The superhero gothic: The montrous hero to the heroic monster in the twentieth century.

John Darowski

University of Louisville

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/4339
THE SUPERHERO GOTHIC:
THE MONSTROUS HERO TO THE HEROIC MONSTER IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

John Darowski
B.A, Brigham Young University, 2004
M.A, Brigham Young University, 2007

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2024
THE SUPERHERO GOTHIC
THE MONSTROUS HERO TO THE HEROIC MONSTER IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

John Darowski
B.A., Brigham Young University, 2004
M.A., Brigham Young University, 2007

A Dissertation Approved on

March 8, 2024

By the following Dissertation Committee

_________________________
Dissertation Chair
Dawn Heinecken

_________________________
Committee member
Ranen Omer-Sherman

_________________________
Committee member
Benjamin Hufbauer

_________________________
Committee member
Gary Hoppenstand

ii
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their love, patience, and support.

And to my parents, Joe and Kay Darowski, for nurturing my love of comic books and popular culture.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee of Dr. Dawn Heinecken, Dr. Ranen Omer-Sherman, Dr. Benjamin Hufbauer, and Dr. Gary Hoppenstand, for their keen insight, guidance, and patience over the course of writing my dissertation. I would also like to thank Dr. Kerry Soper, Dr. Carl Sederholm, and Dr. Charlotte Standford for introducing me to comic book studies and Gothic studies. Many thanks to Dr. Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, the Comics and Comics Art Area of the Popular Culture Association, and the many contributors to my edited works; they don’t know how much their work and support helped me believe in myself over the course of the research and writing process. And lastly to my family and parents; I would not have gotten through this without them.
ABSTRACT

THE SUPERHERO GOTHIC: THE MONSTER HERO TO THE HEROIC MONSTER IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

John Darowski
26 April 2024

The influence of Gothic literature and its adaptations on the superhero genre has been profound. Both genres have an ideological project of the restoration of normalcy and order after disruption and disorder, thereby reinforcing cultural norms. However, their themes and methodologies are diametrically opposed. The Gothic is an exploration of the negative aesthetics of terror and horror, which reveal human weaknesses. The superhero is a power fantasy that celebrates justice and morality. A synthesis of the two creates a paradox: the monstrous hero—a Hoppen stand hero who takes on the attributes of a monster—who evolves into the heroic monster—a monster who is a hero. The monster is an embodiment of cultural anxieties which are traditionally sublimated through negation by the monster’s defeat. The heroic monster instead sublimates fears through heroism, becoming a site of cultural negotiation where what is once othered and different moves towards becoming legitimized as acceptable by American society.

The methodology applies comic book studies and Gothic studies filtered through adaptation studies and new historicism. The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The introduction establishes the intersectionality of the Gothic and the superhero through adaptation studies on a genre level. Chapters 1 and 2 are divided between an analysis of
the key conventions of each genre and their respective histories. Chapter 1 examines how the negative aesthetics of terror and horror are achieved through the sublime, the uncanny, the fantastic, and the abject and then applying them to the history of British and American Gothic to demonstrate how monsters embody cultural anxieties. Chapter 2 lays out the conventions of the superhero (costume, code name, secret identity, powers, and heroic ongoing mission) and the historical ages of superheroes. Chapter 3 consists of close readings of Batman, the Incredible Hulk, Ghost Rider, and Hellboy, with particular attention to their origins, across the twentieth century. The conclusion offers a glimpse into how the superhero Gothic has continued into the twenty-first century. The arc of the superhero Gothic reveals the redeeming values of terror and horror as vehicles of individual and social catharsis and of processing social change.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................iv
Abstract.................................................................................................................................v
List of Figures...........................................................................................................................vii
Note........................................................................................................................................ix

Introduction..............................................................................................................................1

Chapter One—The Gothic: Conventions and History.........................................................16
  Gothic Conventions..............................................................................................................19
  A History of the Gothic.........................................................................................................40

Chapter Two—The Superhero: Conventions and History.....................................................67
  Superhero Conventions........................................................................................................72
  A History of the Superhero....................................................................................................83

Chapter Three—The Superhero Gothic: The Monster-Hero to the Hero-Monster…105
  The Golden Age—Batman.................................................................................................108
  The Silver Age—The Incredible Hulk................................................................................134
  The Bronze Age—Ghost Rider............................................................................................159
  The Dark Age—Hellboy.......................................................................................................179

Conclusion—The Superhero Gothic in the Twenty-First Century........................................195

Endnotes................................................................................................................................203

References..............................................................................................................................227

Curriculum Vita......................................................................................................................254
LIST OF FIGURES

1. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog)* by Caspar David Friedrich………………………………………………………………..24

2. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* by Thomas Cole………………………………………………………………..30
NOTE

The dates attached to the comic books will be the cover date. The cover date initially referred to when an issue should be taken off the newsstand and returned to the publisher. The discrepancy between the cover date and the actual publication can range from one to four months depending on the publisher and market practices. As such, it is often easier to track the cover date than publication date and will be done so here.

The writer and penciler will be cited in text as the comic book creators. This is for the sake of simplicity and not meant to exclude all others who contributed to the creation of each issue. A list of all contributors can be found in the related bibliographical entry, where their roles will be identified as writer (w), penciler (p), artist (a), inker (i), colorist (c), and letterer (l).
INTRODUCTION

The United States is a nation of contradictions. It possesses both the optimism of the American dream and the pessimism of a frequently violent national nightmare. Its Romantic mythology is a utopian vision founded on Enlightenment liberty and Puritan values. But this idealized self-image was built on slavery, has been popularized through entire industries devoted to leisure and entertainment, and is haunted by apocalyptic anxieties. As Mark Edmundson states in *Nightmare on Main Street* (1997): “A nation of ideals, America has also been, not surprisingly, a nation of hard disillusionment, with a fiercely reactive Gothic imagination. Ours is a culture that produced both ‘Self-Reliance’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (5).¹ Or, to put it another way, ours is a culture that has produced both Superman and Batman.

Superman (Clark Kent) and Batman (Bruce Wayne) form the twin poles between which the nascent superhero genre was defined in the late 1930s. Batman, first appearing in *Detective Comics* #27 (cover date May 1939), was the first hero created in reaction to and in contrast of the primogenitor Superman, who first appeared a year earlier in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938).² A Gothic hero following a science fiction one may have been inevitable. In *Matters of Gravity* (2003), culture theorist Scott Bukatman explains: “Terry Castle has argued that the rise of the Enlightenment was inevitably accompanied ‘like a toxic side effect’ by its uncanny underside, and it is indeed striking how quickly the nocturnal gothic figure of Batman followed the vivid blur of Superman on the world
stage” (205). That the Gothic follows science fiction like a shadow isn’t merely because one appears to be the inverse of the other; science fiction as rational whereas the Gothic is irrational. Rather, they share a symbiotic relationship which reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). And it is a symbiosis which has helped fuel the popularity of the superhero genre from Superman and Batman on.

The combination of superheroes and the Gothic is peculiar because the genres appear to be at odds in tone and purpose. The former is a wish-fulfillment fantasy of power and hope while the latter deals in the emotions of terror and helplessness. Writing about Hellboy, comic book critic Stephen Weiner explains this contrast: “*Hellboy* intricately blends the horror tale, in which the forces of darkness appear to be unstoppable, with the hero tale, in which the disorder is set right by one willful protagonist” (12). A synthesis of the two genres creates a paradox: the monstrous hero—a hero who takes on attributes of a monster—or the heroic monster—a monster who is a hero—who protects social order by using darkness and fear as a weapon for good. Yet that inherent contradiction may be part of the innate appeal of characters like Batman, the Incredible Hulk (Bruce Banner), Ghost Rider (Johnny Blaze), and Hellboy, to name a few. Such characters’ personal narratives and visual codes combine conventions from each genre. As a superhero they protect systems of ideological status quo but as a Gothic hero they are also independent from said systems, expressing too much rugged individualism (such characters frequently do not work well on teams). On the spectrum of heroes and villains, the superhero Gothic exist in the grey area between vigilante-outlaw, whose individualistic actions are considered heroic as they benefit society, and the anti-hero, morally-flawed protagonists who utilize transgressive violence to achieve
their personal aims, which mark them as willing outsiders even when their actions still
serve the community. I use the term superhero Gothic rather than the descriptor Gothic
superhero because it implies a mode of reading the comic book narratives. A Gothic
superhero must always be Gothic in character and narrative. The superhero Gothic
involves reading for Gothic tropes and influences in the overall oeuvre of the superhero
genre.

In the twenty-first century, Gothic and comic book scholars have expanded their
studies into intertextuality, including the intersection between Gothic literature and comic
books. However, Gothic and horror scholarship has tended to focus on horror comic
books. Though there have been inroads towards examining the Gothic and superheroes
together, there has not yet been an in-depth study of the influence of the Gothic on
superheroes despite the superhero Gothic being a foundational hybrid genre beginning
with Batman. Monstrosity, an aspect of the Gothic, is an index of the concerns and
anxieties which are threatening to the cultural hegemony, which is identified as normal,
and is embodied through difference. What is considered monstrous changes as aspects of
Otherness become accepted. Superhero comic books, with their constant publication
across eighty-five years, serves a peculiar text reflecting how social values transform
over time. The superhero Gothic documents the transition from the superhero as
representative of the hegemony and policing Otherness in the form of supervillain
grotesques in Batman in the 1940s through the ambiguous heroism of the Other in the
Incredible Hulk and Ghost Rider in the 1960s-80s to the heroic monster in Hellboy in the
1990s. Analyzing the superhero Gothic as a subgenre will examine the development of
the monster-hero into the hero-monster as a response to the evolving American attitude of acceptance towards difference and Otherness.

Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov states in *The Fantastic* (1970): “failing to recognize the existence of genres is equivalent to claiming that a literary work does not bear any relationship to already existing works. Genres are precisely those relay points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature” (8). When inventing the superhero genre in the late 1930s, comic book creators drew inspiration from everything which had come before in popular culture. They mixed the tropes and conventions from diverse genres including detective fiction, war stories, adventure, Westerns, romance, science fiction, fantasy, etc. And, to borrow from Umberto Eco, most importantly “everything they chose came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time” (qtd. in Collins 169). Superheroes became a melting pot of genre, subsuming and homogenizing everything that went into it.

In order to study the superhero Gothic, it is necessary to understand how the superhero mines the Gothic through the process of adaptation. Rather than an adaptation from text to text, a broader perspective examines the movement from genre to genre. A genre is a narrative formula built on a taxonomy of set conventions—character types, settings, narrative patterns, themes, and visuals—and historically-stable shared characteristics which stand apart from other genres. Said conventions and characteristics must be imitable with variation and can only be considered stable when there is a critical mass of such stories. Genres are established as a tradition which accrues over time through a cumulative process of repetition. Once established, the tropes exist in a conceptual space where the elements form constellations of genres as a contract between
producers and consumers (Hutcheon 123). Once a genre is established, it becomes easy to predict. It is precisely because of the fulfillment of expectations that audiences turn towards genre fiction for enjoyment. However, too frequent repetition can cause tropes to become stale clichés. Audiences seek variations on a theme in their generic narratives, being intrigued by the variety while comforted by the familiarity.\(^6\)

The importance of convention and invention in defining a genre can be found by returning to the comparison of Superman and Batman. Comic book creator and historian Jim Steranko explains in his *History of Comics Vol. 1* (1970): “Coincidentally, both Superman and Batman were orphans; both had civilian identities; both wore costumes” (43). This repetition served to codify certain tropes around the burgeoning concept of the superhero. Their deviations can only be appreciated in relation to this model. Steranko continues:

> Batman was, in fact, the opposite of the man of steel, a man of flesh and blood. Superman was a multi-colored one-man circus doing continuous performances at popular prices for the public. Batman was a dark, shadowy loner working outside the law, outside the public eye, ruthless-ly stalking his prey through rain-slick alleyways […] Where Superman’s motivation was one of altruistic benevolence, Batman’s was based on misanthropic vengeance. One summed up the humane qualities that man could have, while the other reflected humanities [sic] relentlessly cold-blooded nature. (43-4)

The differences between Superman and Batman carved out a space for a new genre.

Even though many of the tropes were borrowed, they were arranged in a unique way to create a new constellation of meanings alongside a definitive origin point in literary history.

The necessity of repetition and difference can make demarcating a boundary between genres difficult. In isolating the characteristic elements, conflicting claims of
the general and the specific must be balanced. If a genre is defined by the specific, it may be asked what the absolute minimum number of conventions must be present for a text to belong to a particular genre (Coogan 25). However, such tropes may not be affixed to a specific genre, but shared across many. If so, it may become a case of a hierarchy of elements as to what must be included, what may be included, and what must be excluded. As to the general, one may seek to define the boundaries of a genre. However, as horror author Stephen King explains: “you can draw your own borderlines, if you want—and if you do, you may find that it is a very squiggly border indeed” (16). Such borders are often elastic and frequently overlap, like the intersecting circles of a Venn diagram. Categorizing genre may be further complicated when those ambiguous borders are rendered permeable, allowing texts to belong to more than one genre. This may result in a subgenre with enough tradition and history to claim its own identity while not being autonomous. Or elements may be mixed, resulting in a hybrid genre. In crossing genres, one genre usually remains dominant, but it allows for a blending of elements and themes. In all this mixing and crossing, it may be asked when is a genre able to evolve into its own? It must succeed at being itself by establishing a new paradigm through sufficient repetition (Leitch 16). This answer may seem insubstantial, but defining genre is necessarily subjective.

Categorizing genre may be further complicated when it is not a function of narrative elements as much as it is the aesthetic effect on the audience, as is the case with the Gothic. (The Gothic will be used as an umbrella term to cover its many branches, including gothic, dark Romanticism, terror, horror, and weird tales. But those branches are instructive as they are also adjectives describing the intended emotional effect.) This
is not to say that the Gothic is without its tropes. Many conventions are readily
identifiable, particularly in regards to mise-en-scène: crumbling ruins, haunted houses,
moonless nights, monstrous figures. But these can also be utilized without creating the
requisite atmosphere of dread. There is a mood to the Gothic which defies stable
categorization. It is an extremely mutable genre, transforming itself over the centuries to
address contemporary fears and anxieties (Goddu 5). The Gothic subverts the
expectations of how a genre should function just as Gothic texts so often subvert cultural
narratives.

As the Gothic diffuses its influence across genres, the superhero subsumes it. In
mixing the two genres, the superhero is the primary mode of reading the text. It borrows
from the Gothic through a process of adaptation and appropriation. Adaptation
presupposes a sustained relationship between at least two texts or, in this case, genres.
Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), describes the potential relationship
as: “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; a creative and
an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging; an extended intertextual engagement with
the adapted work” (8; emphasis in original). When adapting from one medium to
another, the dictates of what the medium can and cannot do, such as moving from a novel
to the text and visuals of a comic book, require changes which may alter and even reduce
the complexity of the original. The source text could then be treated as raw material to be
mined for characters and incidents rather than theme and language.

Detached from the source material, characters achieve a mythic life all their own.
Film critic and theorist André Bazin gives an apt example:

Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo simple serve to supply the filmmaker
with characters and adventures largely independent of their literary
framework. Javert or D’Artagnan have become part of a mythology existing outside of the novels. They enjoy an autonomous existence of which the works are no longer anything more than an accidental and superfluous manifestation. (53)

While Bazin speaks of specific texts, the principle may be extrapolated to apply to the components of a genre. Once divorced from its source, the issue of fidelity, that the original text is simply to be reproduced in a different medium or cultural setting, is irrelevant (Hutcheon 7). The text is free to be re-imagined, with the new products both related to and independent from the source. The new text should not be judged on how accurately it reproduces the original but on whether it is good in and of itself. It also means that the characters and conventions become less specific and more abstract.

This is because it is no longer necessary for a reader to have a direct experience with the source text. Instead, the characters and tropes exist in a “generally circulated cultural memory” within the popular consciousness (qtd. in Hutcheon 122). The components become part of recursive complex of adaptations which echo and allude to each other, creating a plurality of potential sources. Such texts exist on the extremes of Thomas Leitch’s strategies of adaptation, as described in his book Film Adaptation and its Discontents (2007). These strategies include: Analogue—invoking the original text in shape by borrowing its formula (114); Pastiche—an extended imitation of a style whose sustained intentional referencing is meant to celebrate rather than parody (Hutcheon 5); Imitation—a continuation of earlier characters, settings, or concepts, often repeating the same narrative formula as the original (Leitch 120); and Allusion—a reference or quotation from an earlier text (121).7 Through these strategies, generic characters and conventions become commodities used by creators and producers for their cultural cache.
A particular interpretation may become equally as influential, if not more so, than the original. An excellent example of this is found in the case of *Frankenstein*. The scene of Victor Frankenstein animating his creation in a laboratory during a lightning storm is iconic. But it only achieved that status through a process of adaptation. Leitch explains: “Mary Shelley’s novel regulates the night when Frankenstein brings his monstrous creation to life to a brief paragraph of summary, but every film adaptation follows the early theatrical adaptations of Richard Brinsley Peake and Henry M. Milner in transforming this episode into a pivotal scene” (208). The image of Frankenstein’s monster with his flat head and bolts on the side of his neck from James Whale’s 1931 film adaptation has become what comic book scholar Christopher Maverick describes as a “truth copy,” the popularly accepted version of fictional narrative (*Sex and the Superman* 39). It is part of our cultural inheritance, referenced in everything from superheroes to breakfast cereal mascots, and inexorably links the name Frankenstein with the monster.

As an adapted commodity multiplies across media it creates a network of texts to be referenced and resourced. Conventions and characters then achieve a virtual existence within a web of intertextuality. Being informed by so many sources approaches media scholar Henry Jenkins’ theory of convergence culture. In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Jenkins describes how content circulates across multiple media platforms and encourages consumers to actively seek out more information and make connections (3, 322). Convergence is an excellent term for this as the interpretations may approach each other but do not have to cohere. The manifold lives of a character like Frankenstein’s monster are all related yet distinct. This creates what adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon
describes as a “palimpsestuous” relationship, wherein one text become a layer through which another is viewed, meaning that multiple texts are experienced at the same time (6). For example, the truth copy of Boris Karloff as the monster in *Frankenstein* has become a filter through which other *Frankenstein* texts, even the original novel, are interpreted. But each person’s experience with the network of texts is different, creating unique sets of connections. Despite the current popularity of superhero films, statistically few viewers also read the related comic book titles, thus creating different individual expectations and experiences.10

This complex of adaptations results in a hybrid canon, a mixture of personal head canon and fundamental aspects of the character and genre.11 Characters become archetypal and certain conventions immutable and no marked deviation is allowed. Dracula must always be a vampire, with his weakness to sunlight and death by a stake through the heart. Bruce Wayne’s parents must always be murdered in an alley, motivating his war on crime as Batman. But in order to maintain relevancy, they need to reflect the realities of the contemporary cultural context. In a movement of proximation, they are relocated in temporal, geographical, and/or social terms to be closer to the audiences’ frame of reference (Sanders 19). As pioneering popular culture theorist Russel B. Nye explains in *The Unembarrassed Muse* (1970): “Popular art confirms the experience of the majority, in contrast to elite art, which tends to explore the new. For this reason, popular art has been an unusually sensitive and accurate reflection of the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it was produced” (4). In an effective adaptation, there needs to be an alchemical mixture of the timeless—the unalterable aspects which allow a character and a genre to endure—and the timely—addressing the
hopes and anxieties which are prevalent in a society. However, in being timely, it may be asked whose attitudes and concerns are being reflected in the work: those of the hegemonic ideology; of the creators who produce it; or of the audience who consumes it? Often, it is a blend of all three (Monnet 98). Popular culture exists at several interstices of mass society.

In order to maintain relevancy, such superhero narratives occur in a temporal and spatial context which is suited to the audience—a mythic present or eternal now. The tension between archetypal stasis and cultural evolution is described by geopolitical scholar Jason Dittmer as “the tyranny of the serial” (252). The serial continuity of the superhero comic book can only offer the illusion of change, building real world events and attitudes into the narrative while leaving the characters fundamentally unchanged. As Umberto Eco describes in his essay “The Myth of Superman” (1962), rather than progressing in an open causal chain of from A to B to C to D etc., like a novel, superheroes are a closed system, moving from A to B to C to D and then back to A (155). Christopher Maverick refers to point A, which is always returned to, as a “mythic gestalt” (“No Tights, No Flights” 159). However, a return to the mythic gestalt is not typically a hard reboot but will carry changes which have accrued to make the characters contemporaneous. Therefore, rather than returning to A prime or A’, it may be said that that characters return to A¹, then A², etc. The ongoing nature of the comic book serial is better suited to alluding to other genres without ever being yoked to the source material, as serialization can never achieve the potent impact of the novel’s conclusion. Yet classic Gothic figures also experience this through the adaptive act of imitation, which continues the stories of Frankenstein’s monster or Dracula into the present day by
ignoring the conclusion of their respective novels. Even when retellings are set in their original temporality, the reinterpretations may suffer from presentism, the projection of modern values into the past. There is a regular vacillation between progressing the characters and conventions to meet the contemporary society’s needs and returning them to their mythic gestalt.

Part of the inescapability of the mythic gestalt is a character’s value as an icon. Iconization is the process through which a character or image evolves from their origin to become imbued with symbolic and ideological connotations (Desbiens-Brassard 28, 30). An icon is a social marker that taps into any number of generic values and typically relies on a visual index. When Captain America (Steve Rogers) shows up in 1940 in a red, white, and blue costume with a white star on the chest and red-and-white vertical stripes around the torso, each element as well as their combination have symbolic meaning that makes him an embodiment of American values. Captain America does not just fight for America; he fights as America. However, Captain America’s costume is built out of preexisting iconography, notably the American flag. Superman’s appearance came without such connotations. His costume was built around the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue; the emphasis on red and blue is emblematic of the American flag without the specificity. His S-shield, originally a triangle rather than an irregular pentagon, began as an empty signifier and accrued meaning over time as a symbol for Superman himself, who only became known for waging “a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way” in 1942. Superman began as a cypher which the creators could imbue with substance while the reader could project meaning onto the character. When the audience interpretation and the creators’ intent intersect, the image
becomes suffused with significance. The iconization within the superhero Gothic draws on gothic symbols: a bat motif; a Frankenstein monster-esque appearance; a burning skeleton; a red-skinned demon. Gothicness is an essential part of these superheroes, imbuing them with pre-established meaning which facilitates their enduring popularity.

Because of the transitory nature of its products, popular culture is a document of society, which itself is always in flux. It is then an artifact of how progress is dealt with. The fear and anxiety over new or challenging ideas are metaphorically embodied in the monsters who exist outside the boundaries of society and threaten its stability. As paradigms shift and cultural borders are redrawn, the roles of such characters change into something more acceptable, even heroic, as a mechanism to help the audience accept the cultural developments. Popular culture functions as a way for a society to evaluate its norms and values, preserving those which are beneficial, adopting the new as they prove valid, and discarding the old as they become obsolete.

The Gothic and the superhero are an excellent resource to study this process because of their near-constant publication and adaptation since their respective inceptions, making them symbolic characters who become part of the shared experience of nearly every member of a society. The Gothic makes use of monster as metaphors to disguise the anxieties and traumas of the human condition and to question cultural narratives. The monster’s defeat not only provides a type of catharsis but signals a reestablishment of societal norms. Supervillains fulfill a similar role, threatening to destabilize society by disrupting its status quo. The superhero, embodying values which are meaningful to the reader, reaffirms those standards by defeating the villain. The contrast between the hero and the villain/monster only allows the virtues to shine more
brightly. That these narratives are fiction allows the characters to function on a symbolic level and work through societal concerns and anxieties from a safe distance.

The kinds of heroes and monsters that become popular and the adventures they are involved in reflect on the dominant values and concerns of a culture. Combining the two into a monster-hero/hero-monster creates a unique friction which reveals much more about how those anxieties are negotiated as they are recognized as both threatening and beneficial. The superhero Gothic focuses on liminal figures who embody both societal values and fears. Batman possesses the mind of the world’s greatest detective, but also dresses like a supernatural bat in order to prey on the fears of criminals, who are “a superstitious and cowardly lot” (Finger and Kane, “Legend: The Batman and How He Came to Be!!” 63). The fusion of contradictory elements into a single character becomes a means of processing change. Representing those values as a heroic outsider is a step in the mechanism of moving what has been feared within cultural boundaries to become accepted.

