general public knows the Hulk

as being Dr. Bruce Banner; a scientist who was exposed to gamma rays when caught in the blast of a gamma bomb, and as a result is turned into a monster whenever he is angry. However, that is not the case, in fact it is way more complicated than that. As a child Bruce suffered from horrific abuse from his father and would later be traumatized by witnessing him murder his mother. It is later revealed that his father was a successful scientist who was exposed to radiation himself. When his wife got pregnant, he feared that he would pass something on to his son. “I wonder_ perhaps all the years of atomic research damaged my genetic structure_ this could all be my fault! I should have known! I shouldn’t have sired a child. With all the radiation my genes have been bombarded with, how can are son be anything other than a monster” (Mantlo, The Incredible Hulk Issue 312). His fathers’ concerns would later manifest into anger which resulted in the abuse that both Bruce and his mother suffered from. Eventually, the tensions surrounding him, and his father would reach a boiling point years later when he would murder him in self-defense. Horrified by his actions Bruce would suppress any feelings or anger that he may have felt and proceeded to have a successful career as a scientist where he would eventually build the Gamma Bomb that resulted in the Hulk coming out. Ironically enough it could easily be implied that his father was always right about Bruce being a monster. “The grim drama of Bruce Banner’s personal turmoil came to an explosive head in the notorious events of the Hulk’s origin. When Banner was trapped in the afterglow of the gamma bombs’ detonation, he was infused with transformative radiation, and his horror story reached an entirely different and more dangerous level. Now Bruce Banner would truly become more than a man: a mutation, a freak, a monster who would endanger the rest of the world. Bruce became the very thing that his father most feared” (The Pantheon Era: Personal and Political Morality in Peter David’s Hulk, Jason Sacks 126). This provides a new wrinkle in the character of Bruce, which makes him infinitely

more tragic. It never mattered if he was exposed to gamma radiation or not, he was always seen as a monster long before he officially became the Hulk. He was brought up in a negative environment with a toxic parent, with nurture and care Bruce could have been more emotionally stable but through constant abuse his father never considered that maybe he's actively making a monster.

This abuse is also important because the anger that Bruce felt when being treated this way is manifested through the Hulk identity. Numerous writers and readers have pointed out that the Hulk has an almost child-like demeanor. He doesn't have much rhyme or reason in his actions, he only aims to destroy. This is done on purpose because the Hulk is symbolic of child Bruce's anger as he is often reminiscent of a child throwing a temper tantrum. "According to longtime series artist Sal Buscema, as a superhero "the Hulk doesn't fit any category at all. He's totally unique. He's monstrous, lumbering, huge, unbelievably strong and he gets even stronger when he gets angry. He has the mentality of a child. This may sound familiar. In discussing the character's creators, critics and fans have tended to rely on just such a "petulant child" psychological portrait: writer Danny Fingeroth calls the Hulk "the distilled essence of anger, from pouting, shrieking infant to tantrum-throwing four year old; fellow Marvel scribe Kurt Busiek likewise describes him "as more like a four-year old... representative of that age when kids want to be dinosaurs and take great pleasures in imagining great power and destruction, because they're so powerless themselves"("The Monster's Analyst" and the "Binomial Self 65). This cuts to the reason on why the Hulk is such a fascinating character. He's the prime example of how suppressed emotions will take a severe toll on us, but at the same time though there is something inherently cathartic about him as well. He is symbolic of rage unfettered and as dark as this may be, there are moments where we all want to lash out at the world with only

destruction on are minds. The Hulk is such a relevant character because there are countless individuals who suffer from emotional instability on a daily basis.

