

OF MAN AND HERO: WHERE DOES SUPERMAN FIT IN?

Christopher Garry

509 S 53rd Pl

Renton, WA 98055

(206) 779-2632

ctgarry@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Like many words, the concept of hero is undergoing the typical refinement that dynamic societies can impose on language. Several decades ago, for example, it was easy for a U. S. president to be termed as a hero--Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower come to mind. Yet it's difficult to name our modern presidents as heroes. It's been said that in the fifties, men and women were made heroes--today heroes are men and women. This change in perception of "hero" is exemplified in some super-hero comic books like the familiar Superman. Where the exact definition of "super-hero" may be unclear, this paper attempts to study the comics as a display of a person with heroic characteristics.

KEYWORDS: *heroism, myth, Washington, Tuchman.*

Introduction

Historian, Barbara Tuchman, is faintly familiar with Superman, yet holds the character afar. (Tuchman 7) She told Bill Moyers that when she attended a Smithsonian Institute conference on the subject of the hero, held on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the first appearance of Superman, she said of the occasion, "I guess I should have realized . . . that what we would discuss would not be exactly my idea of a hero . . . It was quite weird, what they considered a hero." Her point was that it is easy to confuse notoriety with heroism, and Tuchman is on target when decrying newsworthy figures becoming heroes as in incidents like little girls falling down wells, or entertainment stars. However, she is incorrect in implying that Superman is not a hero.

Testimonies have come from all walks of life as to the importance and influence of characters like Superman. Perhaps the most interesting comment of all came from Harlan Ellison. He said, "If one of the unarguable criteria for literary greatness is universal recognition, consider this: In all of the history of literature, there are only five fictional creations known to every man, woman and child on the planet . . . Mickey Mouse, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Robin Hood and Superman." (Dooley 11) The equation of familiarity with greatness does point to popularity as a factor in the modern hero. However the implication is not that these characters are

heroic because they are popular, but that the converse is true. They are popular because they are heroic.

When it comes to the fictional character of Superman, Tuchman displays her unfamiliarity of his origins and true nature. Tuchman was diligent enough to look for the meaning of "hero" in the dictionary and found what she was looking for: "Nobility of purpose." She quoted it at the conference, but, sadly, the notion was rejected as "extraneous." The only conclusion to make is that the conference really wasn't about Superman, for "nobility of purpose" is central to the legend of Superman. She fails then to connect her sensitive understanding of the complexities of heroism with Superman, the quintessential hero, merely because she has never been properly introduced to the character. Would Superman fit in to what she calls a hero?

Tuchman's hero is George Washington; she describes him as "a remarkable man in every aspect of his character, in his courage, in his persistence, and his amazing belief that he was right and that he would prevail in spite of enormous frustrations and difficulties." (Tuchman 8) These are all characteristics which are found in the Superman story now. In recent years, the legend of Superman has changed and molded from the American Hero who goes to war for the Allies (who couldn't be harmed save for a bursting shell) to ridiculously physically invulnerable and

socially immune during the fifties and sixties, to a character who has become more Clark Kent than Superman in the past five years as he realizes the impossibility of being superhuman.² In his becoming more realistic he becomes more of a hero. The reader is ready to see today's Superman on the page and say, "That's Clark, but he's got a special suit on so nobody knows who he really is." Ma and Pa Kent can say, "That's Clark, and no matter what kind of clothes he's wearing, he's our son."

Recently, in a complex, year-long story, the intricacies of the Superman character became more evident when he faced a dilemma of playing judge, jury and executioner of three beings who have maliciously murdered five billion sentient beings, and now threaten to come to Earth. Even as he decides to let the murderers die in a trap, Superman knows that what he does may have horrible implications for someone as powerful as he is. Is he being "protector of the Earth" or playing God by dispensing absolute justice? Despite the genocide of the three criminals, for a year after the incident he cannot reconcile his guilt over allowing the three to die. He is literally driven insane for a time experiencing split personality and paranoia. Life for him is not just choosing between simple opposites-- it isn't just Truth, Justice and the American Way. He thought he was right. He did the most moral thing he could do in preventing further deaths and it nearly destroyed him.