Superheroes in the Gothic mode are both monstrous and heroic, becoming liminal figures who, as monsters, embody certain contemporary cultural fears and, as heroes, facilitate the negotiation and sublimation of said anxieties, alleviating their threat through heroism. Chapters One and Two will detail the tropes and histories of the Gothic and the superhero, respectively. Where the conventions overlap and interact will establish the functioning components of the superhero Gothic subgenre. An overview of the histories will reveal the significant movements and themes which inform the creation and interpretation of key monsters and heroes. This information will form the groundwork for the close readings of the mythic gestalt of Batman, the Incredible Hulk, Ghost Rider,
and Hellboy in Chapter Three. The study of each character as an amalgamation of the Gothic and the superhero will examine the iconization process and how they become imbued with sometimes contradictory cultural meaning. The development of the superhero Gothic in the United States across the latter half of the twentieth century will trace the development of acceptance towards Otherness as the monster-hero evolves into the hero-monster.
CHAPTER ONE—THE GOTHIC: CONVENTIONS AND HISTORY

When Carl Linnaeus developed his taxonomy to categorize the natural world in the eighteenth century\textsuperscript{14}, he made concessions that there were gaps in human knowledge and that all the world’s flora and fauna were not yet known. In the tenth edition of Systema Naturae (1758), he divided homo sapiens into several subspecies; for those as yet unknown he gave the label homo sapiens monstruosus.\textsuperscript{15} Linnaeus was an inheritor of a millennia-long tradition of teratology, the sub-category of biology that studied fantastic creatures and monsters from Aristotle’s Historia Animalium (4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE) through medieval bestiaries,\textsuperscript{16} and believed that there were separate subspecies of man more monstrous in appearance yet to be discovered. Humanity had always believed monsters existed just beyond the known world, at the edges of the map where here be dragons. Yet as the unknown world was explored, mapped, and categorized, monsters from myth and legend were rarely found. But this did not mean that they disappeared. They merely moved into fiction.

The Gothic is a fiction of monsters and things that make us afraid. Gothic fiction is not limited to literature but encompasses all art, including theater, painting, etching, photography, music, film, television, radio, video games, podcasts, comic books, etc. In embodying fears and anxieties, it is a genre of paradoxes. Noël Carroll sums this up in The Philosophy of Horror (1990) as: “1) how can anyone be frightened by what they know does not exist, and 2) why would anyone be interested in horror, since being
horrified is unpleasant?” (8). The first question requires the reader or audience to create a willing suspension of disbelief. One must project oneself into the story and utilize empathy to feel what the characters are feeling. A kind of cognitive dissonance is necessary for the audience to feel both threatened in the imaginary world and safe in the real world. But it is exactly those sorts of imaginary thrills that leads to the answer to the second question.

The longevity of the Gothic genre implies a beneficial or positive consequence for the audience. Neil Gaiman, in his 2009 Newbery Acceptance Speech for *The Graveyard Book* (2008), describes fiction as an inoculation for reality. Comparing it to building up a tolerance to poison, Gaiman explains: “stories had been a way of learning about life without experiencing it […] Sometimes fiction is a way of coping with the poison of the world in a way that lets us survive it” (22). This goes double for the Gothic as there are real horrors in the world for which one should prepare. Encountering terrors from an aesthetic and metaphorical distance allows one to develop these coping mechanisms. Additionally, peering into the darkness and seeing evil allows one to appreciate the light and recognize the good that exists in the world.

To Carroll’s questions can be added two more: how does the Gothic frighten us, as what is scary is different from one person or culture to the next; and, how has it continued to frighten us, as what is fear-inducing in one era is different in the next? These questions will be answered by first examining how the affects of the sublime, the uncanny, the abject, and the fantastic are achieved and utilized in Gothic fiction to instill terror and horror in an audience through grotesque monsters; and second by exploring how the genre has evolved over the centuries to reflect contemporary anxieties in British
and American cultures, establishing not only those fears and how they are embodied by monsters but key Gothic texts which will influence the superhero Gothic. Understanding the movements of Gothic fiction and its monster-types will inform the creation of the monster-hero and its development into the hero-monster.
GOTHIC CONVENTIONS

*Take*—an old castle, half of it ruinous
A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones
Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
As many skeletons, in chests and presses
An old woman, hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.
Assassins and desperados, *‘quaint stuff’*:
Noises, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.
Mix them together, in the form of three volumes to be taken at any
of the watering places, before going to bed. (qtd. in Groom 77; emphasis
in original)

This recipe for the Gothic novel from the anonymous 1798 essay “Terrorist Novel
Writing” reveals how quickly the genre had moved from an experimental style in 1764 to
a point when the formal structures and thematic messages could be parodied by the end
of that century. Not that Gothic conventions are confined to the above example. In
*Gothic* (2014), Gothic theorist Fred Botting has added to this recipe: “dark subterranean
vaults, decaying abbeys, gloomy forests, jagged mountains and wild scenery inhabited by
bandits, persecuted heroines, orphans and malevolent aristocrats” (41). The ingredients
listed to induce chills in the reader offer insight into the stock characters and setting, but
only imply plot or theme. This is because the Gothic is not built around a narrative
structure but primarily recognized by the affective response it engenders in the audience,
particularly fear and other scarifying emotions. The Gothic pursues a negative aesthetic
of terror, horror, revulsion, and paranoia through sensationalistic and suspenseful
storytelling.

Considering the Gothic’s exploration of fear and other disturbing emotions, it is
intriguing how the genre has been able to endure. On genre, film scholar Thomas Schatz
states: “The narrative formula […] transmits and reinforces that genre’s social message—
its ideological or problem-solving strategy—as directly as possible to the audience” (38).

Analyzing the Gothic’s formula is problematic, however. Even during its golden age, which Gothic scholar Maurice Levy identifies as 1764-1824 (8), the Gothic did not have a set narrative formula. Since then it has diffused and transformed to constantly renew itself to address contemporary innovations and anxieties. It is “a highly unstable genre” that is “pliable and malleable,” as described by Gothic theorist Jerrold E. Hogle (Introduction, The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction 1-2). There are some cliché elements—stock characters and settings, the supernatural—but they are all in service of producing specific emotional affects. In a sense, any fiction that creates terror and horror belongs to the Gothic. But that definition is too broad. One may then turn to the other part of Schatz’s statement—that genre has a social message—and ask what is the purpose of the Gothic? The Gothic has endured due to an ideological project centered on reinforcing the construction of the self on an individual and cultural level through an exploration of limits and boundaries.

The Gothic deals in the transgression of social rules in order to reinforce said rules. Popular culture theorist Jeffery A. Brown states: “Horror is meant to be frightening and disruptive to cultural norms even if it ultimately manages to reestablish the status quo however precariously” (Dangerous Curves 197). This may sound contradictory or perhaps self-serving; breaking a boundary, showing how tenuous it is, in order to then rebuild it. But the manner of the trespass is significant. The Gothic utilizes the supernatural or the irrational to breach the taxonomies of acceptable cultural experience and thereby threaten social organization and cultural cohesion. Gothic fiction disguises sources of anxiety that are already troubling society by transferring them onto monstrous
Others. In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” (1996), Jeffery Jerome Cohen explains that the monster’s body is a cultural body: “The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy […] The monstrous body is pure culture” (4). The reader then enjoys the vicarious thrill of breaking taboos and the vindication of punishing the monster, which serves to reaffirm traditional morals and values. As normalcy is restored in the narrative, the message is received that order exists outside the story.

The personal pleasure found in the negative aesthetic results from the purging power of catharsis. The Gothic offers a place to engage with an individual’s and a culture’s repressed desires and traumas in a displaced form and from an aesthetic distance. The reader is able to experience socially unacceptable behavior vicariously through fiction, rendered into metaphor through monsters, and even separated by time into an antiquated space. The symbolic mechanisms of the monster allow these anxieties to be cast onto a proxy and given voice. They may then be confronted, indulged, critiqued, and repressed again (Hogle, Introduction, Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction 6; Hurley 198). These threats are defamiliarized into an object of fear which can then be expelled through punishment and retribution. The expulsion of psychic excesses allows for healing and a return to equilibrium and normalcy (Cavallero 9; Lloyd-Smith, American Gothic Fiction 5). The self is reaffirmed through a frightening encounter with its shadow.

In the Gothic, reason and normalcy are overwhelmed by an excess of negative emotional affect through an encounter with the unspeakable, that which defies
These emotions oscillate on a continuum between terror and horror; others on the spectrum include unease, dread, paranoia, disgust, and revulsion. The premiere Gothic novelist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ann Radcliffe, defined this as an oppositional binary, observing: “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (qtd. in Cavallero 3). This dichotomy is created through terror being related to the intangible and horror to the material.

Excessive emotion is necessary to create the requisite sense of cultural transgression so that normalcy may then be restored, either through a reassertion of reason or an escape from the violation of the natural order back to normalcy, as well as for the cathartic experience to be resolved. Terror and horror are created through certain features that help to define the parameters of the genre: the sublime, the uncanny, the fantastic, and the abject. Monsters or grotesques and *mise-en-scene* complete the Gothic conventions.

Terror is considered the most refined of the negative emotions. It destabilizes the environment and renders it unfamiliar or uncanny. A space that is unknown or incomprehensible is a threat to life and sanity as the mind and senses are expanded to their limit trying to grasp the whole. What lies beyond those limitations becomes obscure and threatening. This may be a matter of scale. On a small, localized level, the source of fear may be that which is “out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past” (Hogle, Introduction, *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* 3). As an example, imagine there is a deadly venomous spider in the room as you are reading this, but you do not know where. You would tax your senses to their utmost trying to find it, darting your eyes to spot any movement or anything out of the ordinary and straining your ears for any
unusual sound. The space has become defamiliarized and therefore terrifying. This is what happens on the voyage of the *Demeter* as recounted in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1894). In Chapter VII, the ship *Demeter* crashes into an English port following a storm with no sign of the crew; only a corpse is lashed to the helm. The ship’s log records that soon after leaving Turkey, transporting several crates for Count Dracula, the crew feels that there is something amiss. There are reports of a strange man aboard, but a search reveals nothing even as crew members mysteriously begin to disappear. Overwork and exhaustion make the dwindling crew more and more anxious of the supernatural as they near England until only the captain remains to tie himself to the wheel, where he dies (75-86). Without the specific target of Dracula, who hides within the crates, the fear and dread of this passage is created through the familiar space of the ship becoming threatening to body and mind; the very atmosphere of terror.

On the other end of the spatial spectrum is the limitless, expressed as the sublime. Space becomes a presence too great to comprehend and too grand for words, lending itself to hyperbolic expressions of awe-inspiring and overpowering that dissolve into referential meaning rather than description. According to Scott Bukatman, it is “the combined sensation of astonishment, terror, and awe that occur through the revelation of power greater, by far, than the human” (*Matters of Gravity* 91). The sublime is a foundational principle of Romanticism and its dark reflection, Gothicism, and stands in contrast to Enlightenment ideas of beauty. The philosophy of Enlightenment aesthetics found pleasure in harmony, unity, and symmetry; anything irregular or disproportional, even in the natural world, was an aberration that disrupted the hierarchy of order
Edmund Burke’s 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* reevaluated the unrestrained power of nature. For Burke, the destructive potential, whether to body or mind, of that which cannot be contained by the individual’s gaze or comprehension creates the strongest emotion:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter into the part of pleasure. (86)

However, this negative thrill must be experienced from a certain aesthetic distance so as to create an existential threat rather than a real one (see Figure 1). Too close and the peril of extinction overwhelms any potential gratification; too far and apprehension diminishes through identification. As Gothic scholar Robert Miles explains: “A sight of nature’s vastness from the top of a mountain would be sublime; the same view from the perspective of someone falling down it would be simple terror” (‘Eighteenth-Century...
Equilibrium must be maintained between the frisson of delight and terror, attraction and repulsion, for any true experience of the Burkean sublime.\(^{23}\)

The safety net of cognitive distance allows for psychological recovery from the sublime experience. For Immanuel Kant, this paradoxically results from being powerless before the grand object yet independent from it, requiring the triumph of the intellect over nature (144-145). According to Bukatman, the subject overcomes this crisis which has disrupted the signifying systems of external reality through “a process of appropriation of, and identification with, the infinite powers on display” (*Matters of Gravity* 92). This is accomplished through rational reflection for Kant and Bukatman and distance for Burke, allowing the individual to recenter and affirm their significance.

This process can be accomplished through humanity imposing its will upon the natural world; what Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) termed the “technological sublime” (230). Technological and engineering accomplishments have increased exponentially from the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution to the electronic and digital revolutions of the present day to shrink the conception of the world. The awe and fear once reserved for the divine is now directed towards monumental achievements, from the continental railroad system to skyscrapers to atomic energy to the World Wide Web and now artificial intelligence. It is technology which now alludes to the limits of human understanding and points to the infinite rather than nature. The technological sublime can be used to combine the Gothic with science fiction, where people may be dwarfed by the overpowering presence of machine power, whether created by human hands or alien beings. Cyborgs, animate machines, and artificial intelligence expose the anxieties of technology surpassing humanity and even destroying and
replacing society. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Enterprise-D is a massive starship but it is absolutely dwarfed by the enormous Borg cube ("Q Who"), a cyborg collective which represents the existential threat of technology subsuming the organic. Just as humanity has overcome nature, there is the threat that technology can overcome the humanity.

As machines become more like people, especially in appearance, they enter what is termed the uncanny valley, an unsettling gap where they appear both human-like and yet not human. This creates feelings of repulsion rather than identification and reveals another register of terror in the uncanny. Whereas so far terror has involved an external unknown which threatens the integrity of the self, the uncanny blurs the line between the self and other through the return of what should have remained hidden. In his essay “The Uncanny” ("Das Unheimliche" [1919])\(^{24}\), Sigmund Freud defines the phenomenon as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and long been familiar” and has become estranged through repression (124, 148); “Uncanny is what one calls everything which ought to have remained secret and hidden and has come to light” (132). What was once ordinary and homely—for Freud, rooted in infantile desires and fears—becomes secret through repression. When something is encountered that serves as a reminder of that secret, it is at once familiar and unfamiliar, in part because that which is repressed cannot be fully remembered (130). Also, what has become part of the internal self is now encountered in an external, and therefore repellant, form (Punter, “Shape and Shadow” 253). One then becomes alienated from the self or reality. While Freud speaks of the uncanny on the individual level, the principle of the past returning to haunt the present is also applicable on a cultural level. In Edgar Allan
Poe’s short story “The Black Cat” (1843), the cruelty of the first-person narrator towards his cat leads to the pet’s hanging. The narrator soon takes in a second black cat, identical to the first except for a white patch of fur that gradually takes the form of a gallows. The narrator eventually murders his wife and boards her body behind a wall only for the cries of the cat, also bricked in, to lead to its discovery and his hanging (348-355). While the uncanniness of the duplicate cats is specific to the narrator, the cats’ coloring and one’s hanging are referential to America’s repressed history of slavery, racism, and lynching.

The doubling of the black cat is indicative of one means by which the uncanny is achieved. Freud describes how unintended repetition transforms something ordinary into something fateful (144). The odd repetition of randomly meeting someone several times may create a feeling of inevitability, which in the Gothic is transformed into meeting one’s mirror-image. The doppelgänger or double, the very definition of the familiar (self) becoming unfamiliar (other), amplifies morbid anxiety by undermining the sense of subjective unity through ambiguity. The double creates a slippage between self and other that threatens individuality and uniqueness (Perry and Sederholm 14). In doing so, it becomes “the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 142). “The Amazing Masquerade!” in Batman #54 (Aug.-Sept. 1949), with art by Lew Sayre Schwartz and Bob Kane, is an excellent example of a crime story that effectively uses the uncanny doppelgänger. Noting their similar appearances, criminal John Foster kills and takes the place of architect George C. Hudson. In the dénouement, Batman disguises himself as Foster to confront the criminal, forcing Foster to relive his crime from the victim’s perspective. Foster then confesses: “Wait! You’re making a mistake! I’m not the real Hudson! I
did the same thing you’re doing—I’ve already killed the real Hudson!” (683; emphasis in original). It is a *doppelgänger* of a scene about *doppelgängers*.

While the uncanny places the self against the other, paranoia blends the self and other as the desire to protect and forget secrets is projected onto the outside world. As media scholar Misha Kavka describes in “Gothic on screen” (2002): “Paranoia thus involves a blurring of boundaries between the self and other, to the extent that the other becomes a version of the self returned, with interest, in the form of hostility” (210). The scheme to repress knowledge leads to viewing the world with suspicion, which becomes a conspiratorial fantasy against the one who is hiding something.

Creating terror can pose certain challenges as its source is supposed to be unrepresentable. Because terror results from the encounter with something beyond human comprehension, it also exists outside of human imagination. Certain codes have been developed relying on obscurity rather than illuminating the object to create an atmosphere of dread anticipation. One trope is for the object of terror to be hidden in shadows or otherwise veiled. This drives one of the plotlines in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) wherein the protagonist, Emily St. Aubert, faints after viewing something hidden behind a black veil in the Castle of Udolpho (236; Vol. II Ch. VI). The potential of this mysterious space haunts Emily and the reader for the remainder of the novel. It is ultimately revealed as a wax figure that looks like a corpse disfigured by worms, a *memento mori*, though the brief description is less exciting than what had been imagined (622; Vol. IV Ch. XVII). In terms of the sublime, there is the convention where a part may be revealed that only hints at the whole. This is the technique favored by weird tales author H. P. Lovecraft to portray things which are impossible to imagine.
In “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), Lovecraft tells of buildings in the hidden city of R’lyeh: “He [Wilcox] said that the geometry of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsome redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours” (192-193; emphasis in original). Lovecraft takes this technique one step further with his blasphemous monsters, not describing their materiality, only the effect of their appearance: “Of the six men who never reached the ship, he [Johansen] thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant. The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (194). Terrors such as the squid-dragon Cthulhu can only be registered on a psychological scale.

But different media demand different conventions. The expressions of terror in literature are markedly distinct from those of film or comic books, wherein imagination is replaced by visual spectacle. This is ultimately beneficial to the uncanny, wherein the visuals of doubling may better create an aesthetic of anxiety than literary description, as in Batman’s “The Amazing Masquerade!” But capturing the scale of the sublime becomes more challenging as some form of identification is required for comprehension. Nineteenth-century landscape painters would often leave a visual instruction in the form of a tiny individual lost in the grandeur of nature with whom the viewer may identify, such as the painter hidden among the foliage in the bottom center of Thomas Cole’s View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (1836), better known as The Oxbow (see Figure 2). But without the individual, it becomes a matter of perspective. The opening shots of Star Wars: A New Hope (George Lucas; 1977) allow
the audience to experience the technological sublime as the size of the Imperial Star Destroyer exceeds the screen as it chases the Rebel blockade runner. But the audience also recognizes the dimensions of the screen, creating the cognitive distance to enjoy the overpowering image through the suspension of disbelief.

The same holds true for comic books. Hellboy creator Mike Mignola states that, when illustrating in the mode of the Lovecraftian sublime: “the best thing to do, always, is not show it. Or show just a piece of it.” Mignola continues: “And I don’t mind admitting that subconsciously, there are times when I don’t know what I’m drawing. I just know that it would be spooky if I was to ink such-and-such shape in such-and-such place” (‘Mike Mignola on Hellboy’). The partial image implies a grander scale beyond
the scope of the panel, creating the sublime affect. However, the panel still fits on the page, which fits in the readers’ hands, allowing for cognitive distancing.

The source of terror may be obscured for a time, but may eventually be explicitly revealed. The terrifying idea then becomes the horrifying object. Whereas terror can be said to be of the mind, horror invokes physical, even visceral, reactions. The separation between terror and horror pivots from the immaterial to the material (Miles, “Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis” 93). Kavka states that this separation is the difference between keeping something that the audience wants to see shadowed or off-screen versus placing something before their eyes from which they want to avert their gaze (227).

Consider the dramatic reveal from 1925 silent film version of The Phantom of the Opera (dir. Rupert Julian), based on Gaston Leroux’s 1910 novel Le Fantôme de l’Opéra. The Phantom’s identity is hidden behind a mask for most of the film, a tantalizing mystery for both opera singer protégé Christine Daaé (Mary Philbin) and the audience. Even for those who know the secret, that the Phantom is disfigured, it is unknown how grotesque he may be. When Christine rips off the mask, Lon Chaney’s transformative make-up exceeds expectations as a ghoulish death mask that the audience quickly turns away from. This disgust results from the Phantom’s face being physically wrong and therefore offending assumed norms; in other words, he is impure.

Such images fire up the fight, flight, or freeze response. The impulse is to look away, but it is impossible to immediately do so because the body is frozen and the mind disoriented. Botting states: “Bound up with feelings of revulsion, disgust, and loathing, horror induces states of shuddering or paralysis, the loss of one’s faculties, particularly consciousness and speech, or a general physical powerlessness and mental confusion”
(“Horror” 185). The senses contract to a point because they are all directed towards a single object. Consider the example of the venomous spider again, only now you suddenly discover it on your arm. Your body is momentarily paralyzed, unable to decide what to do, as all your attention narrows to the spider. Even when you can move again, you may not be able to bring yourself to touch the spider to get it off you out of revulsion.

Part of the fear of said spider is not just the venom but that a bite would momentarily conjoin its body and yours, puncturing the separation between the self and the other. The violation of bodily boundaries, whether through distortion, wounding, or gore, is particularly potent because of the visible disruption of physical integrity. Skin is the ultimate boundary that divides the inside from the outside. Violence and the threat of bodily harm affect each personally as a vicarious encounter with mortality. But it can also serve as an allegory for psychological or social transgression, an atypical morality play. “Foul Play” from EC Comics’ *The Haunt of Fear* #19 (May-June 1953) by writer Al Feldstein and artist Jack Davis is one of the most infamous examples of this. When a rival player kills their teammate with poison on his spiked cleats, the team gets their revenge by using the killer’s dismembered body to play their own night game:

See the long string of pulpy intestines that mark the base lines. See the two lungs and liver that indicate the bases…the heart that is home plate. […] See the batter come to the plate swinging the arms, the legs then throwing all but one away and standing in the box waiting for the pitcher to hurl the head in to him. See the catcher with the torse strapped on as a chest-protector, the infielders with their hand-mits [sic], the stomach-rosin-bag, and all the other pieces of equipment that once was Central City’s star pitcher, Herbie Satten… (qtd. in Trombetta 33)

The violence and gore imply that there is something psychologically wrong with all these players. But there is also a message in the killer’s punishment for his violation of taboos.
In subverting the American pastime, the creators send a perverse moral about the high cost of not playing by the rules.

The body as the ultimate site of horror is explored in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Victor Frankenstein’s triumph at compositing a human figure turns to repulsion when he brings it to life: “but now that I was finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, …” (36; Vol. I Ch. IV). The revulsion directed at a dead body derives from its manifestation of mortality as it has crossed the border from subject to object. *Frankenstein* takes this one step further by troubling the absolute binary of alive/dead through an uncanny return.

This type of horror is what philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva termed “the abject” in her book *The Powers of Horror* (1980). The abject is about the boundary between inside and outside because what separates also connects. The backslash in “alive/dead” becomes its own thing, neither subject nor object, but abject. This problematizes identification and systems of categorization as whatever crosses those borders upsets the distinction between self and other. Kristeva defines the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The body is the ultimate expression of this as it is considered an ontological whole in order to form subjective identity but is full of permeable margins through which mucus, blood, vomit, and feces are expelled. These effluvia connect inside and outside, and must not only be cast off but radically excluded less they create a crisis of identity. The discretion with which excretion is treated or the blessing given after a sneeze reveals the rituals surrounding these taboos.
The repression of these impurities reasserts the distinction between self and other and recuperates identity.

The treatment of the abject is not only about bodily control but of social control. Abjection creates society by establishing and challenging boundaries. The jettisoning of those objects labelled “filth” establishes a hierarchal order. Those rituals surrounding the banishment of bodily excretions become a social form, creating behaviors which are acceptable and unacceptable. Extrapolating from there, other behaviors become delineated as unacceptable or criminal, inversely creating the invisible idea of normalcy. The binary of criminal/normal is further expanded to contain threats through ideological schemes of cultural categorization: masculine/feminine, heterosexual/queer, and so forth. The practices of inclusion and exclusion provide definitions of the individual and cultural self along various axes of division, including race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. All this works in concert to create a cohesive self and hegemonic society, but such stability is illusory. Media scholar John Fiske explains how society is a complex network of groups “that is never static but always the site of contestation and struggle” in terms of social power (1268). The abject returns to challenge the arbitrary lines of division and to pollute the clarity of the subject in the form of the monstrous Other.

The Other stands in contrast to the self, as identified by the individual, culture, or nation. The designation helps a group to define itself through negation, rendering the normal as invisible and everything else as strange and unusual. Whatever the self cannot incorporate is projected outward. While this type of the Other may be horrifying, it is not yet threatening. Monstrosity, however, refuses to stay in a subordinate position and destabilizes the hierarchies of difference (Botting, *Gothic* 10). Monsters attack social
order and signify irrationality and unnaturalness. They lose their claim to a fully human existence and have become what literary and cultural theorist Kelly Hurley has termed “abhuman” (192). This deviance is revealed by making the monster physically grotesque, its impurity and uncleanness an index of monstrosity.

