Comic Books and the Addressing of Social Issues

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Abstract

The question this study asks is what the relationship between comic books and social problems is. The comic books themselves and various articles on the subject matter were analyzed to come to a conclusion. The research found that comics have many instances in which social problems are included in the story line. The problems are addressed by either putting the character in a story dealing directly with the problem, or thought symbolism used during the plot.

INTRODUCTION

Comic books at first glance may seem like something only related to kids and not a viable source of communication. But take into account that ever since their inception in the 1930s, the age of the readers has continued to mature. While in the 1930s comics were mostly read by children, by the 1970s, a majority of the readers were of high school and college age (Berger).

With this rise in reader age comes more important and relevant issues being addressed in these books. Comics at that point became less of a strict fantasy medium and became something capable of relating messages about everything from social issues to dealing with loss of death and even day to day problems such as paying your rent on time. Comic books like X-Men deal with issues of racism through symbolism, while some are more blunt and state the problem outright. Spiderman often deals with day to day problems of real people, such as how he is going to pay his rent, loss of loved ones, and even larger problems such as racism on his local college campus. Characters such as Superman and the Martian Manhunter often deal with feelings of being alone, since they
are the last surviving members of their race. How the heroes and villains of the story deal with it can often have a profound statement about the issue itself. Comics began to grow up with their readers and the subject matter grew with them. The broad range of their demographic actually makes comic books capable of relating messages to far more different age groups than a newspaper or a magazine that has to cater to one particular specialty. Comics have the freedom to address anything while still retaining an interesting story the same way a movie or television show might, however stay more current due to their monthly release without the production lag that the other two media encounter.

**Statement of the Problem**

However this very broad medium that seems to be capable of so much is still to this day not regarded by the mainstream as a viable source for social commentary, much less one that is capable of enacting change. There is a lot of work done to the contrary, and this research is meant to expand and bring together a lot of the point made by other researchers and prove new insights into the importance of the comic book medium.

**Review of the Literature**

More and more research on comic books is being done as time goes on. A classic journal article that almost every source that has been researched has sited was an article titled *Comics and Culture* by Arthur Berger from *The Journal of Pop Culture*. This was one of, if not the, first article to address comics a viable medium. Comic books are a true American art form that started with no respect paid to them. This article argues that comics have to have an effect on culture because it is not possible for people to be
continuously exposed to a form of media and it not have some lasting effect on them. It also states that comics are just as viable and useful source of media as television or books.

This idea is expanded on by a number of additional articles that were found. There were an abundance of articles that focused on one character and how they demonstrated different aspects of American culture and addressed social problems of their time period. The article *Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America* speaks of how Captain America started as a propaganda character during World War II, and eventually evolved into a weapon against such things. His young partner Bucky was killed during his last days during World War II, which causes him to question the senselessness of a war where young people are killed. The article also describes how these social problems were used to grow the character up from the patriot of the 40s to the hero for a new generation of readers.

Another article concentrating on one character was *Spiderman: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition*. This article looks at Spiderman and how the character was effected by what was going on around him in the 60s and how the society helped him to become one of the characters that ushered in a new age in comics. Spiderman was an everyday guy with everyday problems, something not addressed in comics to this point. Most heroes of the time were simply hero and secret identity. Problems such as how they paid the rent or fit in socially were not addressed in any serious manner. This helped Spiderman to identify with a whole other group of readers. He continued to identify with examples of other social problems which contributed greatly to his popularity.
Other articles did not focus on one hero, but tried to look at comics in a broad spectrum. Articles such as *Comic Books and AIDS* take a look at how the industry took on such a serious issue as the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. It speaks on Marvel Comics having the first gay character, although he was never confirmed to be gay and was just implied, and having him contract an “AIDS like” virus that shut down his body’s functions.

The article *What Ever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? A Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero* takes a look at how superheroes are a modern myth in our society and therefore affect us. It talks about how comic book characters are just an extraordinary fictionalized representation of normal society. The article provides examples of many characters and how they relate to everyday situations and problems.

In addition to the journal articles, a few books have been written on the subject. The book *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Society* discuss many of the issues that are talked about in the journal articles, but expand to include some fresh insights. This book takes a look at how some of these characters are so easy to relate to while still having their extraordinary abilities.

The essays included in *Comics and Ideology* include an essay on Wonder Woman and compare her to an immigrant in a new country and what it must be like to adapt to the new culture and its customs. It examines the melting pot philosophy and how one may lose their cultural identity while assimilating into American culture.

Finally, the book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of the Youth Culture in America* take a look at how superheroes questioned authority in a lot of cases and took on
subjects like racism and politics. It provides examples of comics that have mirrored events in history and gave their own commentary on the situation.

In addition to scholarly sources of research, there are some comics that need to be cited as they are important in illustrating the main point of this research. In *Iron Man 128*, the hero is confronted with the fact he is an alcoholic. This is a milestone in comics because it is one of the first times a hero is shown to have an addiction himself instead of trying to help someone fight their own. Another similar book that deals with this issue is *Green Lantern/ Green Arrow 85*. In this issue it is revealed that Green Arrow’s ward and sidekick speedy is a heroin addict. Finally Issues 96 through 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* were the first mainstream comics to challenge the comics code. This was because the story in the issues was one depicting the negative effects of drugs. The code did not allow the depiction of any drugs in comics, but the comics writer Stan Lee and it’s publisher Marvel Comics felt this was an important enough issue and ran it without the code approval stamp on the comics.

*The Punisher: Born* applies a realistic war tale to the origin of the Punisher. It attempts to show the horrors of the Vietnam war using a recognizable character. This is very much like the Marvel book *The ‘Nam* did in the 1980s.