Another example of the human side of heroism becomes evident as Clark deals with his mortality. Through the years the possibility that Clark would live forever has titillated and haunted him. Living forever would mean having to see everyone in his life grow old and die. Yet, over the years he has discovered that his kind is neither invincible nor infallible. Perhaps the most terrible moment for him was when his cousin, Kara (Supergirl), died in his arms after a terrible battle to save millions of lives. In agonized tears, he realized his own mortality and isolation, as, once again, he remained the only known Kryptonian. In his mind a war of frustration wages between the desire to do the right thing and the desire for vengeance against her murderer. It is clear that Clark, as himself or as Superman, is just as human as the rest of us, in the complexity of character, in personal vulnerability and tenderness.

John Glenn, Senator and former astronaut, says, "Although a comic book figure, . . . for five decades Superman has shown generations of kids what being a hero really means." (Dooley 135) It's obvious that now more than ever, as the Clark/Superman character returns to the vulnerability and humanity that he started with during World War II, he becomes more real.

In the classics the hero is the one we identify with, the hero is the one who experiences the tragedy of real life, which links the idea of "hero" with "tragedy." Classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum says that

tragedy only happens when one tries to live well--caring deeply about the things that you do in your life. She cites a Greek tragedy in which Agamemnon is told by his gods to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of the success of the war that he's about to start on the following day. The daughter's life hangs in balance with the lives of his troops who would die in the battle. Just as Superman's code against killing, and protecting the welfare of the public are deep commitments, so it is in the Greek tragedy, that Agamemnon's commitments to his daughter's life and his obedience to the gods run deeply. For Clark and Agamemnon, commitments come in conflict and the results are tragic. They are both heroes for weighing heavily the choices trying to discover what course to take, just as Tuchman's heroic Washington and the rest of the founding fathers weighed heavily their decisions. As John Adams said after his signing of the Declaration of Independence, "I do not know what will be the outcome of this. We may pay a very high price. But it is certain that posterity will profit from our sacrifice."

It would seem that the meaning of "hero" is one that is dynamic, and personal. It is not immediately obvious to Barbara Tuchman that Superman is a hero, as it was not immediately obvious to me that George Washington was a hero until I began to understand more about his motives and aspirations. The moment which describes Washington best for Tuchman is

his simple act of putting on reading glasses for the first time in front of those who love him--"I have grown gray in your service," he says. It is a moment in which the hero becomes a man. People realize his vulnerability, his great sacrifice and the nobility of his purpose of his career. Heroism is the best qualities that are in all of us,--qualities to which we can all aspire. The perseverance in the face of obstacles--tragedies big and small, as Martha Nussbaum noted--is the heroic in all of us. Superman has these same characteristics, and, therefore, he is a hero.

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Notes

1 There is no doubt that the comic book art form has touched many lives. World Color Press, the printer which handled most of the printing for many of the fifteen or so active comic book publishers in 1985, had four hundred million comic books every year rolling off the press. (Marx 29)

Life in the after-market is a thriving place for comics as well. Comics can actually vary greatly in price--even for ones that are virtually identical in every way. The true cash value of any collectible can only be determined after you have finally traded it away for cash and your prize is gone forever. With this in mind the healthy collector will realize that the "value" in his collectible that he holds over the years has nothing to do with money--it is the joy that can be had in the story and art, and any symbolic meaning that the book may hold. For example, one of my most treasured books is a Mickey Mouse issue which I remember as one of my first comics I ever read when I was very little. Current market: two dollars.

2. One of the unique things about writing in the general medium of serial characters is that real time conflicts with fiction time. This introduces several problems: How do you age your characters? When you have characters that last over sixty years how do you provide a believable continuity? They all 25 years old, yet they have all experienced World War II, Korea, Viet Nam and Iraq. The benefits, on the other hand, are the ability to let a character change and adapt over time. In a landmark move in 1986, DC Publishing began a transition stage in their character development which allowed them to actually wrap up old stories, and let some characters die, or retire. (Among these were Superman who lost his

powers permanently, disappeared from public life, married Lois, and had kids.) The writers then started over with first issues, introducing the characters in a way. Most notable of the changes were the Superman legend: Superman never had a career as Superboy, Lana Lang has known that he has superpowers since they were in high school, Lex Luthor is a corporation business man, Clark is not a wimp, Superman isn't nearly as invulnerable, etc. The changes amount to one realization on the part of the writers: For their characters to be successful in the marketplace, they have to be more real, vulnerable, and down-to-earth.