The monster is a product of society that makes the negative attribute visible so that it may be punished. Its unappealing aesthetic is created through liminal bodies that occupy the threshold between oppositional categories (Hurley 190). Because they defy categorization, they can embody an excess of meanings, becoming malleable metaphors for multiple manifestations of fear and anxiety. Stephen King—ironically—categorizes these bodies as the Vampire (Count Dracula), the Werewolf (or other transformation like Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde), and the Thing with No Name (such as Frankenstein’s Monster [51]). The vampire is living/dead, the werewolf is human/beast, and the Thing with No Name defies even categorical opposition, though the lack of a label may indicate a type of primitive/civilized contrast. Their marked differences signal that they are a threat to be destroyed. In doing so, they serve a cautionary function. Gothic experts David Punter and Glennis Byron state: “By providing a visible warning of the results of vice and folly, monsters promote virtuous behavior” (263). The protection and safety provided by social boundaries is thrown into sharp relief against the consequences of breaking them. The monster prowls the boundaries of a culture, pointing out the lines that must not be crossed and punishing those that do, just as the monster is punished when it crosses the border into society.26

As the monster troubles the frontier as a metaphorical embodiment of the things that society views as evil and inhuman, there must be an opposing force to police that
same perimeter and represent that which is good and humane: the monster hunter.

According to Heather L. Duda in *The Monster Hunter in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2008), the best figure to protect against social instability has traditionally been a symbol of the status quo, which for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant male, white, educated, and upper-class (15). Epitomized by *Dracula’s* Abraham Van Helsing, these monster hunters choose to act seemingly out of altruism, but it is their patriarchal position that is most under threat. Restoring cultural normalcy also protects their hegemonic power.

And it is in this that monsters may serve a subversive function. One of their great strengths of the Gothic is to give voice to the Other (Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic* 8). In attacking cultural limits, they interrogate the practice of Other-making and question the legitimacy of their exclusion. Social norms are constantly in flux and Gothic narratives provide displaced areas to examine the validity of values and ethics for prejudice and oppression. In confronting the audience with what is taboo, the Gothic monster forces the audience to question what is normal. A liminal figure that is both hero and monster becomes a site of negotiation to sublimate anxieties and create a path towards acceptance of otherness as part of society.

When the familiar grotesque’s interrogation of cultural boundaries coincides with society’s questioning of its institutions instead of reinforcing them, as it did during the latter part of the twentieth century, the traditional monster becomes increasingly sympathetic and even romantic. By giving the Other a voice, its emotional life become apparent. It is a humanizing move and one that allows the monster to feel regret for its horrendous actions and to seek redemption. The monster then transforms into a new kind
of monster hunter, a liminal figure that is alienated from both other monsters and human society yet seeks to uphold and protect the status quo (Duda 42). The monster hunter fulfills a role similar to that of the superhero, directing violence outwards toward the abject, but their differences will be explored in the next chapter.

Monsters are often created through the supernatural or by science acting in the manner of the supernatural; what may be termed “fantasy science” when there is some illusory foundation in scientific principles or reason and “science fantasy” when there is not. The use of the supernatural must strike a particular timbre for it to be considered Gothic. The Gothic evokes fear through disturbing the separation between the normal and the abnormal and may cause the reader to hesitate as to whether the strange events have a natural or unnatural explanation, disturbing the categories of knowledge. Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov defines this hesitation as “the fantastic.” In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), Todorov describes the uncertainty of a person who only knows the laws of nature confronting a supernatural event and who is thus faced with interpreting the extraordinary either through reason and logic or accepting the mystical and occult. “The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us” (25). The fantastic only operates until the hesitation between the marvelous and the uncanny is often resolved by the end of the text. The fantastic may then be considered a liminal genre, one that texts never wholly belong to, though there are exceptions.²⁷
When the characters or the readers choose to resolve the ambiguity of the fantastic, the story moves into a different genre. If the supernatural is accepted, then the events or monster become ordinary within the laws of an extraordinary world, such as fairy tales or fantasy; Todorov terms this “the marvelous.” If the rational answer is chosen or no explanation for the events is given, then the ordinary world is invaded by the extraordinary, leading to a feeling of horror for the transgressed boundaries (Carroll 16); for this, Todorov borrows from Freud the term “the uncanny” (41). Though Todorov states that “one of the constants of the literature of the fantastic is the existence of beings more powerful than men” (109), the fantastic has little bearing on the superhero Gothic. This is due to the milieu of the superhero, a storyworld which readily accepts the existence of magic, the occult, demons, devils, angels, gods, and other signifiers of the supernatural. The superhero therefore corresponds much more to the marvelous. A hesitation may exist in specific stories as to the cause of the extraordinary events, but the laws of that storyworld never preclude supernatural explanations.

Despite this, the superhero Gothic frequently borrows from the conventions of the Gothic mise-en-scene. Classic Gothic relies on antiquated spaces, crumbling castles, crypts, labyrinths, haunted houses, and so on, where secrets from the past can haunt the characters, either physically or psychologically (Hogle, Introduction, Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction 2). These are delimited spaces which terrify by containing the unseen. Atmospheric effects, like shadows or thunderstorms, help to conceal horrifying threats. As the Gothic diffuses over its history, the tropes of architecture and landscape become more metaphorical and any setting could carry Gothic overtones as long as it is a space that civilization can abject (Lloyd-Smith, American Gothic 7). The
city and then the suburb became the new topography of the Gothic as cultural frontiers of marginalization transformed from geographical to social. The cartography of the Gothic is now traced onto empty warehouses, storefronts, and homes; decaying theaters and laboratories; and subterranean sewers. It is surprising the number of deserted mansions and castles that can exist just outside the city limits. One need only think of Batman’s Gotham City (its name derived from the word Gothic), with its labyrinthine canyons of skyscrapers that create a shadow world, to understand how an urban setting can create a space that extends beyond the normal world into the abnormal.

Terror, horror, and their kind find expression in the grotesque and a dark milieu to form the essential elements of the Gothic genre. However, as Allen S. Weiss reminds in the seventh of his “Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity” (2004): “Monsters exist in the margins. They are thus avatars of chance, impurity, heterodoxy; abomination, mutation, metamorphosis; prodigy, mystery, marvel. Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts” (125). It is not that the Gothic has a core set of conventions but rather that the tropes thrive on the borders, constantly transforming as they make inroads into other genres and respond to a changing culture. The history of the Gothic is a document of monstrosity as an index of Otherness and the monster as a metaphor for cultural anxieties. The evolution of these representations will show how society sublimes its fears through story and how the Gothic renews itself to consistently represent contemporary concerns.
The history of the Gothic is, in many ways, a history of popular culture. According to Russel Nye: “The term ‘the popular arts’ cannot have been used accurately to describe a cultural situation prior to the late eighteenth century” (1). This aligns with the 1764 publication of the first Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole, as well as the subsequent proliferation of the genre through novels and their theatrical adaptations beginning in the 1790s. The genre’s popularity comes about from its ability to negotiate cultural anxieties in displaced forms through malleable metaphors and allegories which contain an excess of interpretations. And while other genres have served a similar function at certain times, the Gothic’s continued relevance is a result of its diachronic transformation to address contemporaneous concerns and its versatility in diffusing across emerging media from the late eighteenth century on. Punter and Byron argue: “The Gothic is frequently considered a genre that re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and which serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form” (39). This would inversely imply that there are periods without such anxiety, which history does not bear out. Rather, it may take some time for an appropriate metaphor to be found to address particular anxieties. Additionally, the Gothic’s initial reception and evolution from marginalization to legitimization establishes a pattern for other media formats and genres in popular culture, such as comic books and superheroes. A survey of the history of the Gothic will provide key texts and movements which will influence the superhero Gothic.
Certain conditions needed to exist for the Gothic to materialize in fiction. According to Gothic literature scholar Allan Lloyd-Smith: “The Gothic deals in transgression and negativity, perhaps in reaction against the optimistic rationalism of its founding era, …” (American Gothic 5). The Age of Enlightenment created an age of revolution, scientifically, technologically, socially, and politically. The efforts of the preceding Scientific Revolution (1543-1687) to categorize the natural world spread through the publication of the Encyclopédie between 1751 and 1772. The Industrial Revolution changed the shape of society as new means of production shifted the growing populations in Europe and America towards cities, where opportunities for education and entrepreneurship created a literate middle class. Democratic ideals, resulting from the philosophical inquiry into the principles which would create the best society, led to ideas of social reform and equal rights. The application of these policies contributed to both the American Revolution (1776-1783) and the terrors of the French Revolution (1789-1799). By the end of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment, which had destabilized older systems of society, found itself on unstable ground.

Rejecting the neoclassicism of the European continent, England claimed the tradition of Gothic art and architecture (late 12th-16th centuries) as part of its national heritage and identity. The dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation had left many English Gothic buildings to fall into ruin. As part of the Gothic revival movement in the eighteenth century, landowners began to construct follies styled as faux ruins on their property in a sense of national pride and to give themselves a false link to British history. Many English manor houses were either built, remodeled, or had additions made in the Gothic style. The epitome of this mode was Strawberry Hill, the
home of Horace Walpole. Walpole remade his cottage by renovating what existed and adding extensions in an eccentric manner. He was not concerned as much with how the elements came together as a whole as that each part was aesthetically pleasing to his Gothic sensibilities. And it was also here that Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, published in December 1764.

*The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* has retrospectively been established as the founding text of Gothic fiction, in part because it was the first to call itself so.\(^\text{30}\) There were predecessors which utilized many of the elements which would go on to define the genre, but *Otranto* brought them all together and launched a disparate trajectory from the artistic associations the Gothic had at the time.\(^\text{31}\) The volume was originally presented as an English translation by William Morris, Gent., of a 1529 Italian text, itself recounting a tale from the crusades in the thirteenth century; or, as Botting describes it: “A fake translation by a fake translator of a fake medieval story by a fake author” (“In Gothic Darkly” 14). In the 1765 second edition, Walpole revealed his ruse as well as his motives: “It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success […] by a strict adherence to common life” (9). Walpole sought to combine the unnatural events of romances with the naturalistic dialogue and complex characterization of the contemporary novel (Clery 25). Nestling the story in multiple texts was but one technique which Walpole utilized which would become a hallmark of the genre. Others include: a *mise-en-scène* of crumbling castles, crypts, and secret passages; dynastic plots; medieval Catholic ritual; and threats of violence, rape, and even incest; all coupled with
the inexplicable supernaturalism of ghosts and the roaming pieces of a giant statue.

These conventions combine to create an atmosphere of suspense and fear through irrational proceedings, highlighting the emotional affect over logical conclusions and reflecting the contemporary unease with the changes brought to society by Enlightenment rationalism. Due to its shocking and controversial content, early response to Walpole’s publication were mixed. But the novelty of the sensationalism, the excitement provoked at the expense of accuracy, kept it in print despite any dubious morality.

While Walpole established the genre conventions of imperiled heroines, dastardly (usually Catholic) villains, ineffectual heroes, crumbling edifices, inclement weather, and the supernatural, *The Castle of Otranto* did not immediately inspire imitation.32 Paradigm shifts in the culture, particularly paranoia surrounding the Reign of Terror in France, as well as developments in distribution created the conditions that allowed the British Gothic to flourish almost a quarter-century later beginning in 1788, a popularity it would maintain for the next forty years.33

One reason Gothic literature flourished in the early nineteenth was female readers and writers. Middle-class women had more access to literature than ever before through private subscription libraries. While the upper class could purchase high-priced new books and the lower class had cheaply-published shilling shockers, an affordable membership in these circulation libraries provided access to new fiction (Glover and McCracken 5). At a time when literature was meant to educate and inculcate a sense of rationality and morality more than entertain, the Gothic was a prime target for censor. There was concern that women would be particularly susceptible to romantic extravagances and licentious imagery (Cavallero 10). Even though the stories vindicate
virtue and punish evil by the end, they were caught between their proposed morality and the unacceptably unrealistic excesses employed. But concerns about propriety did not dictate the market. Women were reading Gothic romances and, as circulation libraries were the biggest purchaser of novels, publishers provided them with what was in demand.

Ann Radcliffe was one of the preeminent authors of the golden age of the Gothic, with popular titles such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797).34 Radcliffe’s plots, often set at a point in the past poised between medieval feudalism and the Renaissance, frequently featured a young female protagonist trapped between her true love and a tyrannical male who has designs on her family fortune, with the situation resolved after the family secrets which haunt the proceedings are revealed. This plot is arguably modeled after *The Castle of Otranto* but differs in at least two key aspects. First, Radcliffe championed feminine independence by focusing on the female perspective and imagination as the characters challenge their societal roles within oppressive patriarchies; this has led her works to be labelled Female Gothic. Second is the mode of the ‘supernatural explained,’ à la Todorov’s uncanny, in which every supernatural aspect of the plot is accounted for by naturalistic means (Groom 84). In combining the two, Radcliffe both plays to the perception that the terrors were the result of a woman’s overactive imagination and counters it by showing that rationalism triumphs. By making the fear internalized rather than actualized, Radcliffe was exploiting contemporary aesthetics and attempting to raise the estimation of her work from genre fiction to literature. But this threatened the literary hegemony at a time when, like many institutions, stability was sought (Gamer 93). The Gothic’s reliance on sex and
violence, such as that found in Matthew Lewis’s scandalous novel *The Monk* (1796),
compounded with the cultural anxiety concerning female authors and readers, resulted in
the genre becoming associated with the excesses of the French Revolution. The dismissal
of the Gothic as second-rate literature also implied that its female readership was second-
rate (Cavallero 10). But the Gothic’s status in the literary hierarchy did not affect its
popularity nor that of its theatrical adaptations, though the stories were often reframed
with more acceptable morals (Botting, *Gothic* 96). The sensationalism and sentimentality
also influenced nineteenth-century melodrama, where the polarity of good and evil
became more ambiguous, first making the villain more sympathetic and then merging the
hero and villain into the Byronic hero (Crawford 26). Combining aspects of the hero and
villain into one character sets a trajectory towards the monster hero.

The Gothic vogue waned in the second decade of the nineteenth century as Britain
experienced a period of increasing stability and power. Gothic literature then became a
target for parody, such as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817). But the Gothic also
followed what Robert Miles calls the first law of genre: “to deviate and make it new”
(58). The evolution of the Gothic arguably begins with one of its most celebrated works:
*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. First published in 1818 with a revised second edition in
1831, Shelley’s novel brought new depth and complexity to the Gothic by moving away
from romance narratives and into psychological inquiry, social commentary, and
scientific anxiety. Shelley combines the sublime and the scientific through Victor
Frankenstein’s quest to create life, a physical being rather than the traditional
supernatural. In his abuse of science, Frankenstein breaks taboos and creates a monstrous
hybrid by bringing a composite dead body back to life. This walking *memento mori*
torments Frankenstein, destroying his life, until the creator vows to destroy his creation and chases the monster to the unexplored frontier of the Arctic. Told through a nesting series of narrators, *Frankenstein* mixes sublime imagery and psychological horror with descriptions of violence and decay. In doing so, Shelley confronts the dilemmas of scientific inquiry and the mechanization of life due to the Industrial Revolution, with an accompanying anxiety concerning the increasing size and power of the working class. Frankenstein’s monster embodies the working class as a commentary on class struggle, but may also represent the racial Other which the British Empire was encountering and relying on as part of their colonial expansion (Hogle, Introduction, *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* 5). *Frankenstein*, though still in the past, was set at an unspecified point in the more recent eighteenth century.

This transposition towards the contemporary world continued in both the Victorian and the early American Gothic where terror came home, both chronologically and spatially. The United States established a robust Gothic tradition as part of defining its own independent character and literary style in the nineteenth century. America lacked the long (white) history, with the accompanying relics, medieval ruins, and legends, which informed the origins of the Gothic. Rather than construct a “second Castle of Otranto,” literary critic W. H. Gardiner writes in his 1822 review of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821): “we hope to see the day, when that more commodious structure, the modern romance, shall be erected in all its native elegance and strength on American soil, and of materials exclusively our own” (49). Those exclusively American materials are elucidated by H. P. Lovecraft in his survey of Gothic fiction, “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927): “The additional fund proceeded […]

46
from the keen spiritual and theological interests of the first colonists, plus the strange and forbidding nature of the scene into which they were plunged” (39). To the legacy of the Puritan founders and frontier exploration should be added tensions surrounding race and slavery to inform the restyling of the Gothic in an American mode.

The United States was founded on Enlightenment principles of humanism, but among the earliest and most influential colonists were Protestant groups such as the Puritans, whose legacy of devotion and hard work continue to this day. Religious revival movements in the nineteenth century known as the Great Awakenings sparked Millennial progress and apocalyptic imagination as many preached that the end of days would occur in their lifetimes. Even in the non-religious there was an interest in the supernatural, which influenced the rise of Spiritualism beginning the in the 1840s. Mediums professed to have contact with spirits while the new technology of photography seemingly captured images of ghosts and other eerie apparitions. Some sought rational explanations for these phenomena, leading to an interest in seances as well as a proliferation of societies for psychic research. The power of religious revivals would wane as the century progressed and pioneers expanded westward, but Spiritualism would continue into the twentieth century.

The self-mythologization of the new nation was built on the rhetoric of exceptionalism and unending progress, enshrined in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in which the American pioneers were chosen by God to expand the nation from the east coast to the Pacific Ocean by taming the frontier through democracy, technology, and capitalism. But nature was an ambivalent symbol to the settlers. The frontier was both a promised land, a cathedral of Edenic nature untouched by the hands of white man, and a
hell where the devil and other terrors dwelled. The former ideology erased indigenous peoples while the latter painted them in a negative light. Early American Gothic frequently featured a journey into nature where the protagonist becomes decentered in a destabilizing environment, either transforming the frontier or being transformed by it (Mogen, et al. 21, 24). But even when nature was transformed by towns and cities, the underlying tension that the environment offered both threat and safety remained.

Westward expansion also highlighted the continued contention concerning slavery as each new state that was admitted to the Union brought up the issue of the voting balance in Congress between the Northern free states and the Southern slave states. Each compromise merely delayed the issue until conflict broke out in the American Civil War (1861-1864). In its opposition, the South became a locus for imagery of excess and transgression. This imaginary South became the nation’s shadow self, a repository for every irrational impulse America wished to repress, and eventually gave rise to the Southern Gothic literary tradition. But before then, the Gothic engaged with the unspeakable history of slavery, which contradicted the myth of equality by revealing the suppression that sustained it. According to Gothic theorist Charles L. Crow: “The American Gothic presented a counter-narrative, undercutting the celebration of progress, inquiring about its costs and the omissions from the story” (17). The framework of imprisonment, entrapment, possession, and familial transgression found in Gothic stories is also evident in the slave system (Goddu 74). American authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville were aware of the implications of their use of darkness and blackness in relation to the ideologies surrounding race in their Gothic stories.
According to literary critic Leslie Fiedler, the American Gothic is “a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (29). The epitome of this in the nineteenth century is found in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. As a critic and magazine editor, Poe sought to develop the American literary style. As an author, he wrote in a variety of genres, helping to create detective stories and science fiction, but worked most extensively with, and hence became most associated with, the Gothic. In “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), Poe states that his chief concern is the emotional effect on the reader (676). Instead of an encounter with a grotesque on the frontier to create terror, Poe turned horror inward through a psychological exploration of the internal landscape of mental subjectivity. The political and social issues are turned into an agonizing introspection of the self (Lloyd-Smith, “Nineteenth Century American Gothic” 174). His narrators descend through a dreamlike state into madness and leave the boundary between reality and illusion unresolved. Rather than the supernatural explained, wherein reason triumphs, Poe explores the perverse, in which hints of the uncanny indicate a diseased imagination and prompt transgressive actions.

These themes are exemplified in one of Poe’s best-known works, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Suffused with an atmosphere of unease, the tale recounts the visit of an unnamed narrator to his ill friend, Roderick Usher, at the Usher familial estate. While there, the two inter Roderick’s dead—though actually catatonic—twin sister, Madeline. The house turns suffocatingly claustrophobic as Roderick declines physically and mentally until his sister revives and confronts him, symbolically revealing their incestuous family secret as the house crumbles around them (199-216). The uncanny abounds in the story through layers of doubling: the Usher family and the house;
Roderick and Madeline; the decaying house and Roderick’s crumbling mental faculties; the art described throughout the story. The live burial, a favored motif of Poe’s, here underscores the violence directed towards women as Other in the Gothic. Poe sets the tale in an isolated locale divorced from its historical moorings, which echoes the alienating and destabilizing effect of the American frontier. The ambiguity of the location in time and space contributes to the surreal impression of the house as a reflection of Usher’s subconscious mind. Poe’s mastery of mood and transformation of the Gothic was not well appreciated in his own time, but would prove influential in both the United States and Europe.

In Victorian England, many of the early conventions of the Gothic were replaced by new locales and grotesques, reflecting the transformation of societal concerns. No longer expatriated to the European continent in bygone times, the genre resituated itself from the nostalgic and sensationalistic to the contemporaneous and provocative (Round 13). The Industrial Revolution brought prosperity and growth to the middle classes but exploited the marginalized underprivileged. Poor living conditions and a centralized population gave rise to violence and corruption as criminals became a new type of the Other (Byron 191). Evil no longer came from without; there was something sinister within that spawned crime and its threat of social disintegration, turning the city into a locus of terror.

One bulwark against the forces threatening stability and normalcy in society was the home and family. Strong family bonds provided a type of cultural containment against the changing societal roles and relations (Cox 137). It became the woman’s role to provide that stability as part of the cult of domesticity, wherein they were to manage
the feminine space of the home and raise the children. Being the Angel of the Home, as coined by Coventry Patmore in his 1854 narrative poem of the same name, could be as much a prison as a refuge with its requisites of moral purity and reliance on intuition over intellect, (Hurley 199; Botting, Gothic 122). Contrarily, women could be portrayed as harlots or madwomen. Saint or sinner, the roles society provided for women were limited and limiting and the Victorian Gothic soon moved into the domestic sphere, especially in the hands of writers like the British Charlotte and Emily Brontë and the American Charlotte Gilman Perkins. Perkins’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), inspired by her own experiences, describes one woman’s descent from domestic purgatory into hellish madness. Speaking in first person, the nameless female narrator, suffering from what now would be identified as postpartum depression, is assigned the rest cure wherein in she is not allowed to do anything after giving birth. Confined to a room with ugly yellow wallpaper, she begins to see patterns in the paper and eventually identifies a doppelgänger in the image of a woman trying to escape the walls. The image’s escape from the wallpaper coincides with the narrator’s collapse of sanity. The story is a powerful critique of constricting patriarchal control with freedom being found in breaking with social norms, which would be viewed from within normative lines as insanity.

While some women became social reformers seeking to change the conditions which resulted in criminality, other people turned to science for explanations of the cause. Criminal anthropology, influenced by the theory of evolution by natural selection introduced by Charles Darwin in On the Origin of Species (1859), sought an essential connection between outward appearance and inward thought, thus making criminal
bodies marked and identifiable (Halberstam 41) as well as reinforcing a hierarchy of racial bodies. This was but one of several theories resulting from new scientific discoveries. However, in offering new ways of ordering the world, science and scientists were not always viewed in a positive light; they could also disrupt prior categorization and be transgressive, exploring heretofore forbidden knowledge (Byron 188-9). The mad scientist soon became a major figure in Gothic fiction, a move foreshadowed by Victor Frankenstein.

Many of the threads of the Victorian Gothic can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), wherein Dr. Jekyll creates a chemical formula which transforms him into a grotesque alter ego named Mr. Hyde who, free from societal morals, indulges in every vice the city has to offer. Building on Darwin’s theory of evolution, the story presents the idea that man may not only progress up the evolutionary ladder but regress as well. Such a transformation would have once been attributed to the supernatural but is now produced through science. This degeneration disturbs the stability of both body and mind, as Jekyll cannot always control Hyde’s desire for violence and debauchery, and reveals how transgressive scientific experimentation can be (Halberstam 78). Stevenson makes the cost of scientific progress much more psychological, illuminating the duality between expressed public performance and repressed private desires. The threat to the social order, then, does not come from without but within. Through the *doppelgängers* of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson lays bare the idea that civilization is only a thin veneer enforced through a social contract taught in the home.45 It strikes at the stability of the self and
questions whether a synthesis between man’s enlightened reason and base nature is at all possible.

Such questions continued into *fin-de-siècle* Britain, also known as the age of decadence. National identity was becoming less integral and more fragmented, increasingly relying on race rather than place (Halberstam 80), as Englishman left and immigrants came in. Without a stable cultural identity, it becomes easy for an outside presence to subvert the system through reverse colonization, in which an Other, be it a being, an idea, or a drug like opium, invades (Groom 94). England needed a new monster with the metaphoric power to address this anxiety, a figure that could also embody disease, deviant sexuality, subversive gender roles, and corruption. Such a figure was found in the vampire, notably one of the Gothic’s most celebrated texts: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. The novel, told in an epistolary format through various narrators, recounts Dracula’s journey to England from Transylvania, his attempts to start a colony of vampires, first with Lucy Westenra and then Mina Harkness, and his defeat by a band of scientific and able-bodied monster hunters. Through the vampire and those who oppose him, Stoker thematically explores late-nineteenth century anxieties concerning immigration, family, and science.

