ARCHETYPES OF CHANGE:
THE EVOLVING COMIC BOOK AND ITS HEROES

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An exhibit curated by Charlie Espinosa ‘15 with help from Shahzeen Nasim ‘16 and Nate Rehm-Daly ‘16

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Sharpless Gallery
Magill Library
Haverford College

http://ds.haverford.edu/comics
The content and reputation of comic books has changed radically in the last few decades. A form once commonly considered juvenile entertainment has garnered an enviable literary reputation, hence the respect afforded the “graphic novel,” the now well-established term for comics in book format. Despite becoming a respected literary form, the comic book medium offers readers something distinct from traditional literature or film. The cohabitation of image and word within the same “panel” and page, along with the sequential movement of panels, creates a unique artistic mode. Moreover, the larger-than-life heroes of comics amplify our cultural desires and identities in ways that make them especially useful windows into our collective psyche.

This exhibit features, though not exclusively, superhero comics as a lens to examine changing depictions of heroism in the 1980s. Superhero narratives have long been likened to modern-day myths, whose archetypal heroes and narratives reflect collective values and aspirations. However, the double identities of comic book superheroes distinguish these heroes from their prototypes in traditional myth. These double identities allow them to embody collective fantasies while also transcending the impotence and banality of modern experience (Eco 14). Furthermore, while the protagonists of classic myth follow a definitive storyline with an inexorable destiny, superheroes—and their ideals, adversaries, and social orders—are mutable, continually being reinvented according to collective demands and the creative choices of new artists. This narrative dynamism and capacity for transformation constitutes the central focus of this exhibit. Drawn from Haverford College’s student-run comic book collection, the exhibit traces depictions of the heroic in comics throughout the 1980s—the source of the largest part of the collection—delineating their debts to earlier comic-book heroes, but primarily focusing on the birth of new aesthetic/narrative forms and the ways in which these forms reflected, criticized, and affected the socio-political realities of their time.

To illustrate the diverse transformations of the comic-book hero during this period, the exhibit draws on literary critic Northrop Frye’s “Theory of Myths” in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, which suggests that societies move cyclically through different narrative modes in accord with historical developments within those societies. He describes four archetypal forms of narrative—romance, tragedy, irony/satire, comedy—and identifies each with one of the four seasons, a metaphor that expresses the character of the different narrative modes and the way that they transition from one into another. This exhibit employs Frye’s four mythoi/seasons in order to understand the evolving heroic archetypes as they appeared in comic books throughout the 1980s. Beginning in summer with the traditional, romantic superhero archetype, the exhibit then moves through autumn and winter, which depict the etiolation, subversion, and perversion of this traditional hero. Finally, the exhibit examines spring, characterized by a flexible heroic identity, discordant societal plurality, and new modes of aesthetic representation. Though it moves somewhat chronologically, the exhibit does not suggest a singular or definitive progression in the medium’s history, but rather uses Frye’s work as a creative mode of curation, which—like the comic books themselves—favors visual metaphor and a sequential logic.
The exhibit begins with summer’s romantic hero, a static and pure character with superior abilities, who defends dominant society from an outside threat. Boundaries between good and evil are well defined, society’s prevailing values are upheld, and societal harmony is restored by the story’s conclusion.

Throughout most of comics’ Golden and Silver ages, which span from the genesis of the superhero in 1938 until the 1970s, the superhero more or less exhibited the characteristics of the romantic hero, serving as a symbol of traditional American values and ideas of utopia. During World War II, the superhero established itself as a reassuring symbol of the American way, as embodied by the soaring popularity of Captain America and similarly patriotic figures. This association was further solidified in 1954 when publishers formed the Comics Code Authority, which required all mainstream comics to conform to dominant American values, reinforcing the hegemonic norms of traditional superhero comics (Anderson 59).