**Rationale for the Hypothesis**

My hypothesis is that comic books are a valid source for identifying and bringing social problems into the light. Possibly even more so than a lot of forms of media due the extremely broad demographic that comic books have. Many social problems have been addressed in comic and have been given much publicity. Also, seeing as though most
people have been exposed to comics in one way or another, it seems illogical that someone exposed to a form of media over many years could not take away in the very least some basic knowledge of the problem (Burger). Issues such as drug addiction, spousal abuse, alcoholism, loss of family and friends, sexual orientation, and many more have been brought up and addressed in comic books. Many times a message about the addiction in the positive is delivered sometimes with a victory and sometimes with a loss. Either way comics help show that sometimes even those with extraordinary powers are capable of committing the most human acts, or can be effected by them just as everyone else can.

**Method**

The sample was restricted to superhero comics in order to maintain a reasonable scope. Comics are an enormous medium and have many layers and types. Also, in addition to restricting the research sample to superheroes, the sample was restricted to the better known in that genre. In other words the flagship characters of the 2 biggest companies, Marvel and DC Comics.

After the base for the sample of the source material was established, previous research on comics was gathered, especially that with which the relationship between comics and certain social problems were addressed or examined. Main points were examined and research on the source material of the articles was gathered to the best of the ability of the researcher. The source materials for the main research question, the comics themselves, were then examined. Issues of the comics that the previous research examined and were available
were gathered and read. For comics that were not available, plot synopses were located if possible. The difficulty was in obtaining issues of the actual comic books that were expensive to buy and not available in other formats. Since comics are considered a collectable, not all comics can be easily handled or viewed. All comics and synopses were then read with the additional ideas of the journal articles and essays in mind. Conclusions were drawn based on that information.

**Results**

The comics and research demonstrated that comics address social issues in a variety of ways. Some of the comics examined seemed to put the problem in the forefront and others relied on metaphors to get their points across. Many characters were also changed with the times to reflect what was going on during the time period. Ideologies of characters were changed completely in some cases. Some of the books used fantasy aspects to fictionalize real life events and goings on. The AIDS epidemic was addressed in this way.

Many familiar characters were observed as being put into awkward situations in which they were faced with a problem and tried to deal with it as morally as possible. The authors of the books seemed to always make the hero take the moral route. In some cases it was more of a gray area as demonstrated by Professor Xavier and Magneto, in the *X-Men* books. While their goals were similar, their means were exact opposites. Magneto seemed to favor violence, where Xavier favored peace.

Most of the characters were also observed as having their origins based in social problems. Batman, Spider-Man, The Punisher, and many others faced the loss of a loved
one through crime which leads them down the road they were on. Magneto was a member of a concentration camp during World War II, which becomes a large reasoning for his view on the human race.

**Discussion**

Comics do define and deal with social problems in a variety of ways. The heroes can be put into situations that they don’t always know how to, or in some cases if, they should deal with it. The heroes always try to keep true to the norms that govern what society considers moral when they confront these issues.

Many of the issues discussed directly effect the heroes. Issues such as Iron Man’s addiction to alcohol, Spider-Man’s friend’s drug addiction or Green Arrow’s ward becoming addicted to drugs, or other issues like poverty, crime and war, almost all heroes are touched in some way by social problems. A lot of the heroes that were examined in this study have origins based in crime. Batman, The Punisher, Spider-Man and a variety of other heroes all have dealt with violent pasts which have caused them to take up their crusade.

Captain America is another example of how social problems can be reflected in comics. The idea of what he stood for has always remained the same, however his ideology changed with the times to reflect what was considered the “good fight.” When in the 1940s he was fighting tyranny against the Nazis he stood for freedom from oppression. However in the 1960s when the character was revived, he stood against warfare, due to the loss of his young partner during World War II (MacDonald).
Spider-Man’s poverty was an issue that Stan Lee cited as a reason for the character’s popularity. Most of the heroes of his time were wealthy and did not deal with the threat of being evicted or how they were going to pay their bills (Mondello). Due to loosing his family to a shooting, he was left alone with his elderly aunt to raise him. Their income was minimal and they had little money. Spider-Man was the first character to have real issues like poverty to deal with.

While some of the issues are addressed outright by putting the characters in the actual situations, some are less blunt with their statements. Comics like X-Men deal with themes such as racism and bigotry without using race as the issue. The characters in the books are mutants, which society views as freaks and people to look down on. Stories in these books range from having violence and hate crimes committed against mutants to them being oppressed by the government. The parallels between this and the struggles with race and sexual orientation that people face in the real world cannot be denied. Martin Luther King, Jr. has often been cited as an influence when writers write his character due to his peaceful stance on the issues. He tried to fight through diplomacy and peace rather than militant action. While the end goal was the same for Xavier and his nemesis, Magneto, were the same, the means they employed were very different. Xavier with his ideology of peace tried to gain mutant rights through politics, where as Magneto tired violence and terrorism.

**Conclusion**

Through these few examples it has been demonstrated that comics are a valid medium that can communicate social issues to far more people than any other medium.
Superheroes can use their appeal to all demographics and deal with these important issues. As Arthur Berger said, it is unlikely that someone would be exposed to a medium for such a long period of time, or from childhood to adulthood, without taking away at least a very general understanding of the problem. If this holds true, it would seem that comics have a more powerful influence than any other form of printed media.

Comics are getting more adult as time goes on. The issues they cover are becoming more and more relevant due to the rising age of the average reader. The results of this research may become more and more obvious as time goes on. Comics may even one day be recognized as the valid form of media that they are, possibly like modern literature.
Works Cited