Dracula threatens morality most directly as an ambiguous sexual figure and deviant masculinity. He is able to hold several women under his thrall and his victims feed on blood from his breast to be converted into vampires, a clear gender reversal. This was part of Stoker’s exploration of changing gender roles in society, such the New Woman. In contrast to the angel of the house, the New Woman challenged the roles prescribed by Victorian gender ideology and sought for economic, political, and sexual
independence (Botting, *Gothic* 131; Hurley 199). *Dracula* undermines traditional feminine constructs by corrupting Lucy Westenra, a virtuous woman who metamorphoses into an evil ghoul who attacks children. Mina Harker forms a synthesis of these dialectics, a New Woman who has mastered modern technology like the typewriter not to become independent but to support her husband. Dracula also threatens to infect Mina, symbolizing her corruption from New Woman ideologies, but Mina is ultimately able to use her modern skills and psychic connection to the Count to help defeat the vampire. Normalcy is restored by the end of the novel with the birth of the Harkers’ son and the reestablishment of the family unit.

The progressivism seen in Mina is also reflected in the patriarchal monster hunters who protect her: a new order of bourgeoisie consisting of scientists, psychologists, lawyers, even an American cowboy. They serve as a foil, positioning the modernity of science, technology, and secularism as good against the evil of Dracula’s archaic traditions. But even in this dichotomy, they rely on knowledge discovered outside the mainstream, such as folklore, superstition, and religion—the Catholic cross and sacramental Host—to gain the knowledge and power to kill the vampire. Though old ideological structures were crumbling, they had not yet been replaced but rather were in a state of negotiation. The vampire serves as an excellent monster for such cultural negotiations because of its ability to generate an excess of meaning (Crow 140). Dracula’s and other vampires’ metaphorical power enables them to be a shifting signifier, allowing them to be interpreted as whatever uncertainties society is confronting throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The battle between good and evil
serves to mediate between traditional and emerging ideologies both in England and in America.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, the United States achieved its Manifest Destiny when the Census Bureau declared the frontier line closed in 1890. The West transitioned from reality into nostalgia and myth as the locus of national identity moved to the urban city. The new century brought a host of technological innovations and scientific discoveries, such as automobiles and powered flight, which accelerated the pace of life. Increased means of production created more leisure time for a larger middle class, though not for the working class. These conditions created a greater demand for entertainment content than ever before. Older stories could be adapted to the expanding number of mediums and the regular repurposing of some texts contributed to their reevaluation from second-rate to classic. But this alone could not meet the appetite for popular consumption. Innovative types of presentation, such as comic strips, pulp magazines, cinema, and radio, warrant expressly original material. The rate of new mediums needing new content will only increase across the coming decades. The Gothic continually evolved to meet this need as it adapted to the unique features of these new forms of entertainment.

The rapid pace of change and new scientific discoveries left many feeling alienated from society and from themselves. The horrors of mechanized and chemical warfare in the Great War (1914-1918) engendered a profound disillusionment with humankind’s vision of progress. Through psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud located the source of society’s anxiety not in external threats but in the mind. Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity dramatically changed the understanding of the universe, pushing
scientific inquiry both outward into space and inward towards the atom. Travelling circuses, with their freakish sideshows, presented deviant biologies to the masses while the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925) renewed debate surrounding evolution. The expansion of organized crime and its accompanying violence during Prohibition (1920-1933) led Americans to feel increasingly preyed upon by uncontrollable forces.

The pessimistic, even nihilistic, attitude of the individual confronting an uncaring universe is a theme entrenched in the weird tales of H. P. Lovecraft. In the 1920s and 30s, Lovecraft wrote for pulp magazines, called so for the cheap paper they were printed on, with some titles notorious for their lurid content. Lovecraft inherited the literary magazine tradition of Poe as well as the heritage of H.G. Wells, who relocated the Gothic into science fiction. The supernatural held little threat for the educated readers of a secular age; Gothic modernism found horrors in outer space and other dimensions. Lovecraft combined scientific and mathematical study with folklore and mythology to create weird tales of what he termed “cosmic dread,” the sublime experience of encountering the incomprehensible infinities of what lay beyond the new boundaries of scientific discovery which may violate the known laws of physics and commonsense notions of reality. In doing so, cosmic dread exposes the insignificance and frailty of human existence.

In “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft describes cosmic dread as “a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes for entities on the known universe’s outside rim” (5). He accomplished this effect by creating a self-sustaining mythology surrounding the fictional New England town of Arkham, home to Miskatonic University and the blasphemous text of the
Necronomicon. Through stories such as “The Call of Cthulu” (1928), “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936), and others, Lovecraft constructed a complex cosmology surrounding the “Old Ones,” ancient aliens with unpronounceable names who once ruled the Earth and will do so again. These tales play with the theory of evolution by having humans evolve from the foodstuff of the Old Ones. Alternatively, monstrous beings from other dimensions could intermingle with humanity, creating a hidden, profane heritage. The latter illustrates a fear of contamination, which reflects Lovecraft’s own xenophobia and racism as well as growing national concerns about the dilution of the American character through immigration.50

The tribulations of the early twentieth century were exacerbated by the Great Depression (1929-1939), which brought the entire project of Enlightenment reason into question. The failure of imprecisely understood economic forces pushed millions of American citizens into poverty while Europe was marching towards war. The fear of unseen powers creating an uncertain future lent metaphorical power to the scary stories that were populating magazines, radio shows, and the silver screen. Radio programs such as Inner Sanctum (1934-1947), Suspense (1940-1962), and Lights Out (1941-1952), often played late at night, quickened the listener’s imagination through audio performance as the Gothic diffused across a new medium. The fact that the horrors were unseen meant they were as terrifying as the listener’s imagination, contributing to the real-world panic from Orson Welles’ adaptation of H. G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds (1898) on 31 October 1938.51

The cinema offered a different experience as previously imagined monsters had to be seen, an issue which will be dealt with by comic books as well. But this lent the
grotesques psychological power to confront the viewer with physical representations of repressed desires, such as in *Dracula* (1931; dir. Tod Browning), or traumas, in *Frankenstein* (1931; dir. James Whale). The monster movies of the thirties and forties, particularly the Universal franchises, were frequently adapted from and inspired by the stage plays rather than the original novels. Influenced by German Expressionism such as Robert Weine’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) or F.W. Murnau’s vampire film *Nosferatu* (1922), the Gothic mise-en-scène of towering castles and ruins, maze-like forests, and impenetrable fog or rain reflected the psychological states of the characters and, in turn, the audiences. This was enhanced by the stark black-and-white cinematography which used extreme angles and chiaroscuro to create a visual language of the sublime and the uncanny (Groom 124, 131). The images of monsters unnaturally lit from below, inverting the normal appearance of light and shadows, have formed their iconic representations in the popular consciousness ever since.

Decades of unease and uncertainty gave way to stability and prosperity in the latter half of the twentieth-century as the United Stated emerged from World War II (1939-1945) as a world superpower, largely thanks to the atomic bomb. A growing middle-class settled in the suburb, the modern endpoint of the American experience, and created a new national identity founded on capitalist consensus culture in contrast to the communist USSR during the burgeoning Cold War (1947-1991). But, according to cultural historian Matthew J. Costello: “The age of abundance was also an age of anxiety” (54). Stability established new cultural limitations which actually intensified the Gothic during the Cold War. The movie monsters of the thirties and forties faded away
as new metaphors were sought to address the phobic pressure points of radiation, invasion, and the space race.

Though the atomic bomb had ended the war, the Soviet Union soon had their own bomb, resulting in an arms race of mutually assured destruction. As historian Daniel J. Boorstin describes: “many Americans were haunted by fear that in the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima they had conjured a fifth rider of the Apocalypse. Along with Pestilence and War and Famine and Death, was there now a horse reserved for Science?” (The Americans: The Democratic Experience 586). Televised bomb tests then turned into tropes of large, mutated animals or the last man on Earth (MacDonald 44-45; Punter and Byron 24). The investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the “witch hunts” of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s created what Richard Hofstadter termed the paranoid style of American politics. Citizens, wary of communist infiltration, were told to watch their neighbors for abnormal or subversive behavior, reinforcing the hegemonic power of normalcy enshrined in the image of the nuclear family. The launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Russians in 1957 angled the Cold War in a different direction. The Gothic and science fiction again melded to portray grotesque aliens and monstrous invasions standing in for foreign Otherness, particularly in B-movies. Fear of corruption from within and threats from without fueled a decade of paranoia.

These national phobic pressure points are interpreted on multiple levels in director Don Siegel’s 1956 film Invasion of the Body Snatchers. In a small town, citizens are replaced by soulless and collectivist doppelgängers grown in vegetables from outer space. The slow extraterrestrial invasion is indicative of the fears of communist
infiltration and an enemy agent’s ability to hide in plain sight. But truly disturbing is the contamination of the mind; it is not spies but subversive ideas that will destabilize society. However, the lack of individuality among the pod people reveals a critique on the conformity of the era. The film ends on a paranoid note as those aware of the aliens are unable to stop their invasion from spreading to other cities. This illustrates the concern that these Cold War anxieties would not be resolved any time soon.

The utopian optimism of the fifties, tinged though it was with paranoia, gave way to pervasive pessimism in the sixties as a new generation came of age in tumultuous times. The Baby Boomers, the first generation truly raised on mass media, grew increasingly disenchanted with the American society of their parents’ generation. The rebellion against the repressive consensus hegemony became known as the counterculture, a transformative movement which empowered the disenfranchised by attacking the ideological supremacy of traditional values. As cultural scholar Jeffrey K. Johnson describes it, the counterculture was the product of a confluence of events that swirled together in an unpredictable way: “societal injustice, war, race, sex, political assassination, drugs, and rock and roll” (94). The Civil Rights movement fought for people to be treated equally under the law regardless of race. Vietnam War protests revealed the anger of youth at what they viewed as an unjust conflict. And second-wave feminism informed both the women’s rights movement and the sexual revolution. All these contributed to the intense scrutiny of American values and the breaking down of ideological barriers.

These movements affected the interpretation of traditional Gothic monsters as they adopted new metaphorical meanings. The films of Roger Corman and Hammer
Studios reintroduced the horror in classic tales and figures like Frankenstein and Dracula, albeit replacing the suspense and terror with an excess of color, violence, and sexuality (Conrich 138). But familiarity had supplanted fear and their Otherness was increasingly celebrated. The tropes of the Gothic which once engendered terror were now parodied on television programs like The Munsters (1964-66) and The Addams Family (1964-66) and even become part of children’s entertainment, such as the Muppet Count von Count on Sesame Street (1969-present).57 At a time when a more tolerant attitude was adopted towards markers of difference, particularly race and gender, famous monsters were no longer abhuman but embraced as tragically romantic rebels against conformity who could be redeemed through love. The repressive systems which had previously excluded them were reoriented as inhumane (Botting, “Aftergothic” 286). Driven by the new paperback publishing market—which also served to popularize Stephen King’s new horrors—works such as Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire (1976) made monsters the central figures and narrators instead of being marginalized in their own stories. In doing so, they presented the vampire and werewolf as an alternative masculinity, a man who is both monstrous and loving. This evolution would contribute to the monster becoming the monster hunter, as well as the heroic monster, by the end of the twentieth century (Duda 38). But the vampire and werewolf also carried a subtext about infection, particularly potent during the sexual revolution given the anxiety surrounding sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and later AIDS (Horner and Zlosnick 66). The realignment of social boundaries towards inclusion is a gradual process, but the celebration of difference facilitates movements of legitimization.
As the alteration of cultural norms brought traditional monsters inside cultural borders, new avenues of horror had to be explored. The success of works such as Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* (1960), based on Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel of the same name, and Truman Capote’s non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1966) reoriented the Gothic from deformed bodies to deviant minds. Serial killer narratives became an exploration of whether human nature is intrinsically good and if aberrations can be identified and contained. This leads to a questioning of the stability of the self, underscored by a profiler’s overidentification with the killer (Punter and Byron 266). The profiler becomes a double of the killer, creating doubts regarding the virtue and morality of the individual. This reflected American society’s distrust of its own institutions following the conclusion of the Vietnam conflict (1955-1975) and the Watergate scandal (1972-1974); a distrust which contributed to the decline of the traditional male monster hunter. The nation began to look inward to its own troubles rather than trying to solve the world’s problems, resulting in what President Jimmy Carter referred to as a “crisis of confidence” in a televised speech on 15 July 1979.

This crisis was conflated with increasing secularization and the dismantling of the nuclear family as an attack on the moral center of American society. The Christian ideology which defined American values and ethics had been eroding for decades, but the seventies fomented a popular scare through new scapegoats. Drug use and New Age philosophy became seen as gateways to brainwashing cults and the Satanic Panic, reinforced by sensationalistic reporting on serial killers such as Charles Manson, the Son of Sam, and the Zodiac Killer. The Gothic continued to shift away from essentializing evil, that the monster is irredeemable and containable, to examining what might be the
corrupting forces in society that create the monster. This move takes responsibility away from the individual and places it on cultural influences. It is now the individual who will attempt to redeem society, whose rules are viewed as repressive, rather than the other way around. In films such as Rosemary’s Baby (1968; dir. Roman Polanski), The Exorcist (1973; dir. William Friedkin), and The Omen (1976; dir. Richard Donner), the external corrupting forces take the form of demonic possession. Transgressive excesses are more readily accepted if they are attributed to the devil (Todorov 159). These films’ controversial content avoided censorship in part because of Hollywood’s new rating system, whose R rating allowed for mature content.

These anxieties about society were temporarily assuaged through the reassertion of conservative values and the resultant backlash towards progressivism through the neoliberalism of the 1980s. Women, in particular, were resituated from the liberties of second-wave feminism to a patriarchal ideal of femininity (Brown, Dangerous Curves 146). The subgenre of slasher films was made famous by new monsters such as Leatherface (The Texas Chainsaw Massacre [1974; dir. Tobe Hooper]), Michael Myers (Halloween [1978; dir. John Carpenter]), Jason (Friday the 13th [1980; dir. Sean S. Cunningham]), and Fred Kruger (A Nightmare on Elm Street [1984; dir. Wes Craven]).

Each presents a new Other that combines the serial killer and the monster, but their monstrosity resists psychological interrogation; rather, they are chaos incarnate. These films sensationalized gratuitous violence against women, typically those who were sexually empowered and thus viewed as vixens acting against societal rules. When attacked, women in these films are objectified as victims to be acted upon and without agency of their own. This patriarchal oppression is problematic for several reasons, but
may extend from the story to the medium of film itself. As the camera takes on a male gaze, as explained by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), it forces female viewers to take on a masculine perspective and identify the women on screen as objects (19-20). Feminist scholar Judith Halberstam states: “When the woman looks, in other words, she too becomes monstrous” (125). The female audience is othered in the viewing experience, which leads them to identify with additional Others on screen: the monsters.

This victimization may be challenged by the trope of the final girl. As defined by film studies scholar Carol J. Clover in Men, Women, and Chainsaws (1992), the final girl is the last woman alive to confront the killer and, after his defeat, tell her story. This woman has often not participated in any of the taboo behaviors for which the other people were punished and is therefore “pure.” But this is not as straightforward as it may seem because the male gaze must identify with the hero in order to achieve the catharsis of defeating the monster. The gender paradigms say that the damsel in distress cannot save herself, so the final girl is transformed into “a physical female and a characterological androgyne” (63). While the defeat of the slasher may contain the moral of virtue triumphing, the message is complicated by the trend of the film franchise. The constant return of the monstrous slasher informs viewers they must constantly adhere to cultural codes lest they be attacked again. The slasher’s refusal to die may also have reflected the reassertion of the Cold War in the eighties as a conflict that would not end.

However, between the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War did end. But this ushered in a new crisis of American identity. Without a stable external Other, the United States was unsure how to
define itself and its new role as sole world superpower. Political attention soon turned inward to an increasingly unamicable culture war. Rising divorce rates and teenage pregnancy as well as the fight for gay rights seemed to signal the end of the nuclear family as a cornerstone of American society. The technological revolution soon made computers and cell phones ubiquitous and the plurality of new options wore away at the monoculture. But the increasing influence of technology also raised the specter of a new Frankenstein in artificial intelligence and cyborgs, such as seen in the Terminator and Robocop franchises (the Gothic and science fiction would also combine in the Alien and Predator film series). The rapid pace of progress made some technology obsolete within a lifetime, creating a new realm of the past to haunt the present. Videotapes, whether through traditional trope of possession (The Ring [2002; dir. Gore Verbinski]) or the new convention of found footage (The Blair Witch Project [1999; dirs. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez])63, as well as the metacommentary of Scream (1996; dir. Wes Craven)64, were indicative of a postmodern potential to reinvent the Gothic for the new millennium.

The continued fascination and critical interest with the Gothic into the twenty-first century may be attributed to the postmodern collapse of the barriers between high and popular culture, which has only continued to facilitate the genre’s legitimization. This is first due to saturation through adaptation and repetition, particularly in visual media. Thomas Leitch posits that part of the appeal of monsters lies in the iconic rather than the psychological (203); in reality it is a combination of the two. Secondly, the Gothic’s critical reevaluation and popular interest is due to its complexity in critiquing and justifying ideological systems. The Gothic also lends its metaphorical power to other
genres to reinvigorate their social message, as will be seen with the superhero. The power of the superhero Gothic as an ideological project lies in creating monsters as metaphors for cultural anxieties who sublimate those concerns through heroism. Lastly, the Gothic should never be underestimated for the ability of its negative aesthetic to give the simple pleasure of chills and thrills.
CHAPTER TWO—THE SUPERHERO: CONVENTIONS AND HISTORY

The explosion of new media and genres throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has provided fertile ground into which the Gothic could sublimate its conventions. The comic book, traditionally sold on a monthly basis in a magazine-pamphlet format, has gone through cycles of emphasizing the Gothic, particularly horror. But the comic book is most closely associated with the superhero, the only genre to originate in that medium. As with the Gothic, adaptation has been key to the superhero’s dissemination and perpetuation through radio, television, film, literature, video games, etc. The twenty-first century, in particular, has seen exponential growth in the cultural influence of the superhero through cycles of blockbuster films. But the superhero’s origin in the comic book points to an intrinsic connection between the genre and medium. The multimodal integration of words and sequential images creates a unique narratology that has been most successfully utilized by the superhero, but the Gothic can be considered a close second. The comic book format resonates with horror and terror because it invites greater reader participation, and therefore emotional involvement in the story, by shortening the aesthetic distance through sequential narrative, closure, and amplification through simplification.

The term “comic book” is a misnomer. They are rarely humorous and are not books in the traditional sense. In this context, the abstracted term “comics” is even broader, encompassing but not limited to comic strips, one-panel cartoons, magazines,
graphic novels, and web comics, which have no physical form at all. Yet there is an ontological consistency across these disparate forms which binds them together and allows them to be classified as the same type of art. Though other terms such as graphic narrative have been proposed to describe the medium, it is difficult to overcome the cachet the term comics has accrued. Whatever the label, it is important to understand how the medium uniquely communicates information; as media scholar Marshall McLuhan stated: “The medium is the message.”

In his landmark work *Understanding Comics* (1993), cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud describes comic books as sequential narrative, defined as: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images [i.e., letters] in a deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Rather than just images in sequence, there must be a self-evident causal relationship between the visual, the verbal, and/or the sequential. I include the backslash because McCloud’s definition is not totalizing. Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* (1979-1995) are one panel comics, often with the text on a separate track underneath the image, while the *xkcd* webcomic strip “Click and Drag” (19 Aug. 2012) by Randall Munroe allows the reader to drag the image in any direction through seemingly infinite space within a panel. These examples may be outliers but should not be excluded from the categorization of comic. Rather, McCloud’s definition is helpful in circumscribing the area which marks comics as different from other art forms.

Comics are then a hybrid art form, commonly combining text in the form of speech bubble, thought balloons, or text below the panels with images in panels. However, this interpretation runs the risk of approaching the narrative and image of a
panel as separate tracks and denying the medium its intersectional peculiarity. Even though using the language of art and literary criticism is useful for analyzing and interpreting a comic, it is the integration of words and images, what the mind does when they are put together, that defines the medium. The combination creates a new aesthetic experience that offers its own challenges for interpretation.

Traditional painting portrays a hermetically-sealed spatial moment. It may carry an implied narrative of what occurred before or after but it is at the discretion of the viewer to interpret what those events may be. Inserting text into an image adds a temporal dimension lasting for the duration it may take for the characters to say or think the words contained in the speech bubbles or thought balloons. McCloud states: “In learning to read comics, we learn how to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same” (100); or, as legendary comic book creator Will Eisner put it: “comics are movies on paper” (qtd. in Inge xx). This addition of time facilitates narrative through multiple potential perspectives and narrators. An image, a speech bubble, a thought bubble, and a narration box could all appear within a single panel and each provide a distinct point of view and sense of time, particularly if the track is framing a flashback. This heteroglossia will then be compounded by moving from panel to panel and the panels’ layout on the page.

The panel as a sheet of time results in a particular phenomenology which initiates the reader’s entry into the storyworld when they are laid out in sequence on a page. The space between the panels, known as the gutter, makes the reader an active and willing participant in generating the story as the imagination fills in the gap between two separate images and transforms them into a single idea through what McCloud terms “closure”
Thomas Leitch explains: “the phenomenon of the gutter, the space between successive panels, [encourages] readers in search of narrative to supply intermediate actions, transitions, and programmatic spatial, chronological or thematic continuities that the comic never explicitly provides” (195). The imagination takes these unconnected moments in space and time and integrates them into a holistic narrative.

This ability to generate a storyworld through closure enables a more immersive reading experience through what Theodor Adorno termed “aesthetic sublimation”: “The consumer arbitrarily projects his impulses—mimetic remnants on whatever is presented to him. […] The identification, carried out by the subject, was not that of making the artwork like himself, but rather of making himself like the artwork. This identification constituted aesthetic sublimation” (7). This process is aided by the simplified, abstracted artwork of the comic book. McCloud explains that the more realistic an image of a face is, the more likely we are to see the face of another person. But by deliberately eliminating details, the image moves close to a platonic ideal of “face” rather than the specifics of an individual. It then becomes easier to visually identify with the image and project oneself onto the character. McCloud describes this as “amplification through simplification,” stating: “A cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled…an empty shell that we inhabit which enable us to travel to another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36). This projection or sublimation shrinks the cognitive dissonance between the fictional character’s emotional experience and the reader’s empathy.
The simplified imagery and closure across gutters create a participatory reading experience; what McLuhan terms “cool” media. Cultural historian William W. Savage Jr. explains:

comics books could carry heroes beyond the limits of possibility imposed by radio (sounds without pictures and thus without depth or significant personification) and film (sounds with pictures, but constrained by technology). Radio, short on data, gave the consumer’s imagination too much latitude, while film, rife with data, refused to give it enough. Comic books, however accidentally, managed to split the difference. (7)

It is a medium well suited to genre fiction, from the high action of cowboys and adventure heroes to the somber gloom of the Gothic mood. But the borders of these genres, as they were being demarcated in the early twentieth century, were porous and soon mixed in this unique medium to create something familiar yet wholly new: the superhero. Comic book writer Kurt Busiek identifies the central conventions of the superhero genre as superpowers, costume, code name, secret identity, heroic ongoing mission, and superhero milieu (133). The examination of the matrix of superhero conventions will establish the genre while a survey of its history will highlight how superheroes address societal fears and anxieties while mirroring the Gothic’s movement from marginalization to legitimization.
SUPERHERO CONVENTIONS

The superhero is a culmination of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ American popular literary traditions of rugged individualism. From the frontiersman to the cowboy to the urban private detective to the superhero, these characters protect civilization from the forces of savagery through violence, bringing order to a chaotic landscape through a generic narrative structure of order/disorder/order. While those earlier genres are predominately linked to a specific time and place, the superhero has leapt free of those temporal and spatial constraints to exist in a mythic present. Similar to the Gothic, the superhero story provides a catharsis by allowing the reader to vicariously experience transgressive violence and the reaffirmation of normalcy.

The superhero subsumes the conventions of its predecessors and other genres into itself. Sharing conventions can make it hard to identify the key elements that make the superhero unique. In Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (2006), Peter Coogan argues that the essential characteristics of a superhero are a pro-social mission, power, and identity, the last including the components of costume and code name (30-39). These tropes are present in the mythic gestalt of the superhero: the secret origin story. While Coogan presents these tropes as pieces of the superhero character, the superhero narrative also includes the ingredients of the milieu and the supervillain. Comic book writer Kurt Busiek explains: “These conventions need to be presented as legitimate options for characters within the narrative. Otherwise, the superhero is just a moron in a cape, not a functioning genre element” (137). The supervillain is an important contextual
aspect of the milieu; by disrupting the status quo which the hero must restore, the villain legitimizes the hero’s actions.

Though these elements establish the core of the genre, the superhero Gothic exists in the margins and plays with generic boundaries. Genres have a slipperiness in defining where they begin and end. And there already exists an indeterminacy in the superhero genre because the components of costumed identity, powers, and mission were established in earlier genres and mediums, such as in films starring Zorro; pulp magazines featuring The Shadow, The Spider, and others; radio shows like The Shadow and The Green Hornet; and comic strips such as Mandrake the Magician and The Phantom. Additionally, a character does not need to meet all the conventions to be considered a superhero. Busiek states: “My feeling has always been that ‘superhero’ is one of those vague terms that have certain hallmarks, and a character who has enough of those hallmarks is a superhero. But ‘enough’ is a nebulous term, and not everyone’s going to agree on which characters fall where” (133). Outside the question of how many tropes are necessary to fit into the superhero genre, it is important to understand how each convention functions.