Comics always depict a particular, limited worldview, and the romantic hero makes visible the values implied by this worldview through an idealized, easily digested aesthetic of bright colors, primary shapes, and robust figures. Although many titles in the 1980s diverged from this traditional depiction, the romantic style remained prevalent, particularly in traditional heroes such as Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Superman, highlighting their role as enduring American myths.

Wonder Woman’s character blends Greek myth with American iconography, implying a unity between sacred virtue and the American way.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
CAPTAIN AMERICA V1 #273 (SEPT. 1982), MARVEL COMICS.
Captain America violently champions American values against a group of terrorists.
--they're up to no good!

KRA-SH!

Hurry, fool! Attach the lift band!

Then slay Captain America--and the rest of our enemies!
Autumn: The Tragic Hero

Autumn, by contrast, corresponds to tragedy and focuses on the isolation of the hero rather than a threat to that hero’s society. The tragic hero is typically someone superior in degree to other human beings, as in a god or superhero, but one with a flaw or imperfection that leads him or her toward an inevitable decline. Tragedy stresses the limitations of the hero’s power and the supremacy of fate.

The autumn hero appeared in comics in the early 1980s when cartoonists began to challenge romantic norms and experiment with darker, tragic narratives. Stories blurred the lines between good and highlighted the fallibility, suffering, and decline of the hero. Artists redrew the bright and glamorized world of the superhero in a “grim and gritty” aesthetic, a style notably pioneered in 1981 by Frank Miller, whose contributions to Daredevil depict a noir-style New York City, characterized by an assortment of shadows, sewers, steam, and bricks.

These new narrative styles were in many ways a reflection of the period’s widespread feelings of cynicism and impotency, which surfaced after three decades of Cold War experience (Costello 161). Utilizing the popular reputation of superheroes, artists invited readers to question the virtue of the superhero archetype as well as the centralized power and traditional values it symbolized. The first work to thoroughly problematize the connection between the superhero and absolute power was Alan Moore’s Marvelman in 1982 (later changed to Miracleman in order to avoid trademark disputes with Marvel Comics), whose hero uses his god-like powers to impose his utopian vision on earth, which rapidly devolves into an oppressive, totalitarian regime. Moore thus criticizes both the foundations of the superhero genre and the notion of an all-powerful governing force.
Mike Baron’s Nexus depicts a superhero plagued with feelings of isolation and impotence who is forced by an alien called “The Merk” to fight for justice.

Alan Moore’s Miracleman is an omnipotent but isolated and tortured figure wracked with doubt over the virtue of his crusade for societal perfection.
If the romantic hero of summer is pure, selfless, and superior in character to the reader, the hero of winter represents its opposite—inferior, pitiable, comical, and absurd. Encompassing the modes of irony and satire, the winter hero is best described as a parody or intentional perversion of the traditional hero.

Beginning in the early 1980s, a number of alternative comics depicted such perverted and exaggerated heroes as a means of exposing the problematic components of the superhero and the fantasies that they breed. The ironic hero, exemplified by the autobiographical comics of Harvey Pekar, is an ordinary, often pathetic figure, victim to the woes and isolation of society. These works intentionally opposed the heroic fantasies of superhero comics through their quotidian, confessional narratives.

The satirical hero also comically undermined the notion of the romantic hero but did so by appropriating the iconography and settings of the traditional superhero. For example, Chris Ware’s “Thrilling Adventure Stories” sustains two parallel narratives, one of a classic superhero adventure told through images and the other of unsettling childhood experiences told through the text, criticizing the genre’s tradition of escapism and oversimplification. Responding to Cold War policies and revamped American idealism, these works made explicit the ways that dominant political and cultural ideologies are encoded in the visual idioms and narrative conventions of superheroes (Tensuan 419).
Chris Ware’s “Thrilling Adventure Stories” critiques the escapism and oversimplifications of the superhero genre by sustaining two parallel narratives, one of a classic superhero adventure told through images and the other of unsettling childhood experiences told through the verbal text.
Whereas the conflicts inherent in romantic narrative are resolved when the original order of society is restored, comedy represents a transformation, the movement of one kind of order towards the birth of a new one. The status quo at the beginning of the story is generally characterized by some arbitrary law and older order, often a “sham utopia,” while the newly transformed society stresses greater freedom and flexibility (Frye 169). The hero in comedy is an evolution of the ironic mode’s pitiful hero into a figure imbued with more of the mythic importance associated with the romantic hero.