However, this is not the only alternate personality that Bruce Banner suffers from. There is another Hulk that resides within him, and that persona is The Grey Hulk AKA Mr. Fixit. This iteration of the Hulk is known for his grey skin instead of the typical green skin. Also, he is known to be slightly more intelligent than the traditional Hulk. He is also much more morally gray as he is seen to be very hedonistic and motivated by food, money, and sex. He will even stoop to working as a mobster in Las Vegas in order to make money. What makes him such a unique character is that he is also symbolic of Bruce's desires, albeit in a different manner. Unlike the child-like rage of the traditional Hulk, this version is symbolic of teenage Bruce's hidden desires. He is always displayed with a strait-laced attitude, even as a young man and never acted upon any of the desires that he may have had. So, the Grey Hulk is symbolic for Bruce's ID completely untethered. "While Hulk has been portrayed as a character as reveling in certain base aspects or primal desires, David presents a character driven by the pursuits of material goods, comfort and respect" (A Made Man: Joe Fixit, the 1980's and Consumption as Resistance 112). What makes him even more interesting though is the element of social commentary that writer Peter David incorporates into these stories. This era of the Hulk's history was during the 80's when consumer culture was at an all time high. There is a certain element of satire in the way he is written, his obsession with his status is played up to an almost absurd level. This was not a coincidence as one of the purposes of his character was to hold up a mirror to society and show us what it would be like if we got ourselves preoccupied with are own selfish needs. It's especially unnerving as it makes us realize that maybe we're not so different to a character as fearsome as the Hulk. "Mr. Fixit is easily one of these pop culture entertainment

productions. Debuting four years after Madonna's "Material Girl" and one year after Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*, Peter David's *Fixit* manifests these materialistic trends multiple times across the story's arc. Gone are the psychological or post-Atomic Age metaphors the Hulk might normally stand in for; they are replaced by a ubiquitous shirt and tie and a man who does a job for the right price so he can maintain his perfect apartment. As one comic journalist puts it, "Mr. Fixit was clever, brash, and always looking for an advantage... Mr. Fixit formed and broke alliances and played enemies against one another... Mr. Fixit came from a place even scarier, personifying Banner's ego, his greed, his primal desires for food and sex and conquest" (*A Made Man: Joe Fixit, 1980's and Consumption as Resistance* 116). We can deny it all we want but we all have this capacity for greed, and it can completely warp us just like it did the Hulk. However, despite this being a scathing critique on consumerism there are some who see his position as being liberating. Bruce Banner is considered to be a tragic figure who will always be plagued by his inner demons, but the Grey Hulk is someone who could provide all of them with the good life. "But, in these capitalistic, consumerist pursuits, Fixit also represents one of the very few times that Hulk was actually contributing to society and the broader culture as a citizen; instead of tearing the world down, he's got a job, a relationship, a residence and sense of purpose" (*A Made Man; Joe Fixit, the 1980's and Consumption as Resistance* 113). Even if what he is doing is morally questionable, he is seen as an actual person and not just a mindless brute, which is cathartic for someone like him. The Grey Hulk is an extremely interesting addition to the Hulk Mythos and shows the reader just how severe his mental illness really is.

This brings me to the most important part of the Hulk's character and why he is so relevant for so many readers, he is his own worst enemy. He may fight against a variety of different super villains but at the end of the day he is just an emotionally troubled man trying to

fight against the worst impulses of himself. There are countless moments where we have to control ourselves and make sure our worst impulses such as anger don't take control. This kind of dilemma is found in two major story arcs starring the Hulk. *The Hulk: Future Imperfect* and *Hulk: The End*. *The Hulk: Future Imperfect* takes place in a dystopian future where the world has been destroyed in a nuclear war. The Hulk however is the only one who could survive these kinds of conditions and grew mad with power becoming a dictator known as "The Maestro". To put a stop to him a group of rebels go back in time and bring the Hulk to the future to stop his future self. This results in a complex battle where Hulk is forced to "literally face his demons". What makes this dynamic so interesting though is that Maestro initially tries to convince himself, (Hulk) to work with him claiming that the world has failed them. In fact, he makes the case that while they have always been deemed as a monster, it was society that made them so. The Hulk was created from a man-made gamma bomb, so he was inherently born from a device meant to cause violence and destruction. He also brings up the uncomfortable irony that it was man who destroyed themselves through nuclear war. "For as long as I can recall humans touted their moral superiority over me. I was "The Monster". But when it came down to it, they were the ones who brought destruction upon themselves. Me, A monster? I wasn't even in their league" (*The Incredible Hulk Future Imperfect Part 2*). He also says that they have every single right to subjugate Earth due to Mankind's hypocrisy and that they will never change no matter what they do. "Stay here. Rule at my side. Don't you see Bruce... We own humans nothing'. They're just takers. They take all we have and give nothing back. They spit in our face. You don't know what lies ahead for you. I do. Listen to me, Bruce... They're going to take it all away. You're going to end up with nothing and no one. Why go back to that... when you can stay here and have everything? Persecution. Betrayal. Hatred. These things don't change" (*The*