The costumed identity is a tripartite of costume, code name, and secret identity. The costume is the most visual component, makes the most use of the comic book medium, and makes the superhero the most distinct from other genres. The skin-tight spandex was inspired by circus performers where the strongmen would often wear a flesh-colored leotard to show off their physique and a pair of trunks over that to avoid the appearance of nudity. The connotations of strength and confidence of the circus strongmen has carried over into the superhero. The bright colors of the costume are used
to help the characters pop off the printed page. The poor printing quality and crude artwork of early comic books needed color to help the characters stand out. The addition of capes can imbue a sense of motion, grace, and weightlessness. Masks hide their true identity behind a performative persona.

But superhero costumes aren’t just bright colors. They are highly organized symbols which publicly mark their bodies with their chosen identity as outsiders. Design critic Stephen Bayley explains: “By virtue of its intimacy with the body, however, fashion also functions as an extension of personality, a medium through which autobiographical statements (true or false ones) are made manifest. Clothes are a sort of theatre where the leading player—the self—is torn between function and decoration, protection and assertion, concealment and display” (qtd. in Marling 17). The superhero costume is almost always marked by some logo, like Superman’s S-shield, Batman’s bat, or Captain America’s patriotic star and stripes, which provide biographical information and give insight into their powers, values, and/or motivations and contributes to the iconization process.

The code name also conveys some autobiographical information. Spider-Man (Peter Parker) signifies both that he has spider-based powers and that he received said power from a spider bite. The Flash clearly indicates speed powers. Iron Man (Tony Stark) projects strength as well as a need to protect himself with his armor, particularly in the early stories when his chest plate kept him alive. But code names also have a tendency to highlight gender and race in a way it does not have to for white men. Comic book scholar William L. Svitavsky notes that whiteness is usually invisible while ethnicity is expressed: “Batman is not white Batman and Green Arrow [Oliver Queen] is
not green; whiteness is assumed but unimportant to the concepts that distinguish these characters. For most black superheroes [i.e. Black Panther (T’Challa), Black Lightning (Jefferson Pierce)], ethnicity is central to identity, whether expressed in a codename or kept secret by a costume” (159-160). Likewise, female heroes are more likely to have a feminine appellation attached to their code name, especially if their character is derivative of a pre-existing male hero: She-Hulk (Jennifer Walters) as the female version of the Hulk or Ms. Marvel (Carol Danvers) as the female version of the original Marvel Comics’ Captain Marvel (Mar-Vell). Femininity and race are expressed through the code name and costume while masculinity and whiteness are assumed as part of the superhero’s role in protecting the status quo of the patriarchal hegemony.

The costumed identity conceals a secret identity or alter ego. The superhero usually maintains a civilian existence and the mask ostensibly protects them and their loved ones from retribution by their enemies. But the secret identity serves a deeper function both for the superhero and for the reader. The premise of the costumed identity within the storyworld idealizes a strong and active performance while the secret identity allows for the inclusion of passive attributes of emotionality and vulnerability as part of a whole, authentic self (Brown, Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans 175). It is a way for the character to be both special and “one of us.” This is crucial for the genre’ appeal; the reader can both identify with the human alter ego and experience the wish-fulfillment of feeling extraordinary. The audience may see themselves in the ordinariness of Clark Kent but deep down yearns to be more special than they appear, like Superman (Fingeroth 50). The idealized and the ordinary embodied in a single
character reflects the reader’s experience of the dichotomy between the real and the imagined self.

Superpowers narratively set superheroes apart from other genres. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), literary theorist Northrup Frye defines four types of the hero in literature: if the hero is superior in kind to both men and environment, they are divine; if superior in degree, they are marvelous; if superior to men but not the environment, a leader; and if superior to neither men nor environment, they are normal (33-34). Superheroes possess capabilities beyond the limits of ordinary humans or even the laws of physics, whether they be granted by evolution, mutation, radioactive accident, mysticism, or by not being human, such as an extraterrestrial. According to Frye, the superhero must then either be divine or marvelous. Combining Frye’s definition of the marvelous with Todorov’s results in a person who is superior in degree to man and nature in a world in which the extraordinary is treated as ordinary. This is the superhero milieu. A superhero can also be Northrop’s leader, as seen in cases where a marvelous hero can command a divine one, such as Captain America leading Thor in the Avengers. Superheroes combine the divine/marvelous and the normal through the secret identity.

Superpowers do not need to be found in the body; they can be achieved through technology, like Iron Man’s armor, or highly developed mental and physical capabilities, like Batman. But powers are not absolute as there is often some weakness or vulnerability which accompanies them. Superman is rendered powerless by kryptonite, the radioactive remnants of his home world. At Marvel Comics, Stan Lee preferred to have superpowers be tinged with tragedy: Daredevil (Matt Murdock) was blinded by radioactive waste but his other senses were heightened, while for gifted surgeon Dr.
Stephen Strange the loss of the use of his hands sent him on his journey to become the Sorcerer Supreme.

If powers make a person super, then repeatedly acting for the good of society makes one a hero. Powers and costumes are neutral tropes which mark a character as Other; it is how they are used that makes a character a superhero or a supervillain. The superhero regularly acts selflessly to defeat evil and protect innocent lives and private property. But what form this should take is debatable. In *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett establish the following form of the superhero social contract:

A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with the threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal conditions; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)


A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action—and defended over and over again almost without respite […] The normal is valuable and is constantly under attack, which means almost by definition the superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo. (77)

In the former, the present is corrupted and must be redeemed by the restoration of an idealized past—which likely never existed. In the latter, the present must be protected from potential corruption. It may be argued that both are telling the same story, one before the disruption and one after. As Reynolds points out: “The superhero by his very existence asserts American utopianism, which remains a highly potent cultural myth”
The two descriptions are reconcilable because both exhibit faith in a future where normalcy is restored and society returns to a path towards utopia.

The superhero mission is not without its flaws. Either protecting or restoring the status quo perpetuates many objectionable features of American society concerning race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, etc. Building towards a utopian society could correct this, but in reality, the goals of peace, justice, and the American way are too abstract to be achievable by societal institutions. This is in part because said institutions are portrayed as too weak to protect society themselves; the police are inadequate to fight supervillains and the prison system cannot contain them. These establishments need the extralegal assistance of the superhero. It is also because, due to the tyranny of the serial, the restoration of the status quo in comic books is always temporary (Bongco 93); the villain always returns to disrupt order. Despite this, there is an underlying optimism in the superhero narrative in mankind’s ability to overcome the forces and terrors that threaten to overwhelm society (Berger 207). Even if what they are fighting for seems too abstract, superheroes keep fighting for them because it is a worthwhile goal.

While the superhero’s mission may benefit society, it may be asked why superheroes personally perform this duty. There are three primary motivations for superheroes to enact their pro-social mission: altruism, revenge, and redemption. Each are contained in the three of the most popular superheroes: Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. Superman began the tradition of doing good because he is a hero, not becoming a hero by doing good; his commitment is an a priori utilitarian assumption (Maverick, “No Tights, No Flight” 160). In Action Comics #1, written by Jerome “Jerry” Siegel and drawn by Joseph “Joe” Shuster, his motivation is described: “Early, Clark
decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created…Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who has sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!” (“Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!” 8). There is not yet an event or reason to do good; it is merely the American thing to do. Later, in Fantastic Four #1 (Nov. 1961) by writer Stan Lee (née Stanley Lieber) and penciler Jacob “Jack” Kirby (née Kurtzberg), this altruism is amended as a sort of noblesse oblige, that because someone has powers, they should use those powers for good. Mr. Fantastic (Reed Richards) rather obviously states: “Together we have more power than any humans have ever possessed!” The Thing (Ben Grimm) interrupts: “You don’t have to make a speech, big shot! We understand! We’ve got to use that power to help mankind, right?” (“The Fantastic Four” 32). Batman initially seems to act for altruistic reasons as his origin is not shown until Detective Comics #33 (Nov. 1939), six months after his first appearance in Detective Comics #27 (May 1939). It is then revealed by writer Bill Finger and artist Bob Kane that, following the murder of his parents, young Bruce Wayne makes a vow: “And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending my life warring on all criminals” (“Legend” 63). The fact that he declares war on all crime rather than targeting a specific individual makes his mission pro-social and never-ending. The origin of Spider-Man’s motivation in Amazing Fantasy #15 (Aug. 1962), written by Stan Lee and drawn by Steve Ditko, is also based on the tragic loss of a loved one, his Uncle Ben; however, he quickly tracks down the killer only to realize he had the opportunity to stop the gunman earlier but decided not to. This leads Peter Parker to a profound realization, as recounted by the narrator: “And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with
great power must also come--great responsibility!” (“Spider-Man!” 150). Spider-Man has spent the rest of his superheroic career trying to make up for the one mistake that cost his uncle his life and to make sure no one suffers as he has.

Popular culture historian Jennifer Stuller argues in “What is a Female Superhero?” (2013) that there is a difference to what motivates female superheroes. The psychologist William Moulton Marston created one of the first superheroines, Wonder Woman (Diana Prince) in All Star Comics #8 (Jan. 1942) with artist Harry G. Peter, to offset the predominant “blood-curdling masculinity” of superheroes. This criticism took the form of motivating Wonder Woman through love. Stuller explains that love in all its forms—romantic, filial, platonic, altruistic—is the defining characteristic of female superheroes. This does not preclude women from being motivated by revenge or redemption nor that male heroes cannot be motivated by love, but that a focus on collaboration and support is predominate in the female superhero narrative (20-21). Love is related to altruism, so this should not be viewed as a gendered motivation.

The superhero possesses moral autonomy but chooses to serve the values of the community by protecting life and property. They do so as a willing Outsider from society, enforcing the laws and values without following them. Their powers may make them inherently Other, but their costume marks their choice to be different. They straddle the boundary between inside and outside, synthesizing the oppositions in order to police the border. As a liminal figure, the superhero may act as an agent of negotiation between the community and the causes of anxiety and fear. The superhero can critique the threat of the supervillain and determine whether the problem comes from inside or outside of society. If the problem lies with the culture, then the superhero will work to
reform rather than actively change society. In “Superman in the Slums” from *Action Comics* #8 (Jan. 1939) by Siegel and Shuster, rather than fight every gang leader to stop delinquent behavior, Superman realizes the link between poor living conditions and delinquency. He then destroys the local slums so that the government is forced to build new housing, resulting in greater reform than he could achieve individually (101-114). But the majority of the time the superhero chooses to protect the status quo.

Within the storyworld, some superheroes are granted a dispensation by society to act on its behalf and others are treated as outlaws. In *The Beast & the Sovereign* (2009), Jacques Derrida analyzes political structures and identifies two types of people who place themselves outside the law, which he terms the sovereign and the outlaw or, more apropos for this study, the werewolf. The sovereign is excluded from the law because the people grant them an exemption (279). Captain America or Superman are granted autonomy because of their high moral caliber, the trust that they will use their powers to support and defend society (though how a society would enforce the rule of law on Superman is questionable). If the sovereign-hero uses their powers proactively, they then become a savior, or, if it is also against the desires of the community, a despotic ruler or a destroyer (Coogan 114). It becomes a matter of degrees whether they are villainous or not. This is also true for the werewolf, who exclude themselves from the law as an Outsider. They may then be categorized as a vigilante, who enforces the law without legal authority, or an anti-hero, who lacks the moral qualities of a hero. If an anti-hero’s actions have positive outcome for society, it has been done either for a selfish mission or is accomplished in an excessively violent manner. The superhero Gothic exists somewhere in the area between vigilante and anti-hero because as a Gothic figure they
are not condoned by society and, as will be seen, they do not possess all the conventions of the superhero. They possess enough traits to belong to both genres.

What makes the citizens in the storyworld accept superheroes’ pro-social mission and extralegal authority is the existence of threats that normal institutions cannot combat: the supervillain. Without an equal, if not superior, enemy, readers would have become bored with the four-colored bombast and the superhero genre would have become a flash in the pan. Superman’s earliest adventures saw him fighting war profiteers (Siegel and Shuster, “Revolution in San Monte, Part 2” 21-34) and corrupt business owners (Siegel and Shuster, “The Blakely Mine Disaster” 35-48); in Action Comics #12 (May 1939), he declared war on reckless drivers (Siegel and Shuster, “Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers” 157-170). While Superman was addressing contemporary concerns, there was little drama as these challenges posed no threat to the Man of Steel. The superhero should not overwhelm their opponent by sheer force nor be defeated by circumstances beyond their control. The superhero would not have lasted without the antithesis, the supervillain, to provide the genre’s thematic weight.

The superhero and the supervillain share the tropes of costumed identity and power. Those elements make a character super; it is the mission that decides whether a character is a hero or a villain. But merely saying that a villain has an anti-social mission, in contrast to a pro-social mission, is reductive. A supervillain may be self-serving, using their powers for personal gain, but their goal could also be to improve society and conquering the world is merely the most efficient way to accomplish this. It is that their methods are unacceptable as their means are unjust and immoral. As an
agent of change, the supervillain may want radical progress, imposing their will on society, rather than working for reform through communal consensus.

The supervillain is what really makes the superhero milieu function as a genre element, but one last element is important to consider. Even though superheroes fight battles around the world, in outer space, and in other dimensions, they are rooted in an always-contemporaneous America, an eternal present. Other cultures have created their own superheroes, especially in the twenty-first century global market\(^7\), but none have a similar self-sustaining mythic tradition that so intrinsically mirror national identity. The reasons for this lay in the history of the superhero genre in America.

Two crucial distinctions […] mark the American making of a popular legendary hero. First, there was a fantastic chronological abridgement: from elusive oral legend to printed form required here a few years rather than centuries. Legends hastened into print before they could be purified of vulgarities and localisms. Second, the earliest printed versions were in a distinctly American form; they were not in literature but “subliterature”—writings on popular and vulgar subjects, belly-laugh humor, slapstick and tall tales, adventures for the simple-minded. Crockett was not written down in any American counterpart of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* or in any *Morte d’Arthur*… (328)

In the twentieth century, the chronological abridgement was even more condensed, often bypassing the oral stage and going right to print, thus allowing the development and evolution of a character to be almost entirely documented. The American “subliterature” was new media that could take decades to be legitimized: film, radio, television, video games, and, for one set of legendary heroes for the modern age, comic books.

For the majority of its ninety-plus year history, the American comic book has been chiefly associated with superhero stories, dominated by the “big two” companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. The historiography of the superhero in the twentieth century is divided into several eras initially inspired by the Ages of Man from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 CE): the Golden Age (1938-1955), in which, according to comic book writer Nat Getler, heroes fought against evil as the key conventions of the genre were codified; the Silver Age (1956-1970), which added psychological complexity by exploring why heroes fight evil; the Bronze Age (1971-1985), which introduced social
commentary by examining the repercussions of heroes fighting evil; and the Dark or Iron Age (1986-2000), wherein the superhero moves away from reflecting the real world as heroes and villains battle with little concern for the fallout (Duncan and Smith 232-233). These paradigm shifts in style and content result from numerous factors which form a complex negotiation between social conditions, reader consumption, creative collaboration, market practices, and technological advances.

Each age moves through a predictable evolutionary pattern. Jeffrey A. Brown identifies a three-stage process of experimentation, classicism, and refinement (*Black Superheroes* 149-50). In the experimental stage, creators explore various art styles and narrative formulas until consumers indicate what they respond to and will therefore be popular. Publishers then imitate and repeat those key ingredients until they achieve a classic status. But oversaturation then leads readers to become fatigued and seek out variations through reinvention and subversion. Creators will then begin to experiment with themes and characterization, often beginning by returning the characters to their mythic gestalt, until a new paradigm in established.

The comic book is a product of the 1930s, though its style of narratology developed throughout the nineteenth century from narrative caricature to the newspaper comic strip. The use of illustration in newspapers was decried as sensationalistic and juvenile—similar to critiques of the Gothic in the early nineteenth century—but the comics page proved popular and became a feature of the rivalry between Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal American*. Advancements in color printing technology led Hearst to proclaim on 4 Oct. 1896, that, as opposed to Pulitzer’s four-page insert, his comic supplement was “eight
pages of iridescent effulgence that makes the rainbow look like a lead pipe” (qtd. in Inge 138).

In 1933, Harry Wildenberg of the Eastern Color Printing Company capitalized on the popularity of the newspaper strips by collecting a variety of syndicated series for reprint in a magazine-pamphlet format similar to the pulps.84 *Funnies on Parade* (1933) was an eight-page promotional giveaway for Proctor and Gamble but Maxwell Gaines experimented with placing copies on newsstands with a 10-cent sticker, which promptly sold out. Wildenberg and Gaines (born Max Ginzberg) convinced Eastern Publishing to create *Famous Funnies* #1 (July 1934) as a 68-page series to be sold in chain stores and newsstands (Regalado 95). Success quickly bred imitation as other companies entered the new comic book publishing field.

Among the problems inherent in repackaging comic strips was the finite amount of material available, with demand quickly exceeding supply, and the copyright fees, which could add significantly to costs. In response, Major Malcolm Nelson-Wheeler of National Allied Publication realized that he could cut out the middle man of the newspaper syndicates and instead publish all original material. Beginning with *New Fun* #1 (Feb. 1935), several titles were planned which, in a manner similar to the pulps, would be devoted to stories on the same theme. Nelson-Wheeler was an ambitious but not savvy businessman and was soon pushed out by his business partners at Detective Comics, Inc., Harry Donenfeld and Jack Leibowitz. But not before soliciting stories for a new title: *Action Comics*.

Two Cleveland teenagers, writer Jerry Seigel and artist Joe Shuster, had been trying to break into the lucrative comic strip market for years with their idea of a
superpowered, costumed man who fought the evils of the world, bringing together the components of super powers, secret identity, and pro-social mission in a unique and bombastic manner. However, the comic strip syndicates were not interested, with the Bell Syndicate responding in their rejection: “We are in the market for strips likely to have the most extraordinary appeal, and we do not feel Superman gets into that category” (Steranko 39). With dwindling options and having previously been published at National, Siegel and Shuster eventually agreed to repackage their superhero for comic books and sold the strip, along with the rights to the character. Superman appeared on the cover of Action Comics #1 (June 1938), ushering in the Golden Age of superhero comics.

The now-iconic image of the brightly-clad man violently lifting a car over his head captured the imagination of millions of readers who clamored for more. Seeing the sales success, other publishers wanted their own costumed and powered heroes, showing that the concept was imitable with variation with the first appearance of Batman in Detective Comics #27 (May 1939) by artist Robert “Bob” Kane (née Kahn) and writer Milton “Bill” Finger. These earliest heroes were social crusaders, battling crime, corruption, crooked businesses, everything that could make one feel powerless and threaten property, though they could do little to resolve real crises like the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. During a period when some thought that the American experiment had reached its limits, superheroes leaped beyond those boundaries to new possibilities. As these stories were targeted to youth, there also came a moral responsibility placed on such literature by the cultural guardians of society: parents, teachers, religious groups,
and government officials. The more violent content was toned down while other conventions were codified to reinforce social values.  

By 1940, the growing threat of the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific helped to solidify the superhero’s role in reinforcing mainstream cultural values. The new-found clarity of purpose, reflecting the public’s preoccupation with international politics, was embodied in characters like the Shield (Joe Higgins; *Pep Comics* #1 [Jan. 1940]), Captain America (*Captain America Comics* #1 [Mar. 1941]), and Wonder Woman (*All-Star Comics* #8 [Oct. 1941]), who draped themselves in red, white, and blue and were openly jingoistic and propagandistic. On the cover for *Captain America Comics* #1 by artist Jack Kirby, with story by Joseph “Joe” Simon and appearing on newsstands in Dec. 1940, the titular hero is shown punching Adolf Hitler in the jaw almost a year before the U.S. would officially enter World War II.  

In reinforcing shared societal values, the superhero genre also reflected its cultural biases. Superheroes of the 1940s were almost exclusively white and male. Women, when they appeared, were commonly portrayed as either a love interest whom the male superheroes resisted as justice took priority over love and marriage, or they functioned to provide a mother/sister/wife dynamic to balance out a team; Wonder Woman only joined the first superhero team, the Justice Society of America, as their secretary in *All-Star Comics* #13 (Oct.-Nov. 1942) by writer Gardner Fox and artist Jack Burnley. Female superheroes were frequently derivative of their male counterpart, identified with codenames which included “girl” or “woman” or other feminized nomenclature, and would be kidnapped or otherwise threatened as a damsel in distress to motivate the hero to act; female villains were femme fatales. Minorities, if they appeared at all, were
caricatured to mirror the stereotypes found in other popular media. In the case of the United States’ enemies, the images were offensively racist as part of the propaganda message.

Superhero comic books enjoyed immense popularity throughout the war years as their message of American exceptionalism and superior values mirrored the national consensus. Their adventures, particularly Superman’s, were translated into radio, cartoon, film serials, and, coming full circle, comic strips. But that clarity of purpose dissipated after World War II as post-war prosperity led Americans to embrace a new suburban lifestyle and consumer-based culture with its vision of unending progress focused on the nuclear family, a system which offered greater stability after the turbulence of the preceding decade-and-a-half (Johnson 70). Superheroes gradually disappeared from the newsstand by the early 1950s with only a few DC heroes remaining in continuous print.91

The place of superheroes was filled by other continuing genres, including funny animals, Westerns, war, science fiction, and teenage humor. Many returning GIs, who had received comic books as part of their care packages during the war, were still interested in the medium but wanted more mature stories that reflected their experiences and interests, leading to the creation of romance, crime, and horror comics. Crime comics, beginning with *Crime Does Not Pay* #22 (July 1942)92 by Charles Biro, Bob Wood, and George Tuska, gained a reputation for glamorizing the violent lifestyle of criminals before they were punished, often on the last panel. EC (Entertaining Comics; formerly Educational Comics)93 gained the most popularity with the horror titles such *Tales from the Crypt, The Vault of Horror*, and *The Haunt of Fear*, each with their own
satirical host to introduce and state the moral of the stories. Much like the golden age of the Gothic, crime and horror comics were caught between their proposed morality and their presentation but even more so as the visuals of the comic book brought an immediacy to the violence and the grotesque that had been left to the imagination in the Gothic novel. But that subversiveness was also part of their appeal. By 1952, almost every publisher had jumped on the bandwagon as horror comics constituted approximately 25% of the titles published (Schelly 54). But many of these titles lacked the sophisticated social commentary and high caliber artwork of the EC titles. Instead, as Jim Trombetta describes it: “The horror comic became a sort of cultural garbage can into which every unacceptable thought and impulse could be chucked” (32). Gothic horror’s innate ability to critique social norms was also quickly coming up against the burgeoning Cold War consensus culture.

The United States had emerged from their victory in World War II as a global superpower but was soon opposed by the communist USSR as the two nations entered into a forty-four-year Cold War of political, military, and technological gamesmanship rather than open warfare. Popular Western rhetoric deconstructed this complex geopolitical conflict into an essentialized dichotomy: the freedom, individualism, and right to private property of democracy and capitalism were good while communism was atheistic, totalitarian, and evil. Having learned throughout the second World War that neglecting international politics could threaten American prosperity, these new foreign concerns became central to the domestic policies and lifestyles throughout the 1950s.

Both post-WWII consumerism and the paranoia of communist infiltration conspired to foster a consensus culture within the United States. According to Matthew
J. Costello, the liberal consensus of freedom, progress, and prosperity had built a consensual national identity. But the strength of this consensus was at odds with individual identity as any deviation from the hegemonic ideology became a threat to its rhetorical power (3). The policing of democratic values reinforced the growing paranoia. Societal anxieties became centered on the nuclear family. Much as in Victorian England, the family became venerated as the central pillar of societal morals and values. Costello explains: “The rhetoric of the government and anti-communist experts—that the family was the bulwark of American values and thus the greatest weapon against the communist—linked the popular fear of communists to fears about the breakdown of the family” (51). One group who received substantial attention in this regard was the relatively new classification of teenager. The changing educational structures and familial priorities of the late 1940s created a period of adolescence which had not existed before. With their disposable time and income, teenagers were viewed by advertisers as a desirable market for consumers seeking self-expression and authentic identity (Wright 200). But this new independent lifestyle created concerns that commercial culture was intervening between youth and the sources of traditional values in parents, teachers, and religion (88). This, in turn, gave rise to the specter of juvenile delinquency, with the accompanying fears of familial breakdown and communist corruption. Though there is little statistical evidence for any increase in delinquency (Schelly 53), journalists, civic and church groups, and government agencies heightened public anxiety through increased coverage of the topic.

In seeking a cause onto which they could place the blame for the supposed epidemic of teenage crime, cultural guardians turned to a source influencing all youth:
mass media. The perceived influence of crime and horror comics led the entire comic book industry to be targeted. Decency crusades had previously been fought against comic books on religious, moral, and political grounds, but now psychology could be added to the arsenal. Building on his work with troubled teenagers, Dr. Fredric Wertham’s 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* described how all comic books were textbooks for crime and were corrupting the nation’s youth. In the same year, the Senate Judiciary Committee created a subcommittee to investigate the causes of juvenile delinquency. This almost proved the death knell of the comic book industry.