Skeptical attitudes toward old-fashioned notions of truth and order embodied by traditional American superheroes gave birth to new heroic stories and narrative forms that celebrated the diversity of modern experience. Heroes diverged from the hegemonic identities of the traditional superhero, inscribing alternative subjectivities into the archetype. A number of works depicted heroes with new sexual, racial, and gender identities, particularly DC’s *Milestone* and *Vertigo* imprints. Artists also re-imagined the traditional privileging of human civilization over the natural world by creating the ecological superhero. The character of Black Orchid, for example, debuted in 1973 but was relaunched in the late 1980s by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean as a human-plant hybrid who combats the polluting tendencies of human industry. In accordance with these new values, many works abandoned the robust figures and sharply defined shapes of traditional superhero comics in favor of more dynamic and expressive forms.

**BLACK ORCHID V1 #3 (1989), DC COMICS.**

*In a highly experimental technique at the time, artist Dave McKean uses watercolors to convey Black Orchid’s eco-infused viewpoint.*

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**

*DOOM PATROL V2 #54 (APR. 1992), DC COMICS.* The superhero originally known as Negative Man from the series *Doom Patrol* was revised in the late 1980s to be a hybrid of the original white male hero and his black female physician, Dr. Eleanor Poole, who combine to form the divine hermaphrodite, Rebis.
THREEPARTSCOMBINED.

TWOSEXES.

ONEPURPOSE.
Comics and traditional myth alike often function as reifications of specific values and convey a particular worldview. If the comic book hero is popularly viewed as an embodiment of collective beliefs and fantasies, then it also serves as an ideal vehicle for the criticism, subversion, and transformation of those beliefs.

This narrative dynamism demonstrates an underlying characteristic of comics, particularly in the superhero genre. The 1980s Cold War era brought about social and intellectual shifts which cast doubt on the very possibility of formulating a satisfactory, all-encompassing order, an order associated with the omnipotent figure of the traditional superhero. However, in the superhero universe there is no absolute conceptual center or definite storyline but rather a conglomeration of continuously changing and multiplying narratives that are always subject to manipulation. The diverse ways in which superheroes and their iconography were transformed during the 1980s are a testament to this capacity as well as an affirmation of the redemptive mutability of the American cultural space.

Static was one of several titles published by Milestone Comics, a company established in 1993 by a coalition of African-American artists seeking to inscribe new minority identities into the white-dominated tradition of superheroes. The title hero gains electromagnetic powers after being exposed to an experimental chemical during a gang fight.


CONTRIBUTORS

CURATORS

Charlie Espinosa ’15, Curator
Charlie is an anthropology major and environmental studies minor from Charlottesville, Virginia. In his academic work, he has focused on modes of popular culture, writing his senior thesis on digital and linguistic phenomena surrounding contemporary hip hop music. He loves to hike, explore, and read. Charlie spent the summer of 2014 in Magill Library’s comic book collection researching for and designing this exhibit.

Shahzeen Nasim ’16, Co-curator
Shahzeen was born in Pakistan and grew up in California. She is a senior English major, writing her thesis on autobiographical performance in James Baldwin’s No Name in the Street. She hopes to one day be fluent in Arabic and Persian. Shahzeen oversaw the design and production of the interactive components of the exhibit.

Nate Rehm-Daly ’16, Co-curator
Nate is a junior from New York City majoring in fine arts and classical studies. He is interested in digital media and design and is a big comics fan. Nate took primary responsibility for the exhibit website and assisted with other interactive components of it.

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–Charlie Espinosa