Incredible Hulk Future Imperfect Part 2). At this moment it becomes apparent that the Maestro is symbolic for hate. He is what happens when we let our feelings of rage and disregard for others take over us. Obviously, Bruce is horrified by how twisted he has become and realizes that he must put a stop to this by ending him for good and as mentioned before essentially “conquer his own demons”. To do this he sends The Maestro back in time to when they first became the Hulk where in an ironic twist of fate is killed by the same Gamma Bomb that created him. This is a very human based story because we all on some level fear that we will succumb to our worst impulses which is exactly why the Hulk is such a great hero. He has to save the world while also not losing himself in the process.

This battle against the self also plays a part in the story arc Hulk: The End. This story also takes place in another alternative future where the Earth has been annihilated by a nuclear war. However, this time the Hulk is the only living thing to survive the attack and is forced to walk in this wasteland alone. During this time Bruce now, a decrepit old man reflects on his relationship with the Hulk. Bruce wants nothing more than to just die, but he can't as any time he attempts to he turns into the Hulk. As a result, Bruce is allowed to reflect on his life and the nature of his relationship with the Hulk. He eventually reaches the epiphany that he is the physical embodiment of the Atomic Age. “The Hulk was... is... the living symbol of the Atomic Age. The Atomic Age Frankenstein, they called him. The Atomic Age Jekyll and Hyde. The Atomic Age which brought fire and a terrible, terrible knowledge to Mankind. A knowledge for which the final price was... oblivion” (Hulk: The End). This cuts right down to the spirit of the Hulk mythos. We all have this dark tendency to destroy one another, and it is what will lead to our downfall. It is no coincidence that the Atomic Bomb is an image always associated with the Hulk. Many lives have always been lost from these kinds of man-made devices and are still

today. The Hulk may be a tragic and misunderstood monster but at the same time he is symbolic for man's worst impulses. That being said this story also does acknowledge the more tragic nature of the Hulk's mythos. By the end of the story Bruce finally on the verge of dying from a heart attack tries to convince Hulk to let go as they can finally reach peace in the afterlife. However, The Hulk refuses as he is unable to forget about how he was treated and simply wants to be alone. "No! Hulk won't let it happen! Hulk doesn't want friends! Hulk doesn't want friends! Hulk doesn't want to be with anybody because Hulk just wants to be left alone!" (Hulk: The End). This leads to Hulk overpowering Banner suppressing him forever, leaving him the only one remaining. While initially happy Hulk starts to realize what he has done and how truly miserable it is to live alone. "And Hulk... Hulk doesn't miss Banner at all. Hulk is... happy to be alone. Yes, Hulk is happy. Hulk never needed Banner. Never needed any of them. Because if Hulk needed someone... then Hulk would be weak. And Hulk must... never be weak. Never. Because Hulk is...strongest one there is...Hulk is... Hulk feels...cold" (Hulk: The End). This ties back into Hulk symbolizing man's darkness albeit through a different way. There are countless moments where we all feel angry at the world and just want to break away and live like a hermit. However, love and empathy should always be the number one priority as empathy is the only way we can make any progress as a collective society. Unfortunately, Hulk could not overcome his anger and bitterness and is now forced to live a life of solitude as a result. If we are to actually make a difference, we have to listen to each other and not resort to anger like the Hulk does. Overall, the Hulk is a very interesting character, he is not your average clean-cut character. He can scare you but also hold a mirror up to us let see what we could become if we let are primitive impulses control us.