The Senate subcommittee had a broad remit to investigate juvenile delinquency and only spent a small portion of its time on comic books, two days on 21 and 22 Apr. 1954, with a third day added on 4 June. No one from the comic book industry was subpoenaed, but Bill Gaines of EC requested to testify to rebut the testimony of Dr. Fredric Wertham. Part of a damning exchange between Gaines and Senator Estes Kefauver concerned the cover of the recent *Crime SuspenStories #22* (Apr./May 1954):

Kefauver: Here is your May 22 issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman’s head up, which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

Gaines: Yes, sir, I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

Kefauver: You have some blood coming out of her mouth.

Gaines: A little.

Kefauver: Here is blood on the ax. I think most adults are shocked by that. (qtd. in Hajdu 270-271)
Though at issue here are questions of decency and good taste, the debate also points to the potentialities of the visualization of the Gothic. Gothic imagery can either provide horror by shocking with gore and disgust, as it does for Sen. Kefauver, or terror by denying such visuals and merely implying the violence, as Gaines interprets it. The spectrum between horror and terror can be a matter of opinion.

The Senate subcommittee ultimately determined comic books’ contribution to juvenile delinquency was inconclusive and gave more attention to the new medium of television. Not that mass media became a scapegoat; Kefauver concluded “that juvenile delinquency essentially stems from the moral breakdown in the home and community and, in many cases, parental apathy” (qtd. in York, “Rebellion in Riverdale” 111). Though no federal censorship was proposed, comic book publishers were cautioned to regulate their own content lest the government step in. Publishers joined together to create the Comics Code, a self-censoring set of content guidelines modelled after the Hollywood Production Code and the Television Code. Comic books companies paid the independent Comics Code Authority (CCA) to review the content of their books; any issue that did not receive the CCA seal of approval would not be sold on newsstands. The CCA guaranteed, among other things, that criminals were always punished and that established authorities and institutions were treated with respect. Of particular note is “General Standards Part B”:

1. No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
2. All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
3. All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
4. Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
5. Scenes dealing with, or instrument associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited. (Nyberg 167)

This section seems particularly vindictive towards EC and eventually drove that leading competitor from the field, leaving Bill Gaines to focus on the less-regulated magazine market with his humor title *MAD*. In all, the Comics Code was a desperate move to placate moral guardians, avoid government intervention, and lend respectability to a disreputable medium (Doherty 68). Though the CCA allowed the industry to survive, the damage was already done. By 1957, the number of titles published dropped by 25% while almost half the publishers shut down (Schelly 117). Its reputation tarnished, the industry also faced increased competition from new media of paperback books and television.

The Comics Code may have censored certain genres but the strictures of virtuous principles and moral purity, that “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” (Nyberg 166), aligned with the storytelling of the previous generation. It was time for superheroes to come out of their suspended animation. The sanitized violence of the battles between the American superheroes and the supervillains, usually thinly-veiled stand-ins for communists, had a symbolic purpose within the context of two global superpowers in conflict over the fate of the world. Showing do-gooders triumphing over evil perpetuated the message that democracy would overcome totalitarianism, though there were always more or returning villains, implying the need for constant vigilance.

The superhero hiatus of the early fifties meant that 1956 was the perfect opportunity not only to reintroduce these characters to new readers but to recontextualize
them. Though superheroes had begun in the 1930s as agents of change, they had now become agents of the state. For some, this meant putting a new face to an old codename. The Silver Age is generally accepted as beginning with the first appearance of Barry Allen as the new Flash in *Showcase* #4 (Oct. 1956) by writers Robert Kanigher and John Broome and artist Carmine Infantino, followed by Hal Jordan as the new Green Lantern in *Showcase* #22 (Oct. 1959) by Broome and penciler Gil Kane. For others, it meant reorienting their characterization. Comic book writer and Superman expert Mark Waid explains:

> As a nation, we had just validated the concept of the American way not only by leading—and helping to win—the greatest battle mankind had ever witnessed, but also consequently establishing ourselves as the world’s policemen. As a people, we were justifiably proud of ourselves and believed more than ever in the ideals of order and virtue. In reflection, Superman gradually curbed his rebel ways and became more of a superlawman—a global boy scout if you will. (5-6)

This idea of superheroes reflecting the United States as global policemen was represented in other characters as well: Barry Allen worked for the police department as a scientist; as Green Lantern, Hal Jordan became a member of an intergalactic police force, the Green Lantern Corps; in the popular *Batman* television show (1966-1968) the caped crusader worked as an honorary member of the Gotham City police department, albeit one with extralegal authority. With the increased role of government agencies like the FBI and CIA as well as citizens asked to observe their neighbors and report any un-American activity, DC Comics’ superheroes reinforced this policing as members of various governmental institutions.

These Silver Age superheroes also took on a decidedly science-fiction flavor as they intersected with another area of cultural concern: the space race. The USSR’s
launch of the Sputnik I satellite on 4 Oct. 1957 followed by the first man in space, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, on 12 Apr. 1961 shocked the United States out of its technological complacency. On 12 Sept. 1962, President John F. Kennedy made clear that the U.S.’s technological leadership and implied national defense would be secured by having a manned mission land on the moon by the end of the decade (Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Effort). The Space Race had created a new avenue of anxiety but these new superheroes proved prepared to defend the American way.

Marvel Comics publisher Martin Goodman always followed the popular trends in comic book publishing. Hearing of the success DC was having, he decided it was time to start publishing superheroes again. Writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby were tasked with creating a new superhero series they titled Fantastic Four. Though built on Silver Age science-fiction themes, Lee’s and Kirby’s interests lied elsewhere. Fantastic Four #1 (Aug. 1961) begins with four astronauts launching an experimental rocket ship; as Sue Storm puts it: “We’ve got to take this chance…unless we want the commies to beat us to space” (28). Once in space they are bombarded by cosmic radiation that grants them superpowers. But these powers can be as much a curse as a blessing, especially for the Thing, who is permanently transformed into a rocky, orange monster. This turn from celebrating science to concerns about radiation reflected youths’ anxieties about the military’s control of nuclear power within the context of the escalating Vietnam War (1955-1975).

The success of Fantastic Four allowed Lee, Kirby, and artist Steve Ditko to expand the shared Marvel Universe with more heroes who received their powers through radiation, appealing to the teenage Baby Boomers who had grown up under the specter of
the mushroom cloud where “The cultural fallout of the Bomb settled all over American culture…” (Doherty 8). The Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man, and Daredevil receive their powers through direct exposure to radiation and it is implied in *X-Men* that mutants are born with powers because they were exposed in utero. Additionally, Dr. Bruce Banner, Iron Man, and Captain America, the latter revived from being frozen in a block of ice since WWII, are all aligned in various ways with the military-industrial complex. Many of the supervillains gained their powers from radiation and were representatives of foreign, communist powers. This ultimately reflected the anxiety that atomic power was both a threat and defense for the nation.

Unlike their DC counterparts, Marvel heroes were not unwavering agents of the state but were more ambivalent, expressing frustration and doubt about their powers and battling each other almost as often as they fought villains. These internal struggles added psychological complexity to the characters which helped comic books to again appeal to teenage readers. By revealing the underlying tensions that result from superpowers, these heroes mirrored the anxieties beneath the image of domestic perfection and revealed the growing divide inherent in developing an authentic individual identity within a consensus culture. The Fantastic Four were an atypical family that bickered and fought, showing that, despite the efforts of psychologists and educators, the image of the nuclear family had never been normalized (Getner 937). Both the Hulk and the Thing felt cursed by the monstrous appearances. Spider-Man was a reluctant hero who struggled to make financial ends meet. These types of flaws added a layer of realism to the stories that was lacking from the somewhat staid superheroes of DC. Within a few years, Marvel had become the leading comic book publisher in the industry.
By the late sixties, the Silver Age was beginning to lose its luster as comic book companies were chaffing under the Comics Code in the face of the countercultural upheavals in society. Warren Comics found success publishing horror titles such as *Creepy* and *Eerie* in a black-and-white magazine format to avoid the Code. Other creators sought creative freedom by going underground to self-publish their “comix,” beginning with *Zap Comix* #1 (Feb. 1968) by Robert Crumb, which was initially sold out of a baby stroller. Underground comix broke every societal taboo concerning drugs, sex, nudity, and language, but their controversial subversion also began to reveal the potential of the comic book medium as an art form.

Things came to a head for mainstream publishers in 1970 when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare asked Marvel Comics to publish an anti-drug message in its leading comic book. However, depictions of drug use were forbidden under the Comics Code. Stan Lee felt that the anti-drug message was more important and, as a result, *Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 (May-July 1971) by writer Lee and penciler Gil Kane was published without the CCA seal of approval. As there was no public outcry, and with Hollywood having abandoned its Production Code in favor of a ratings system, the CCA revised the Comics Code in 1971, beginning the Bronze Age. In addition to adding a section 6 dealing with the portrayal of drugs and narcotics, sections 1 and 5 of the “General Standards—Part B” now read:

1. No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title. These words may be used judiciously in the body of the magazine (The Board of Directors has ruled that a judicious use does not include the words “horror” or “terror” in story titles within the magazine.) […]

5. Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead or torture shall not be used. Vampires, ghouls and werewolves shall be permitted to be used when handled in the classic tradition such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and other high caliber literary works written by
Edgar Allen Poe, Saki (H.H. Munro), Conan Doyle and other respected authors whose works are read in schools throughout the world. (Nyberg 172)

It is interesting to note that in the previous century genre fiction had been considered second-rate but now those authors were of “high literary caliber,” revealing how legitimization can occur over time. This loosening of the content restrictions opened a veritable floodgate for Gothic monsters and stories.

The new-found freedom also allowed for different concepts and directions in the Bronze Age as superheroes gained a social conscience, tackling human problems rather than global ones. Détente had lessened tensions with the Soviet Union and communist China while the Watergate scandal, culminating with the resignation of President Richard Nixon on 8 Aug. 1975, and the withdrawal from the police action in Vietnam following the fall of Saigon on 30 Apr. 1975 contributed to a loss of faith in traditional institutions (Costello 126). Superheroes, as symbolic representatives of such institutions, either lost faith in themselves or held said institutions accountable. Green Arrow learns his sidekick Speedy (Roy Harper) is addicted to heroin in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #85 (Aug. 1971 [O’Neil and Adams]). Steve Rogers quits being Captain America following the discovery of a corrupt government conspiracy in *Captain America and the Falcon* #176 (Aug. 1974 [Englehart and Buscema]). Iron Man battles alcoholism in *Iron Man* #128 (Nov. 1979 [Michelinie, Layton, and Romita]). The eroding hegemony led to a reexamination of traditional values, which reoriented society towards celebrating difference and otherness. In May 1975, Marvel relaunched their mutant heroes with *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (Wein and Cockrum) with an international cast which emphasized minorities and empowered women. 102 Readers, seeing themselves in these outsiders who
sought acceptance, empathized with the mutants’ plight and the X-Men became the industry’s most successful brand over the subsequent two decades. However, this increase in representation was driven behind the scenes by white male creators who failed to understand the cultures they were trying to represent and therefore lacked authenticity. Despite their best intentions, writers and artists fell back on positive and negative stereotypes of minorities and women due to cultural ignorance and creative compromises (Svitavsky 153), often resulting in tokenism or pandering.

By the late seventies, the newsstand market for comic books imploded due to rising costs amid stagflation but survived by moving to the direct market of sending the issues to comic book specialty stores which were supported by a devoted fan base. Comic book shops also allowed independent and alternative presses, who could bypass the CCA, to break into the market as they could be profitable on smaller print runs. This creative freedom found at the smaller publishers was appealing to creators as many artists and writers were seeking more creative control over, and financial reward from, their intellectual property rather than be work-for-hire at the major companies.103

The Reagan presidency of the 1980s attempted to reassert traditional values and re-create the consensus culture, resulting in an escalation of the Cold War and a backlash against second-wave feminism. While this consolidated conservative power in the religious right, the nation remained divided. The role of the superhero was critiqued as perpetuating rather than solving social ills in two landmark works which ushered in the Dark Age: Watchmen (Sept. 1986-Oct. 1987) by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons; and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (Feb.-June 1986), written and drawn by Frank Miller. Both works projected the era’s conservative politics onto dystopian
cityscapes where individual heroes must revolt against the corrupt establishment in order
to save humanity, even if the means to accomplish this goal paints them as villains.
These texts deconstructed the motive, morals, and purposes of superheroes and ushered in
an era of darker, more complex works that elevated the medium while targeting an older
audience outside the established superhero readership, leading to a boom period for the
industry at the end of the eighties. The Comics Code was revised for the final time in
1989, removing specific content restrictions as long as the story and art was acceptable
for a general audience.

The 1990s was marked by the comic book industry’s greatest boom and bust
period. Reports of Golden Age comics being auctioned for thousands of dollars drove a
speculator’s market in the expectation that comic books would be an investment.
Established publishers glutted the stands with more titles and special issues, highlighted
by various gimmicky covers, while several more companies entered their field, creating
their own superhero universes filled with grand, interconnected narratives with the
expectation that readers would buy the whole story either as issues or as collected trade
paperbacks in bookstores. Leading the way was Image Comics, the fastest-growing
company in the history of the medium. Established in 1992 by seven superstar artists
who left Marvel to have creative and economic control over their creations, Image
Comics emphasized spectacle through a style-over-substance approach that highlighted
the extreme art of the era. Characters were hypersexualized as men became hyper-
muscular, frequently carrying large, phallic weapons; women were just as tough as the
men but their feminine attributes became impossibly proportioned to accentuate their
desirability and reinforce the heteronormativity of both the male heroes and the largely
male readership. The most popular characters from Image, including Todd McFarlane’s Spawn and Eric Larsen’s Savage Dragon\textsuperscript{104}, are indicative of the shift in acceptance of Otherness as heroic monsters.

The grand narrative of the Cold War, that preventing nuclear Armageddon would result in a promised utopia, was proven false after the collapse of the USSR as the world did not adhere to a singular super-narrative, but was composed of fragmented, often-competing narratives that did not necessarily align with geopolitical boundaries. Without a stable, external Other against which to define itself, the Cold War consensus ceased to function and American identity fragmented into competing ideologies. This was symbolically reflected in \textit{The Death of Superman} storyline (Dec. 1992-Oct. 1993), where the first superhero dies battling the new villain Doomsday, whose design of pure muscle epitomized the extreme art style of the age (Jurgens et al., \textit{The Death of Superman}). Four replacement Supermen soon appear, each representing a potential new direction for American identity as part of the culture war: the teenage, Gen-X Superboy (Connor Kent); the armored, African-American Steel (John Henry Irons); the half-robot Cyborg-Superman (Hank Henshaw); and the anti-hero Last Son of Krypton (Eradicator) (Jurgens et al., \textit{Superman: Reign of the Supermen}).\textsuperscript{105} This was part of a trend to boost sales where the traditional hero, most of whom were created early in the Cold War, was replaced by a new character more representative of the post-Cold War era.

Collectors soon realized that scarcity is what makes a comic book valuable and that high sales meant their purchases would only depreciate. The bubble popped in the second half of the nineties, sending the industry spiraling. The number of issues sold dropped 25% between 1996 and 1997 and a further 16% the next year (Sacks and Dallas
Several publishers and comic book shops closed and Marvel Comics declared bankruptcy. Much like America itself, most superheroes retreated from the experimental phase and returned to more traditional characterization and storytelling, with Clark Kent returning as Superman, only now sporting a mullet. In *The Power of Comics* (2009) Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith term this a move from the “Era of Ambition” to the “Era of Reiteration:” “Doing so has tapped into the mythic qualities of the genre, demonstrating the vitality of heroic mythology for generating stories” (78). Coming out of its bankruptcy, Marvel Comics as well as DC Comics became more editorially-driven than creator-driven in order to try and maintain their dominance in the industry into the twenty-first century.

Superhero comic books’ near-monthly publication model over several decades serves as a reflector of the both the values and anxieties of the changing American culture in the second half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The conventions of costume, code name, secret identity, powers, pro-social mission, and modern milieu mark the genre, but the superhero’s borrowing from other genres, such as the Gothic, make the characters and their adventures infinitely malleable, containing everything from science fiction to the supernatural. A history of censorship parallels fears of the Gothic as a corrupting influence on readers. The gradual revisions in superhero comics reveal developing attitudes towards difference, allowing the monster-hero to transform into the hero-monster. And the superhero facilitated the transition from second-rate literature to recognized art form. Close readings of Batman as a monstrous hero, the Incredible Hulk as an ambiguous superhuman, Ghost Rider as a reluctant superhero, and Hellboy as a heroic monster form an arc that will substantiate the allegorical value of the intersection
of superheroes and the Gothic through their ability to sublimate cultural fears and anxieties through heroism.
There are a surprising number of parallels between the history and the conventions of the Gothic and of the superhero. Both began as marginalized genres scrutinized for censorship before progressing, in part due to their adaptations, to legitimization, with specific works reevaluated in critical and popular opinions from second-rate to high-caliber literature.

The tropes of the Gothic, including the negative emotional aesthetics of the sublime, the uncanny, the fantastic, and the abject, make the genre extremely malleable. Jerrold E. Hogle provides general parameters to establish a matrix of Gothic conventions, including: “an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space” which hide “some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story;” and an oscillation “between the laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural” that can range between terror and horror (Introduction, *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* 2-3). This matrix may be mapped onto the primary hallmarks of the superhero: superpowers, code name, secret identity, heroic ongoing mission, and superhero milieu. Kurt Busiek states: “If a character has three of the those six, he or she is probably a superhero” (133). When these conventions overlap in the mythic gestalt of the origin story, the character belongs in the superhero Gothic.
Superpowers exceed human comprehension and traverse into the realm of the sublime. The spectacle of Superman flying unaided through the air, the destructive potential of super-strength, or the body horror of the Incredible Hulk’s physical transformation result in feelings of astonishment and powerlessness at encountering powers greater than can be explained. Consider comic book writer Grant Morrison’s description of the people on the cover of *Action Comics* #1 witnessing Superman lifting a car over his head: “In the bottom left corner, a man with a blue business suit runs off the frame, clutching his head like Edvard Munch’s *Scream*, his face a cartoon of gibbering existential terror, like a man driven to the city limits of sanity by what he just witnessed” (6). This demonstration of superpowers creates a panic due to the shock of the impossible, which would fade as superheroes become a familiar presence. Most superheroes are treated without fear by the public in their storyworld because of their pro-social mission, but there are exceptions, such as Batman and Ghost Rider, who used fear as one of their weapons.

The costumed identity is a marker of Otherness, signaling that the character is a willing Outsider from the norms of society. As Charles L. Crow notes, masks and veils are a common trope of the Gothic (59). The costumed identity belongs to the realm of the superpowered or supernatural, separate from the laws of conventional reality. Both the costumed and the secret identity haunt the hero as the separation between the two must be protected. This fragmentation creates a doubling which may arrive at an uncanny effect. If their identity is revealed, the hero’s friends and family may feel the familiar become unfamiliar as they realize that the person they thought was normal is actually extraordinary.
Solely relying on a taxonomy of tropes to define a subgenre can lead to superficiality or empty formalism. As this study will demonstrate, the superhero Gothic is about reading superheroes in a Gothic mode. Reading across the ages of superheroes invites discussion, comparison, and reference to texts within that tradition. Popular culture scholar Christopher McGunnigle states: “The monster is more than read and deciphered—it is constantly re-reified into new languages and media that seek to expand and re-encrypt the monster’s cultural meaning” (113). In each superhero age, monsters-as-heroes are introduced, deciphered, and become familiar. They are re-encrypted by returning to their mythic gestalt or through the introduction of new monsters to embody contemporary cultural anxieties as shifting signifiers of Otherness. Close readings of the mythic gestalt and early adventures of Batman, the Incredible Hulk, Ghost Rider, and Hellboy will show how the threat of monstrosity is sublimated through heroism and how the superhero Gothic traces the changing meaning and acceptance of Otherness through the transformation of the monstrous hero to the heroic monster.
Batman is an uncanny figure of the night, simultaneously human and not human. His bat iconography originally had little symbolism beyond inducing fear in criminals. But through the iconization process, meaning was layered on the symbols and the character beginning with the Gothic, which was subsequently softened to be more palatable to young readers through superheroism. The result is Batman as monstrous hero, created to address the anxieties of the Great Depression but malleable enough to change with the cultural times.

Batman—or The Bat-Man, as he was initially introduced—was neither a superhero nor truly Gothic in his first appearance in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939). The Gothic conventions he adapted were too abstract to create the requisite negative aesthetic; the superhero tropes were too new to have been defined, Superman having premiered as a novel science fiction concept only a year earlier in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938). Rather, Batman began as the descendent of urban detectives, such as Sam Spade or the Shadow (Kent Allard/Lamont Cranston), and idle aristocrats who are secretly masked heroes, such as Zorro (Don Diego de la Vega) or the Green Hornet (Britt Reid). The only thing that set him apart was that he dressed like a giant bat. But therein lay the potential for the Gothic (the bat motif) and the superhero (costume, code name, and secret identity) to be introduced into the comic book series and synthesized into a single character through iconization. Batman evolved from urban vigilante to monster hunter to monstrous superhero over the course of the first year of Batman stories...
as genre elements were layered onto the character and storyworld through an iconization process until their apotheosis established the superhero Gothic.

Batman’s creators, artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, split the difference in iconization by taking a symbol with preexisting meaning, the bat, and attaching it to a cypher character. Not that the bat was the initial idea. The exact creation of Batman is lost to time, though a few details remain. Accounts vary, but most agree that Kane met with his friend Finger on a weekend in early 1939 at Edgar Allan Poe Park in New York City—an unintentional homage to a leading figure in the American Gothic and the creator of the detective story—to discuss a character he was developing. Kane’s editor at Detective Comics, Inc. (later DC Comics), Vincent “Vin” Sullivan, wanted a superhero that fit the theme of hardboiled detective fiction of their comic book *Detective Comics*. Hearing that Superman creators Joe Siegel and Jerry Shuster were making eight hundred dollars a week apiece—Kane was making thirty-five to fifty a week drawing humor strips—convinced Kane to take the assignment on a Friday. But with only one superhero from which to draw inspiration, there was little guidance on how to create a new one. Kane took Superman’s design and traced various costumes over it, arriving at a character in a red and black outfit and a domino mask named Birdman; it is unknown if Birdman would have had any superpowers. Finger suggested a more Gothic aesthetic with a nocturnal black-and-grey color scheme and adding a cape, gloves, and a hood with a mask, moving from a bird motif towards a bat. Batman arrived on Sullivan’s desk on Monday (Kane with Andrae 35, 41; Daniels, *Batman* 18-25). With a striking Gothic character design in place, Kane and Finger were given the greenlight to create a story.
The use of a bat motif immediately infuses Batman with an air of menace. Kane claims he drew inspiration from a Leonardo da Vinci quote: “And your bird shall have no other model than a bat” (Kane with Andrae 36); Batman initially had a stiff cape, similar to da Vinci’s sketches for a solo flying device, before taking on a more scalloped, flowing design. But the bat is also an abject creature that defies traditional scientific classification. It is the only mammal that flies, sleeps hanging upside down, and most species are nocturnal. It makes sense that dreadful folklore would develop around such an animal, from carrying disease to witchcraft. As Arthur Asa Berger explains: “the bat is a symbol of something deadly and strange, a nocturnal beast associated with vampirism and the occult” (161). Though Batman’s use of bat imagery is coupled with the color black to invoke supernatural associations and therefore inspire terror in criminals, this does not immediately make him a Gothic character.

The Gothic was only one of the various sources Kane and Finger drew on—and sometimes plagiarized—in crafting their masked vigilante. While Superman is the obvious point of inspiration, Kane looked towards Douglas Fairbanks Sr.’s acrobatic performance in The Mark of Zorro (1920; dir. Fred Niblo), the first adaptation of the swashbuckler, and mystery film The Bat Whispers (1930; dir. Roland West), which featured a masked villain called The Bat. Batman’s urban milieu, originally an unnamed city before being identified as New York City (Fox and Kane, “Batman Versus the Vampire, Part One” 40) and later the fictional Gotham City (Finger and Kane, “The Case of the Joker’s Crime Circus” 36), was inspired by gangster movies and the Universal horror films, the latter influenced by German Expressionism (Kane with Andrae 1, 38, 111). However, even with these stated intentions, it is well known that
Kane followed the common practice of swiping panel designs and layouts from other comic artists (Cronin, “Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #173”). Finger viewed Batman as a combination of D’Artagnan from Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective Sherlock Holmes (1887-1927 [Daniels, *Batman 23*]). Finger was likely inspired as much, if not more, by the recent popular interpretations of those characters on film, radio, and comic strips as by the original stories. Finger also drew on pulp detectives like the Shadow, later stating “My first Batman script was a take-off on a Shadow story” (qtd. in Tollin 132). Specifically, the plot was based on “Partners in Peril” by Theodore Tinsley from the November 1936 *The Shadow Magazine*, the first Shadow story not written by Walter Gibson; the story was published under the pseudonym Maxwell Grant, as all Shadow stories were. Batman inker and artist Sherrill “Jerry” Robinson speculated that Finger struggled to move from writing humor to action stories and used the Shadow as a model (Cronin, *Comic Book Legends Revealed #484*). The result of these influences was a mixture of the action of the pulp crimefighter, the intellect of the British detective, and a hint of the macabre.

Batman was not inspired solely by popular culture but by the socio-political context. The 1930s were a Gothic decade. Prohibition in the previous decade had exposed both organized crime, which consolidated economic power in shadowy criminal conspiracies, and its related corruption, which resulted in a distrust of police and political institutions. The Great Depression, defined by its high unemployment rate, persisted throughout the thirties despite government intervention. This resulted in widespread despair and emasculation, particularly among the manual laborers affected by the Dust Bowl who could no longer support themselves nor their families. Some, such as Senator
Huey Long, popular radio host Father Charles Coughlin, and historian Charles A. Beard, felt that the American democratic experiment and laissez-faire capitalism had run its course and new, more radical solutions were needed, ranging from collectivism to socialism, fascism, or communism. In Europe, Nazi Germany was perpetuating the suppression of Jews and other minorities while annexing Austria (March 1938) and invading Czechoslovakia (March 1939) with little opposition from world powers in the hopes of appeasing Chancellor Adolf Hitler. In response to these international aggressions, the United States adopted an isolationist and non-interventionist policy. All of these factors contributed to a disenchantment with the traditional utopian vision of American progress as citizens increasingly felt preyed upon by unseen and uncontrollable forces.

A new type of hero was needed to combat these pervasive ills. Superman had been developed by Siegel and Shuster throughout the 1930s as an embodiment of the New Deal ethos, an outside force that would come into society and remove disruptive elements so that the common man could have a fair chance at the American Dream. As a “champion of the oppressed” (Siegel and Shuster, “Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!” 8), the Man of Steel fought for the everyman by rooting out corrupt politicians (ibid. 18-20) and businessmen (Siegel and Shuster, “The Blakely Mine Disaster” 35-48), tackling prison reform (Siegel and Shuster, “Superman Goes to Prison” 129-142) and illegal stock trading (Siegel and Shuster, “Superman and the ‘Black Gold’ Swindle” 143-156), even tearing down slums to force the government to erect new apartments (Siegel and Shuster, “Superman in the Slums” 113-114). However, the New Deal was increasingly considered ineffective, with treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau
testifying to the House Ways and Means Committee on 9 May 1939: “We have tried spending money. We are spending more than we have ever spent before and it does not work. […] I say after eight years of this administration that we have just as much unemployment as when we started…. And an enormous debt to boot!” (qtd. in Will). Rather than a New Deal savior, it was more and more apparent that the average citizen would have to fend for themself and overcome their hardships through individual hard work and ingenuity.

This ethos would require a different type of superhero. Jeffrey K. Johnson equates Batman war on criminals to the average American’s battle against oppressive social and economic forces (24). Even though Wayne is independently wealthy, he does work hard to prepare to become Batman: “He becomes a master scientist. Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats” (Finger and Kane, “Legend” 63). Johnson’s allegorical interpretation, though not perfect, does invite an intriguing correlation between the individual citizen’s lone struggles and Batman’s vigilantism.

Vigilantism has its roots in the deficiencies of the legal system. Throughout the nineteenth century, the judicial system could not keep pace with the United States’ westward expansion. Frontier communities resorted to mob rule, with an individual or a posse exercising extralegal authority to enact perceived justice and undertaking law enforcement and judicial activities through violence. There was a racial component to this as well, as vigilantes policed Otherness by hunting escaped slaves and in lynchings. But the closing of the West by 1890 as well as the shift from agrarian to urban population centers meant that a centralized legal system was firmly established and that the
individual no longer needed to take justice into their own hands.\textsuperscript{119} Those who did so, as the history of racism and lynching indicate, adopted the guise of outlaws and began to wear masks or hoods in the pursuit of their own brand of justice. Comics scholar Chris Gavaler points to the 1905 novel \textit{The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan} by Thomas F. Dixon Jr. as perhaps the first example of a costumed secret identity as the Klan fights to protect their hegemonic ideal through fear and violence (\textit{On the Origin} 178-180).\textsuperscript{120} Though the masked pulp hero was quickly divorced from this racist reality, there certainly is enough context for segments of the population to fear a person who dresses up like a bad guy while claiming to fight for justice and order.

The metropolitan city became viewed as the culmination of civilization, with its implication of fully-functioning social institutions. But this urban landscape was rife with tensions and contradictions, particularly as it was portrayed in fiction as rampant with crime. The dichotomy of optimism and pessimism is represented by the New York World’s Fair, opening 30 Apr. 1939, which offered a futurist vision of the world of tomorrow while in the distance the world’s tallest building, the Empire State Building, remained largely empty due to the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{121} Superman’s Metropolis, with its vertical skyscraper canyons for the Man of Steel to leap over, presented a kaleidoscopic modernism; Batman’s Gotham City, as Scott Bukatman describes it, is “a concatenation of hidden spaces, corners, and traps” (\textit{Matters of Gravity} 203). Journalists and the media presented the crowded slums, with their accompanying gang violence, as a dangerous and unhealthy environment that made people weak and dependent. Then-presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt stated in his 23 Sept. 1932 address to the Commonwealth Club: “More than half our people do not live on farms or on lands and
cannot derive a living by cultivating their own property. There is practically no more free land. [...] We are not able to invite the immigration from Europe to share our endless plenty. We are now providing a drab living for our own people.” Without open land to develop self-reliance, people had to depend more on their communities. But the city was not a unified community; rather, it was divided into neighborhoods, often along ethnic identities. Some were concerned that the urban milieu did not allow immigrants to become fully assimilated and therefore diluted the national character into racialized Others through hybrid “hyphen-Americans.” The Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants in order to “maintain the racial preponderance of the basic strain on our people and thereby stabilize the ethnic composition of the population.” The metropolitan city, the primary locus of the superhero, was the embodiment of several cultural dichotomies of the 1930s, both sublime and uncanny, a site of boundless possibility and a locus of anxiety.

While Superman fought against the plight of average citizens, Batman initially confined his crime-fighting to protecting the upper class from violent crimes. Earlier adventurers, such as Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel (Sir Percy Blakeney)122, and even Dixon’s The Clansman, fought against what they perceived to be corrupt governments. And, like golden age Gothic, these stories were set in a romanticized past; respectively, Spanish/Mexican California (1767-1848), the French Revolution (1789-1799), and the Reconstruction South (1865-1877). By the 1930s, pulp adventures had moved forward to the present day in a world where the U.S. government was viewed more positively. Vigilantes’ new target was the criminal class, villains who disrupt everyday order just as the Great Depression had disrupted social normalcy. Batman’s protection of the
capitalist elite sends a message that violence can affect anyone, though without the moral that the citizenry is all in this together. A lone costumed vigilante with an unknown motivation dispensing their own brand of justice—Batman regularly killed criminals in his first year of publication—should not be a reassuring image. Batman’s early stories are existentially terrifying because they reflect a world where civilizing institutions—not just government but religion, schools, and family—have failed to prevent the crimes that disturb normalcy. But they are appealing because they present the idea that the world can be set right by a righteous individual. They confront the reader with the lesson that the individual must rely on their own hard work to survive.

Though Batman’s adventures do not reflect all these historical realities, the dark undercurrent of the popular subconscious events do influence the stories’ subtext. Batman is introduced on the cover of Detective Comics #27, his black-and-grey costume contrasting with the garish yellow background as he swings over the rooftops carrying a man in a headlock. The story inside is distinct from the daytime cover as the first panel immediately places Batman as nocturnal, more in line with his totemic symbol. In the following six succinct pages, Batman investigates the successive murders of business partners. Batman appears as a known quantity as criminals recognize and already fear him. Adding to his mysterious aura, Batman does not speak until the dénouement when he reveals that the industrialist Stryker was behind the murders to get out repaying a loan. When Stryker attempts to flee, Batman punches him into a vat of acid, declaring: “A fitting end for his kind!” (Finger and Kane, “The Case of the Chemical Syndicate” 9). The story ends with the uncanny reveal that Batman is secretly Bruce Wayne, who was introduced in the opening panels as a bored socialite.123
On the surface, there are several indicators which could lead a reader to interpret Batman as a superhero. There is the trifecta of skintight costume/codename/secret identity as well as an *a priori* assumption that he has a pro-social mission as he fights crime. The opening text describes him as: “The ‘Bat-Man,’ a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrong doer, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society…his identity remains unknown” (Finger and Kane, “Case of the Chemical Syndicate” 4). While superhero conventions and the comic book medium invite comparisons to Superman, Batman has more in common comic strip heroes like the Phantom or the masked mystery men, such as Batman’s predecessor and DC Comics’ first masked hero, the Crimson Avenger (Lee Walter Travis), created by Jim Chambers and first appearing in *Detective Comics* #20 (Oct. 1938). Notably, Batman was proceeded in the Nov. 1934’ *Popular Detective* pulp magazine by the Bat (Dawson Clade), a vigilante who wore a sackcloth mask with a bat emblem. Additionally, another character dressed in black with a hooded mask and cape named the Black Bat (Anthony Quinn) premiered in the July 1939 *Black Book Detective* magazine, mere months after Batman. Kane would later state: “A scant sixty days made the difference between Batman’s becoming a new superstar in comics and being consigned to oblivion” (43). But it was more than a matter of timing that made Batman an icon and regulated pulp heroes like the Crimson Avenger and Black Bat to relative obscurity in pop culture history.

One of the key differences between Batman and both pulp heroes the Bat and Black Bat is the presentational medium. Though often accompanied by illustrations, pulp magazines are text-based stories while comic books are a text/visual hybrid which can
present directly what text might only imply. The former can give the reader’s imagination too much latitude in determining time and space and directing action while the latter strikes a balance where freedom of imagination can be skillfully guided by the creators. Comic books’ reliance on visuals contributes to the iconization process. Though the Bat does wear a distinctive bat emblem, he is otherwise dressed in a business suit; the Bat also only appeared in four stories, lacking the repetition to reinforce the image as an icon. The Black Bat, costumed in black with a cape and cowl, possesses no significant symbolic imagery for the reader to latch onto. The comic book Crimson Avenger is merely a masked detective who, like the Shadow, dresses in a trench coat, fedora, and red domino mask, and, like the Green Hornet, uses a gas gun and has an Asian valet, Wing Han. He does not have an iconic symbol and does not meet the criteria for a superhero beyond mask and codename, though he would begin wearing a skintight costume beginning in *Detective Comics* #44 (Oct. 1940 [Lehti]). Batman, on the other hand, was designed with an extensive bat motif, from the scalloped cape to the cowl’s pointed ears to the bat emblem on his chest. This branding was soon extended to a range of gadgets. What begins in *Detective Comics* #28 (June 1939) with a generic silk rope to swing on (Finger and Kane, “Frenchy Blake’s…” 12-13) and in *Detective Comics* #29 (July 1939) a utility belt and suction cups to aid in climbing (Fox and Kane, “Batman Meets Doctor Death” 20) soon becomes a batarang and batgyro in *Detective Comics* #31 (Sept. 1939 [Fox and Kane “Batman Versus the Vampire, Part One” 42], a batplane in *Batman* #1 (Finger and Kane, “Professor Hugo Strange and the Monster Men” 161), and the Batmobile in *Batman* #5 (Spring 1941 [Finger and Kane, “The Riddle of the Missing Card” 131]). The repetition of bat imagery reinforces its meaning as an icon, moving
beyond the Gothic motif to have each bat-gadget coming to stand for the character himself.

The comic book medium also allowed Batman more versatility in mixing genres. The pulp magazines had created a contract with the reader over the previous decades so that, even if a mystery magazine included novel elements like a codename/costume/secret identity, they needed to cohere to the audience’s genre expectations. For the Black Bat, that meant that he was constrained to detective stories. The nascent superhero genre had no such expectations yet, allowing Batman the freedom to rove from his initial detective genre, with the most closely related being the Gothic. With the overlapping traditions of mystery and the supernatural as well as the symbolic power of the bat, Batman was soon moving away from the initial mandate of detective stories into the Gothic.

Following another standard detective story, “Frenchy Blake’s Jewel Gang” by Bill Finger in *Detective Comics* #28, writer Gardner Fox was brought on to help keep the series on schedule. Fox immediately saw the potential in Batman for tales of terror rather than boilerplate mysteries. The cover for *Detective Comics* #29 features Batman swinging through a window in a stone wall (alas, with a rounded Romanesque rather than a pointed Gothic arch) to knock over a turbaned man, which interrupts the pointed-eared and monocled mad scientist in the foreground. The image immediately evokes a Gothic aesthetic through an antiquated space, likely inspired by the Universal monster movies, and a touch of exoticism. Inside, the opening text changes the hero’s description from “The ‘Bat-Man,’ a mysterious and adventurous figure…” (Finger and Kane, “Frenchy Blake’s…” 11) to “The Batman, eerie figure of the night…” (Fox and Kane, “Batman Meets Doctor Death” 18). In the two-part story, Dr. Hellfern extorts the city’s wealthy
using his death pollen. Dr. Hellfern seemingly dies in a laboratory fire in *Detective Comics* #29, only to return *Detective Comics* #30 (Aug. 1939), now possessing a green, skull-like visage (Finger and Kane, “Return of Doctor Death” 38). Though built as a detective story, Dr. Hellfern’s uncanny return as a grotesque moves Batman closer to the Gothic, setting the villain apart from normal society by having his appearance match his morality.

In the next two issues, Fox and Kane drop all pretense of the detective theme, transitioning Batman’s characterization from vigilante to monster hunter by delivering a straightforward horror story in “Batman Versus the Vampire.” The cover of *Detective Comics* #31 looks like a movie poster as Batman looms out of the background over the scene of a red-robed man carrying a woman up to a castle. The cover is distinct not only for its striking visual design but because Batman is portrayed in full Gothic splendor. For the uninformed reader, it would be unclear that Batman is not a vampiric overlord to whom the robed figure is bringing the woman. That ambiguity highlights the tension of Batman as a figure of terror who protects civilization. This is reflected in the story as it is the first time that Batman is shown scaring citizens and not just criminals; Batman lands on top of an automobile, causing the driver to exclaim “Help! The Devil himself” (Fox and Kane, “Batman Versus the Vampire, Part One” 45). In *Detective Comics* #31, Batman—now introduced as a “weird menace to all crime” (Fox and Kane, “Batman versus the Vampire, Part One” 40)—discovers Bruce Wayne’s fiancée, Julie Madison, wandering in a hypnotic fugue. Their doctor (also hypnotized) recommends a journey to Hungary, “the land of werewolves” (41-42). Batman watches over Julie’s journey, first protecting her from the Monk, described as “A strange creature, cowled like a monk, but
possessing the powers of Satan!” (40), and then battling a giant ape to rescue her. In
Detective Comics #32, Batman follows the Monk to Hungary where Dala, the Monk’s
female assistant, bites Madison on the neck, confirming that she and her master are
vampires. Dala leads Batman and Julie to the Monk’s castle. Batman escapes from a
pack of wolves and then uses silver bullets to kill the Monk and Dala, thereby freeing
Julie from her hypnotic spell.

The script plays to Kane’s artistic strengths, with its use of shadow and canted
angles allowing for more dynamic action than in previous issues. But the story is
illogical, an almost incoherent jumble. Batman regularly puts Julie in danger in order to
get to the next action piece. The Gothic elements are shambolic, drawing on disparate
sources to create a sense of terror. The mixture of werewolf mythology, from the Monk
threatening to turn Madison into a werewolf rather than a vampire to Batman defeating
the vampires by shooting them with silver bullets (Fox and Kane, “Batman Versus the
Vampire, Part Two” 57, 60), indicates only a cursory knowledge of the original Dracula
text. It is more likely that the information was gleaned from the popular Universal
Dracula movies of the 1930s. It is possible that the changes were made to avoid any
potential copyright lawsuit, Dracula not having entered the public domain; DC Comics
was very protective of its own copyrights and would have expected the same from
others. The vampiric Monk’s hypnotic powers, which are used to control someone’s
fiancée, and the female assistant are drawn from Bram Stoker’s Dracula, with Batman
replacing Van Helsing’s monster hunting crew. Having the vampire be called the Monk
harkens back to the golden age of the Gothic, when Catholicism was utilized as an
indicator of devious power. The Monk’s outfit of red robes and a hood with a skull-and-
crossbones on the forehead do not necessarily constitute a costume; as Richard Reynolds points out in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), there is not enough to distinguish him as an actual monk instead of a costumed villain with codename (49). However, the introduction of superpowers, especially supernatural ones like vampirism, hypnosis, and the Monk’s transformation into a wolf (Fox and Kane, “Batman Versus the Vampire, Part Two” 54, 56-57), builds the superhero milieu, making the Monk a precursor to the recurring supervillain.

The Monk’s home in Hungary, standing in for Transylvania, reinforces the threat of the racialized Other from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Batman regularly polices this type of Otherness in his early adventures. Dr. Death employs the Indian Jabah and the Cossack Mikhail as servants and enforcers until each are killed by Batman (Fox and Kane, “Batman Meets Doctor Death” 26; “Return of Doctor Death” 36). Batman travels to Gotham’s Chinatown to battle Hindus, whose mastermind is revealed to be a white man in yellow-face, in *Detective Comics* #35 (Jan. 1940 [Finger and Kane, “The Case of the Ruby Idol” 85-97] and the Chinese Tong, an organized criminal gang whose leader appears similar to Sax Rohmer’s Dr. Fu Manchu, in *Detective Comics* #39 (May 1940 [Finger and Kane, “The Horde of…” 6-18]. And Batman and Robin fight African pygmies who are trying to rescue an evolutionary “missing link,” a giant white man who appears as a cross between an ape and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan, in *Batman* #2 (Summer 1940 [Finger and Kane, “The Case of the Missing Link” 86-88]). The exoticism and orientalism featured in these stories play into the Gothic conventions of the era as a way of policing Otherness.
In battling mad scientists, vampires, and racial Others, Batman is not adapting any specific Gothic text but rather draws on a web of intertextuality that populates popular culture. These generic monsters live in the shadows of literary predecessors. But the villains create a potentiality for Batman to move beyond being a cypher. Not only do they provide a fair fight, as Batman must overcome more than the average criminal (certainly fairer than Superman using his prodigious powers to fight corrupt businessmen and politicians), there is a symbiosis in Batman battling Gothic villains as a reflection of his own outsider status. Berger states: “When he [Batman] takes on his disguise he becomes a grotesque, a macabre figure whose sacred mission it to battle other grotesques” (163). Though a macabre figure, Batman inherits the role of the classic monster hunter and becomes a humanizing agent. Similar to how Dracula’s Abraham Van Helsing embodied all that was good in the late-nineteenth century gentleman, Bruce Wayne represents all that is considered good in mid-century American society: educated, strong, virtuous, wealthy, and masculine. He protects society from that which would corrupt it, even though as Batman he is also an outsider from that society by adopting monstrous icons. The only question concerning the taxonomy of the monster hunter is whether Batman is acting by choice; as Heather Duda states: “Not only must these early monster hunters be pure and good, they must also make the choice to be monster hunters” (11). In his first six appearance, no indication is given as to why Bruce Wayne decided to dress up like a man-bat and chase criminals over rooftops. That would soon change with the revelation of Batman’s origin.

*Detective Comics* #33 (Nov. 1939) would likely be a largely forgotten story of Batman battling a Napoleonic madman with a death ray on a dirigible if not for the
While “The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom” was written by Gardner Fox, this opening, framing Batman’s mythic gestalt, was penned by Bill Finger. As a child, Bruce Wayne witnesses his parents’ murders when a random mugging goes wrong. Days later, young Bruce makes an oath, revealing why he chooses to fight evil: “And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals.” After spending years preparing, Bruce is ready to begin his war on crime but needs a disguise: “Criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot. Some disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible...A . A...’ -As if in answer, a huge bat flies in the open window. ‘A Bat! That’s it! It’s an omen. I shall become a BAT!” (62-63; emphasis in original). Even though the reader knows that Batman is human, it is clear here that Wayne’s intention is that the symbol of the bat should invoke terror through its association with the supernatural; that the supernatural exists within the storyworld is established by the vampiric Monk.

Batman’s origin reads as a Gothic story and neatly fits within Jerrold E. Hogle’s matrix of Gothic conventions: an antiquated space, secrets from the past that haunt the character, and the oscillation between natural laws and supernatural possibilities to creating a negative emotional affect (Introduction, The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction 2-3). Wayne is psychologically haunted by the murder of his parents. Kane states: “Bill [Finger] and I discussed it and we figured there’s nothing more traumatic than having your parents murdered before your eyes” (Daniels, Batman 31). Wayne intimately knows the feeling of helplessness that criminals can create and the fragility of the law to prevent such crime. He recognizes that he can only rely on himself to
overcome his powerlessness through self-reliance by training his body and mind. His fears are made tangible not as the mugger who murdered his parents but as all crime, which means the conflict can never be resolved (Batman seemingly has little regard for the social conditions which may lead an individual to criminal acts). Whereas previous aristocratic adventurers like Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel are motivated by a sense of *noblese oblige*, Batman possesses the more primal motivation of vengeance. To aid in this, Wayne creates the alter ego of Batman, through which he oscillates between the natural and seemingly supernatural and marks himself as Other. Within this origin, the shadowy alley where the Waynes are murdered, later known as Crime Alley, as well as stately Wayne Manor are antiquated spaces.

Why does Wayne choose to fight crime as Batman rather than in a socially acceptable role as a police officer, federal agent, or private detective? On a metatextual level, it is because Kane and Finger set out to create a superhero and therefore needed a costumed identity. The reasoning given in the origin story is that the murder of Bruce’s parents is a violation of the social contract, that the institutions of law and order could not prevent the crime, leaving the child emotionally and psychologically othered. Wayne shows his distrust of police to do their job by taking the law into his own hands and marks his otherness through the symbol of an abject creature, the bat; he wishes to terrify criminals just as they terrified him as a child. Understanding Batman’s motivation to become a type of monster hunter moves away from being a cypher through more characterization that indicates he should be read in a Gothic mode. His strong motivation increases his iconization as a signifier of vengeance, something to which all readers can relate.
A Gothic reading is especially evident in the next story, *Detective Comics* #34 (Dec. 1939), Gardner Fox’s last contribution to the Golden Age Batman, which moves from horror to the weird. In “Peril in Paris,” Bruce Wayne is on his way back from Hungary, having sent his fiancée Julie Madison ahead, when he encounters Charles Marie, a man with no face and, separately, Charles’s sister Karel. The siblings have been targeted by the pointed-eared Duc D’Orterre, master of the Apaches, who has burned away Charles’s face with a special ray. Batman confronts Duc D’Orterre and escapes a death trap, only to end up in a garden where the flowers have human faces. Batman does rescue Karel and Charles, though Charles does not appear to get his face back. Nor is there an explanation for the why the flowers have human faces and can talk. Unlike “Batman versus the Vampire,” where the supernatural operates according to known, albeit mixed-up, rules—Batman already knew that silver bullets would kill the vampires—“Peril in Paris” takes place in Todorov’s “the marvelous,” wherein the reality is controlled by unknown laws. It may be termed as the difference between science fantasy, wherein the various apparatuses had at least an illusory basis in scientific principles or reason, and fantasy science, with no such adherence to logic or reality. Fantasy science’s transgression of the natural order, coupled with nontraditional horrors, place this story with the dark fantasy of the weird tale.

Bill Finger’s return as writer brought Batman back to detective stories. A tinge of the Gothic remained, though, whether it was through the Orientalism of the seemingly cursed ruby statue of the Hindu god Kali in “The Case of the Ruby Idol” (Detective Comics #35 [Jan. 1940]) or the effects of the fog machine of Dr. Hugo Strange, Finger’s take on Sherlock Holmes’s criminal mastermind Professor James Moriarty in *Detective*
Comics #36 (Feb. 1940 [Finger and Kane, “Professor Hugo Strange” 98-110]). The Gothic in Kane’s art became less specific and more atmospheric. This move away from directly addressing horror may have been the result of pressure from parents, teachers, religious organizations, and civic groups to make superheroes more kid-friendly. Even though comic books of the era were enjoyed by a wide range of readers, DC Comics recognized that their target audience was children. Batman’s violence, rooted in his detective and Gothic traditions, became particularly problematic in “Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters” in Batman #1. Professor Strange uses an extract that accelerated the growth gland on inmates from an asylum, turning them into fifteen-foot tall, super-strong monster men, with appearances similar to Boris Karloff in the title role of Frankenstein. Batman is particularly violent in killing the monster men, hanging one from a noose (reminiscent of a lynching) and shooting another who had scaled a skyscraper with gas pellets from his batplane in a scene comparable to the finale of King Kong (1933; dirs. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack [162-164]). These scenes caused editor Whitney Ellsworth to ban Batman from killing or using a gun in future stories, marking the beginning of Detective Comics, Inc.’s in-house code of ethics and censorship. This marks the beginning of Batman’s transformation from a monster hunter into a superhero, which culminated when he is declared an honorary member of the police department in Batman #7 (Oct./Nov. 1941 [Finger and Kane, “The People vs. the Batman” 221]). Batman is no longer a lawless vigilante nor monster hunter but rather an upstanding citizen contributing to the betterment of society.