One of the most significant aspects of the human experience is suffering and no one knows that as well as the superhero Daredevil. Daredevil also known as Matt Murdock is a lawyer who was blinded as a child. He swore to protect those who needed it, whether it be in the courtroom or on the street. Over the years he would have to overcome several obstacles whether it be a disability, depression, or loss he still manages to get back up. As a child he grew up in Hell's Kitchen with a single father who worked as a boxer. His father not wanting him to end up like a nobody like himself pushed Matt to study and make something of himself. This alienated him from other children as he always stayed in and studied. He was given the nickname "Daredevil" as a sarcastic nickname. As he got older, he saved an elderly man from traffic. However, some chemical substances got into his eyes during this conflict and left him blind. All of the progress he had made throughout his life was gone and he now had to rebuild himself from the ground up. There were some advantages though, despite being blind his other senses had become amplified. This was a cause for criticism as many readers and advocates did not see him as authentic representation of people with disabilities. Since he essentially had superpowers, it made his struggles with his blindness essentially unimportant. However, that was not the case as he did not immediately overcome his disability. Since all of his senses were amplified, he was experiencing constant sensory overload. "Yes, it courses through his blood. It changed him. His blood. It burns... It gushes through high power hoses and slams against the base of his skull. Everything hurts. He doesn't know where he is. Sandpaper scrapes his skin every time he moves... no.. not sandpaper_sheets_starched sheets_and the smells_chemical smells. Disinfectants. Hospital, he thinks I'm in a hospital. People come and go, smelling like bathtubs full of sweat_like eaten food_like Italian sauces and half-digested eggs_They stab him with needles and fill him full of drugs, but Drugs don't fool him. He knows they cut his face.

Everything Hurts. All he wants is to die” (Daredevil: The Man Without Fear Issue 1). Eventually he starts to gain some improvement with help from his mentor Stick who teaches him how to master his senses and martial arts.

This training did not come easy as Stick proved to be a strict and merciless trainer. Even though Matt struggled Stick refused to go easy on him and pushed him to his limits. To accomplish this, he taught Matt how to utilize all of his senses to compensate for his lack of sight. It eventually got to the point that Matt was able to become aware of his surroundings by feeling abstract sensations like air. “The air’s filling the room. One wall’s closer than the other. Feel it” (Daredevil: The Man Without Fear Issue 1). Eventually it got to the point that his other senses became superhuman, his hearing being particularly strong. This can be seen in his remarkable ability to tell if someone’s lying just by listening to the speed of their heartbeat. “I can taste__ smell_hear_in ways people couldn’t even imagine. They also couldn’t imagine that under this two-thousand-dollar suit is the uniform of a man the city knows as Daredevil_The Man Without Fear. And because of these abilities. I know how they will vote before it even happens” (Daredevil Issue 26). Even though he once felt powerless from his disability with years of training and conditioning he managed to turn it into something empowering. However, it is important to empathize that there are still moments where he experiences limitations with his disability. This can often be seen in the way that he can experience sensory overload. If there is a lot of noise in his proximity it incapacitates him. “The subway smell’s making my eyes water. That smell_That_control it. You’re training. Stick” (Daredevil Issue 26). Even though Daredevil is powerful there are often moments where his struggles with being blind do become apparent.

Unfortunately, Matt’s father Jack was in debt to the Mafia in Hell’s Kitchen, and they kept him under their thumb by having him do favors for them. They also ensured that he would

win fights by having them fixed. However, Jack rebuffed them refusing to take a dive as he wanted Matt to look up to him just once. This led to Jack tragically getting murdered by them. This death was devastating for Matt and only motivated him further. He eventually graduated from college and started his career as a lawyer. As time passed, he quickly becomes disillusioned with his career as a lawyer, feeling like he could do so much more. “And Matt remembers why he wanted to become an attorney. To fight for justice. To fight the bullies” (Daredevil: The Man Without Fear Issue 4). Realizing he can’t be inactive; he moves back to Hell’s Kitchen and starts his own law firm. Since the criminal activity is so severe, he realizes that the law can only go so far and becomes the vigilante known as “Daredevil”.

In regards the comic book genre, this is only the tip of the iceberg. There are so many other characters and worlds that I could have broken down. The main goal of this essay was to raise more awareness for a medium that does not get a lot of attention, and if anyone comes out of this essay wanting to explore the comic book world then I know this essay was a success.

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With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility.

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