The transition towards superhero was also facilitated by the introduction of a new character for young readers to identify with in Batman’s sidekick Robin, the Boy
Wonder, introduced in *Detective Comics* #38 (Apr. 1940). Created by Kane, Finger, and inker Jerry Robinson, Robin stood in contrast to the grim Batman, particularly in his bright red, green, and yellow costume. In the introductory story, in order to extort money from the circus, Boss Zucco tampers with the trapeze ropes, causing Grayson’s parents to fall to their deaths. Seeing a kindred spirit due to the similarity of their loss, Grayson is taken in as a ward by Bruce Wayne and trained by Batman to help capture Zucco. The fact that they capture the criminal responsible for his parents’ deaths means that Robin, in continuing to fight crime, is not motivated by revenge but rather altruism. Unlike Batman’s oath to avenge his parents’ deaths by warring on crime, Robin takes a different oath to fight “against crime and corruption and never swerve from the path of righteousness!” (Finger and Kane, “Introducing Robin, the Boy Wonder” 127). Part of the reason for introducing a sidekick was so that Batman would have someone to talk to and explain his deductive reasoning rather than rely on thought balloons or description boxes. But having Batman talk more not only removed some of his mystique, it shifted his characterization. As Batman was speaking to a child and, by proxy, the reading audience, his tone became friendlier and more avuncular; he even begins to crack jokes during fights. According to Batman writer and editor Dennis O’Neil, this revamped Batman from “a wealthy, gentleman vigilante” to “a *paternal* costumed gentleman crimefighter” (6-7; emphasis in original). The introduction of another costumed character also moves toward legitimizing Batman’s own costume, which was shifting from black and grey to blue and grey, as part of the generic conventions of the superhero storyworld.
As Batman’s characterization was becoming lighter, his storyworld kept one foot in the Gothic, as well as completing the conventions of the superhero, through the creation of his rogues’ gallery of recurring supervillains beginning in *Batman* #1. This anthology issue contains four stories: the return of Professor Hugo Strange with his monster men; the introduction of the Cat, later Catwoman (Selina Kyle), though as a master of disguise rather than a costumed thief (Kane and Finger, “The Cat” 165-177); and, in the first and last stories, the introduction and return of Batman’s archnemesis the Joker. Jerry Robinson was inspired in designing the Joker by playing cards and the 1928 silent film *The Man Who Laughs* (Paul Leni). In doing so, he took something familiar from the golden age of the travelling circus, the clown, and made it sinister. The Joker’s emphasis on secondary colors through his green hair and purple costumes is in contrast to Batman and Robin’s color schemes while his chalk-white skin marks him as an emissary of death.

In “The Joker” and “The Joker Returns,” the “harlequin of hate” (Finger and Kane, “The Joker Returns” 184) announces his plans over the radio, daring the police to stop him. He then uses elaborate schemes to poison his targets and then steal their valuable jewels. The victims take on a rictus grin in death, the calling card of the Joker. According to Julia Kristeva, it is not only the Joker’s appearance but his premeditation that makes him an abject figure. Kristeva writes: “any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge, are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. […] Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady; a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles” (4). At the end of the first story, the Joker is captured.
In the second, he escapes prison and returns to his secret lab underneath a cemetery to continue his crime spree. The Joker accidental stabs himself while fighting Batman and appears to die, only for it to be revealed on the last panel that his is still alive (Finger and Kane, “The Joker Returns” 190). The Joker was meant to die, as almost all the previous villains had, but editor Whitney Ellsworth found him too interesting and intervened to keep him around as a recurring foe (Daniels, *Batman* 41). This then set up an initial pattern where the Joker would appear to die at the end of each appearance only to uncannily return again and again.

Though Batman also fulfills the role of a monster hunter in *Batman* #1 in “Professor Hugo Strange and the Monster Men,” the idea of recurring supervillains like the Joker furthers Batman’s transformation into a superhero. Costumed villains and outlandish grotesques perfect the superhero storyworld and fully justify Batman’s decision to wear a costume. Even though villains like the Joker would also become lighter and more kid-friendly throughout the 1940s, they would often contain a hint of the Gothic, ranging from the femme fatale Catwoman, the uncanny Scarecrow (Jonathan Crane) in *World’s Finest Comics* #3 (Sept. 1941[Finger and Kane, “The Riddle of the Human Scarecrow” 155-168]), the atavistic Penguin (Oswald Cobblepot) in *Detective Comics* #58 (Dec. 1941 [Kane and Finger, “One of the Most…” 18-31]) to the scarred, schizophrenic Two-Face (Harvey “Apollo” Kent) in *Detective Comics* #66 (Aug. 1942 [Finger and Kane, “The Crimes of Two-Face!” 4-16). Some of these foes do not have the luxury of hiding behind a mask, their grotesqueness on full display, but that also means that a character’s appearance does not have to be a marker of ethics (Bukatman, *Matters*
of Gravity 214). Rather, masks and deformity become ambiguous signifiers of generic “superness” within a superhero storyworld.

More superheroes followed in Superman and Batman’s wake, cementing their codification of a new genre. And their iconization continued as the United States entered World War II on 8 Dec. 1941 following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. During the war, superheroes increasingly inserted themselves into the national narrative, reflecting patriotic values by fighting for a righteous cause. Unlike many Golden Age superheroes, however, Batman and Robin rarely participated directly in the war.138 Rather, their covers would feature patriotic images and they appeared in public service ads promoting how children could contribute to the war effort, showing that each person’s contribution was essential.139 Though he may not have participated in the war directly, Batman was still protecting the American way of life. Comics scholar Ian Gordon argues that such stories carry an implicit message that good citizens leading normal lives during wartime would help prove the U.S.’s superiority in the global conflict and lead to economic prosperity in the postwar years (70). This may have been prescient, as Batman was one of the few superheroes to remain in continuous publication after the war.140

Throughout World War II and after, Batman stories would regularly invoke the Gothic. Sometimes it would be through a reference, such as the parallels to Poe’s “The Black Cat” in “Claws of the Catwoman!” (Batman #42 [Aug./Sept. 1947]), where Catwoman accidentally bricks in her own cat alongside Batman and Robin, which proves her undoing by allowing the heroes to escape and capture her (Finger and Paris 516-517); or even a quotation, such as in Batman #43 (Oct. 1947) when Batman tells the captured
Penguin: “Remember what Poe’s raven said?... ‘Quoth the raven, nevermore!’” (Finger and Mooney 599). Other tales evoke more feelings of horror, like the Jekyll-and-Hyde pastiche of Two-Face, a district attorney scarred by acid on half of his face, revealing a separate criminal personality; or terror, like Batman battling fiends around giant replicas of ordinary objects, a favored motif of writer Bill Finger. These recurring motifs keep Batman within the scope of the Gothic mode.

Though Batman had begun his career as a vigilante-turned-monster hunter, he transformed into a fairly innocuous superhero-adventurer. But in the 1950s, it was not Batman but Bruce Wayne and his over-privileged life that was viewed as threatening. In Seduction of the Innocent, Dr. Frederic Wertham reserved three pages, his longest diatribe against any character, accusing Batman and Robin of promoting a deviant lifestyle: “They live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler, Alfred. […] It is like the wish dream of two homosexuals living together,” and “the Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies” (190-191). Though Wertham’s interpretation relied on selective reading that would not have reflected the experience of most young readers, it nevertheless compelled DC Comics to gentrify Batman and Robin following the establishment of the Comics Code Authority.

The first indication of Batman and Robin’s domestication to remove the any potential further social stigma was the introduction of Ace the Bat-Hound in Batman #92 (June 1955) by Finger and penciler Sheldon Moldoff. Subsequently, the heroes were given innocuous love interests, Batwoman (Kathy Kane) from Detective Comics #233 (July 1956) by writer Edmund Hamilton and Moldoff pairing with Batman and her cousin Bat-Girl (Betty Kane) and Robin beginning in Batman #139 (Apr. 1961) by Finger and
Moldoff. Meanwhile, the storytelling shifted to emphasize science fiction. As comic writer and former DC Comics president Paul Levitz describes it: “he [Batman] had discarded his creature-of-the-night mantle to become a part-time science-fiction hero in the Superman vein—a reflection of the era’s creative conformity, which made many formally distinct characters’ adventures seem interchangeable” (73). Gothic elements still appeared, from abandoned buildings to spooky fiends, but they were stripped of any potential horror by having rational explanations. It wasn’t until the revision of the Comics Code in 1971, as well as an influx of the new creative talent, particularly writer Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams, that Batman returned to his Gothic roots.

Though he began as a costumed vigilante, other genre elements were quickly layered onto Batman to create the superhero Gothic. The conventions of the Gothic and the superhero—except for superpowers—neatly overlap onto this single character. Even as Batman oscillates between characterizations as a monster-hunting Dark Knight and a brighter Caped Crusader, there is an underlying anxiety to most of his stories as the need for a vigilante points to the hidden costs of modernity—crime as unchecked capitalism—as well as the fragility and ineffectiveness of social institutions. Batman is an eerie and menacing figure, but he is a hero because he aims that terror at the hearts of criminals everywhere.
Rushing to save the life of teenager Rick Jones, who has entered a secure (?) military weapon testing site on a dare, Dr. Bruce Banner is caught in the explosion of his own gamma bomb. Instead of dying, Banner is cursed to transform into the green-skinned, muscular monster known as the Incredible Hulk. Drawing directly on Gothic influences, including the themes of scientific hubris from Frankenstein and psychological duality from Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby set out to create a heroic monster, but the result was more ambiguous. Stitched together like Frankenstein’s creation, the conventions of the superhero and the Gothic that the creators chose were initially at odds with each other. The first series of The Incredible Hulk only lasted six issues (May 1962-Mar. 1963) before its cancellation due to poor sales. The Hulk then became part of the superhero milieu of the Marvel Universe, guest-starring in other books, before returning to solo adventures a year and a half later in Tales to Astonish #59 (Sept. 1964 [Lee and Ayers 1-19]). It took creators the rest of the decade to find the right balance of monster and hero amidst the Cold War to sublimate the anxieties surrounding atomic energy and American masculinity for the Incredible Hulk to truly be considered a superhero.

Imitating the success that rival DC Comics’ Silver Age offerings had in combining heroics and science fiction, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s first entry into Marvel Comics’ line of superheroes, Fantastic Four #1 (Nov. 1961), utilized the Cold War space race as the point of origin for their approach to the genre. By the late 1950s, the race for technological superiority was shifting from building better missiles to making better
rockets to conquer space. The USSR had more success at launching a series of satellites, including the first animal in space, the dog Laika aboard Sputnik II on 3 Nov. 1957, and the first man in space, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin in 12 Apr. 1961. The United States responded by founding the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on 1 Oct. 1958, though its rocket program seemed more a series of failures than successes. In *Fantastic Four* #1, four astronauts rush to launch their experimental rocket “unless we want the Commissars to beat us to it [space]” (Lee and Kirby, “The Fantastic Four” 13)—though this was seven months after Gagarin, it was also six months after President John F. Kennedy called for human exploration of the moon (Address to the Joint Session of Congress). The crew is bombarded with cosmic rays, granting them extraordinary abilities. But Lee did not want to merely imitate but innovate with the genre. The Fantastic Four had powers, a mission, and codenames, but public identities rather than secret ones and they initially worked without costumes—though the latter changes in issue #3 (Mar. 1962 [Lee and Kirby, “The Menace of the Miracle Man!” 56]).

The success of *Fantastic Four* created a demand for more heroes in the “Marvel style,” a formula which Lee described as “superheroes with super problems” (qtd. in Hatfield 116). Heroics were counterbalanced with tragedy as great power was accompanied by disability or deformity, which frequently externalized internal self-conflicts. The Thing, a member of the Fantastic Four with incredible strength but an ugly, rocky, orange exterior, was quickly recognized as a fan favorite. Just as Batman followed Superman, the science fiction of the Fantastic Four was followed by the Gothic as Lee then decided to create the solo adventures of a monster as hero. Lee states: “The more I dwelled on the Thing’s popularity, the more I realized that everyone likes a
mixed-up, monster-type marauder, so long as we know that beneath the grotesque surface there beats the heart as noble and pure as a driven comic book creator!” (Introduction, Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk Vol. 1 vi). The combination of horrifying appearance and virtuous character places the Hulk within the evolutionary trajectory of Gothic monsters, moving from object of fear in the previous decade to part of the burgeoning counterculture’s celebration of Otherness. Jeffery Jerome Cohen describes this state as “Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (16). Throughout the late 1950s, Marvel, as Atlas Comics, published anthology series featuring one-off stories featuring oversized grotesques, often from outer space, who threatened the stability of American hegemony and needed to be contained or destroyed—including a furry extraterrestrial called the Hulk in Journey into Mystery #62 (Nov. 1960) and #66 (Mar. 1961), written by Lee and Larry Leiber and penciled by Kirby. The fact that these were external threats linked such science-fiction monsters metaphorically with the threat of Communism as well as casting them in the role of the Other. Their defeat reinforced American exceptionalism amidst the Cold War consensus culture. Mixing the familiar monster tropes with the Silver Age superhero aesthetic seemed like a winning combination that would pass the censorship of the Comics Code Authority and its ban on horror.

On Hulk’s creation, Lee continues:

Then, another thought hit me. Anyone who had ever seen the original Frankenstein movie, starring Boris Karloff as the monster, probably had a soft spot in his or her heart for the sewn-together strong man whom Karloff so brilliantly portrayed. I know I do. As far as I was concerned, the tragic misunderstood monster was actually the hero of the movie; he was the one who most aroused my sympathy.
My mind was made up. Our next featured hero would be a monster of some sort! (Introduction, *Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk* Vol. 1 vi)

Lee was no stranger to writing monster stories. Marvel Comics publisher Martin Goodman followed every fad in the comic book industry, chasing sales but never leading the way. This meant that Lee, who had begun working for his uncle Goodman at Timely Comics as a gofer in 1939 but quickly moved up to writer and editor during World War II, had written hundreds of monster stories during the 1950s, as well as teen romance, Western, science fiction, medieval adventure, and horror. Lee approached Jack Kirby with this idea, envisioning “a somewhat nice-looking monster, big and brutish enough to make him feared by all who met him yet with a certain tragic appeal that would make readers care about him and cheer him on” (Lee, “There Shall Come a Jolly Green Giant” 76). Monsters were also classic Kirby territory, having received regular work from Atlas/Marvel Comics and other publishers for the previous two decades in almost every genre—including creating the teen romance comic book; the creature-hero would be a concept he returned to many times in his illustrious career. The artist designed a muscleman with a face that resembled the makeup designed by Jack Peirce for Boris Karloff in the 1931 *Frankenstein* film adaptation and a hairstyle that the Beatles would soon make famous. By drawing on the themes and visuals of *Frankenstein* and its adaptations for inspiration, Lee and Kirby met the challenge of iconization by making their character both familiar, imitating the iconic film likeness of the creature, and unique, the monster as a green-skinned, muscular superhero. The result was a brutish figure, uncanny in his distortion of humanity and terrifying in his size and strength.
*Fantastic Four* had been an experimental superhero concept; *The Incredible Hulk* was iconoclastic.

Lee did not set out to create a superhero universe. After over twenty years of working in the comic book industry, he still considered it a temporary job on the way to his real literary endeavors and was contemplating quitting in 1960 before Goodman’s mandate to create a superhero team coincided with his wife Joan’s advice to put his full effort into the project (Wells 47). Being somewhat inexperienced in writing superhero stories, Lee drew on his strengths in monster tales to put his own spin on the resurgent genre. The cover of *Fantastic Four* #1 features a giant creature bursting out of the ground, clutching Invisible Girl (Sue Storm) in his fist. The Human Torch (Johnny Storm) and the Thing, whose appearances would not be out of place in a horror story, prepare to attack while Mr. Fantastic is inexplicably tangled in rope. There is very little on this cover to indicate that this is the introduction of a new superhero team rather than another weird tale with the exception of the appearance of their codenames in a text box. The story inside also leans into the horror tradition, from the body horror of their powers manifesting to the Fantastic Four battling an invasion by the subterranean Mole Man (Harvey Elder) and his monstrous army.

The cover of *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (May 1962) obscures any superheroic intentions even more. A gray, titanic figure towers over a man with only wavy lines between them to suggest some connection between the two while in the background the military looks on in horror. The text announces the Hulk as “The Strangest Man of All Time” and asks the question “Is He Man Or Monster Or...Is He Both?” while the opening splash page describes him as a liminal “Half-man, half-monster...” (Lee and
Kirby, “The Coming of the Hulk” viii, 1). This manner of presentation is indicative of a monster story of an abject figure who defies categorization. Even the name the Hulk, like the Thing, points to a figure that words fail to describe, the “Thing with No Name” that exists outside human experience (King 51). Though the continuing series attempts to be a science adventure, frequently by fighting alien or other invaders with Banner providing a scientific solution, the question of the Hulk’s monstrosity informs his mythic gestalt.

Lee and Kirby drew on their work the monster genre of the 1950s rather than the superhero tradition in creating the Marvel Universe. While this proved effective with the Fantastic Four, it was less so with the Hulk. Comic writer and scholar Danny Fingeroth describes the title as: “an effort to fit the square-pegged monster into the round-hole mold of the superhero” (123). In the first three issues, the Hulk only causes chaos and destruction. In The Incredible Hulk #1 and #2 (July 1962), it is Bruce Banner who saves the day, curing the Communist mastermind the Gargoyle of his radiation-induced deformity (Lee and Kirby, “The Coming of the Hulk” 23) and repelling the invasion of the Toad Men from outer space (Lee and Kirby, “The Terror of the Toad Men” 49) respectively. In issue #3 (Sept. 1962) the Hulk is unable to transform back into Banner after he is shot into space and exposed to cosmic radiation (Lee and Kirby, “Banished to Outer Space” 58). In issues #4-6 (Nov. 1962-Mar. 1963), Banner uses a special ray to allow him to maintain his intelligence while in the Hulk’s form, meaning that it is still technically Banner with the Hulk’s strength who defeats space invaders like Mongu—actually a Russian in a mechanical suit trying to capture the Hulk (Lee and Kirby, “The Gladiator from Outer Space” 90-99)—, the immortal Roman emperor Tyrannus (Lee and Kirby, “Beauty and the Beast” 101-111), the Communist General Fang (Lee and Kirby,
“The Hordes of General Fang!” 119-124) and the extraterrestrial Metal Master (Lee and Ditko, “The Metal Master!” 126-149). Throughout, the Hulk stays true to his Gothic roots as figure to be feared by foes and bystanders alike through his embodiment of category crisis in his transmorphic physicality and ambiguous characterization, and of the existential fear of nuclear power and, more abstractly, scientific progress, particularly through his origin story.

The first issue of The Incredible Hulk reads as a part Gothic, mostly spy story. Though the bulk of the narrative is full of Cold War paranoia involving Soviet spies and Communist machinations, including the kidnapping of the Hulk and Rick Jones on U.S. soil before sending them behind the Iron Curtain, the most pertinent part is the origin contained within the first six pages wherein Banner is caught in the explosion of his gamma bomb while rescuing Jones and becomes doomed to transform into the rampaging Hulk. This part of the mythic gestalt is repeated in issues #2 (Lee and Kirby, “The Terror of the Toad Men!” 28), #3 (Lee and Kirby, “Banished to Outer Space” 62-64), and #4 (Lee and Kirby, “The Monster and the Machine” 77) and referenced on numerous other occasions to introduce new readers to the Hulk’s story. Of this origin, Stan Lee states: “Okay, now how would Doc Banner become a monster? The origin is always so important. […] It seemed I had heard of gamma rays somewhere. Had no idea what they were, but that didn’t matter. The name has a nice ring to it. So I found a way to zap Banner with some gamma rays and lo, another hero was born” (Lee and Mair 121).

Bathing Banner with gamma radiation involved the doctor, like Frankenstein before him, paying the price for his scientific hubris. Unlike the Fantastic Four, whose character
designs were largely original, the Incredible Hulk’ design acknowledges his appropriation visually and thematically.

Hulk’s visual construction reveals the intertextuality in Lee and Kirby’s appropriation of Frankenstein’s monster in that they privilege the truth copy of James Whale’s 1931 film version over Mary Shelley’s original text. Frankenstein’s creature has become divorced from that source text and leads a mythic life with popular culture, particularly through the iconic imagery of Whale’s film. Thomas Leitch posits that this is because visual representation has the power to show what the written word can only present indirectly and that the appeal of Frankenstein is in the iconic rather than the psychological. For example, the creation scene that is described in barely three paragraphs in Shelley’s novel has become a trademark set piece, with its elaborate laboratory and scientific paraphernalia, of almost all adaptations (Leitch 97, 207). Arguably, any potential adapter/interpreter need not experience the original text or the entire film, merely the “It’s alive!” scene as it encapsulates the most salient components of the story, even if this neglects the development of the deeper themes. It is Frankenstein’s mythic gestalt which is always harkened back to and repeated.

Though the visual representation of Frankenstein’s monster and the Hulk has made them iconic, it is their similar themes that make them resonate. Shelley’s novel, written soon after the Enlightenment, serves as a cautionary tale of the thirst of knowledge outstripping man’s morality and against the misguided faith in the capacity for reason to subdue nature (Genter 961). Victor Frankenstein uses the latest scientific theories and technology to, as Shelley describes in her 1831 introduction to the revised novel, “mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world” by creating life
Victor states: “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of life into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source” (Vol. I Chap. III 33). After the creature awakens, he realizes his hubris: “but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Vol. I Chap. III 36). To borrow from another Frankenstein-ian text, the film *Jurassic Park* (1993; dir. Steven Spielberg), the doctor was “so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should.” Victor is haunted by the unintended consequences of his research, eventually realizing that, if he creates a mate for the creature as it requests, their superior progeny could dominate or even wipe out humanity. Victor rejects his creation again, though the monster returns to destroy Frankenstein’s happiness and, ultimately, his life.

Mary Shelley’s anxieties about scientific progress and its cost are easily transposed to the Cold War context of 1960’s America. Like his literary predecessor, Dr. Banner is guilty of believing that science and technology could control nature, now in the form of dangerous radiation. News commentator H. V. Kaltenborn linked the two following the atomic bombings of Japan, declaring: “For all we know, we have created a Frankenstein” (qtd. in Genter 962). By blasting Dr. Banner with the experimental gamma bomb he developed for the military—though the 1954 Comics Code had plenty to say about violence, it stated nothing about the use of atomic weaponry—Lee’s pseudo-science drew on specific cultural anxieties about man’s scientific progress. Popular culture scholars Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and César Alfonso Marino note: “Just as Mary Shelley reflects on the achievements of science in Frankenstein, the [comic
book] authors, through Hulk, discuss these topics from the formulation of a question: does science really sustain the progress of civilization or only undermine it?” (45). As Frankenstein was “the Modern Prometheus,” as Shelley subtitled her novel, Dr. Bruce Banner can be read as the Atomic Prometheus.

The Hulk’s birth at an experimental bomb testing site firmly situates the character in the Cold War arms race. The G-bomb was merely the latest in the military’s efforts to create more and better ways to annihilate the enemy in the name of peace. However, as Thomas Doherty explains: “The atomic bomb and, after 1952, the hydrogen bomb augured an apocalyptic payoff to the super-power face-off” (8). The American public was made aware of the destructive potential of nuclear power through a series of public service documentaries and educational dramas about nuclear bombs. Especially relevant was the broadcast by all networks on 17 March 1953, when the Atomic Energy Commission and Civil Defense Administration utilized “Doom Town,” a fabricated two-household community complete with mannequins to represent the family, to simulate the impact of an atomic explosion on the average home (10). The scope of the power and devastation was too grand for most people to comprehend, moving it into the realm of the sublime. It could only be grasped in small portions, such as “Doom Town,” or through metaphorical monsters, such as the Hulk or in the films like Them! (1954; dir. Gordon Douglas) and Godzilla, King of the Monsters! (1956; dirs. Terry O. Morse and Ishirō Honda), which featured creatures mutated to enormous size by radiation. Fears may have been alleviated somewhat in 1958 when the US, the UK, and the USSR agreed to a moratorium on testing, though no permanent agreement was reached and escalating
tensions ended the moratorium in 1961, a year before *The Incredible Hulk* #1 was published.

The Incredible Hulk takes the concept of nuclear power and embodies it in a living being, a walking, smashing metaphor for a superweapon as well as man’s inability to control nature. Even his green skin makes use of a traditional signifier of radioactivity. Cultural historian Robert Genter argues that the Hulk “was an explicit warning about the dangers of scientific and technological developments and was one of many pieces of popular culture that used monstrous images to issue warnings about nuclear holocaust” (960). Inscribing nuclear power into a physical manifestation transforms the locus of anxiety from a sublime idea to a horrifying object. The mixture of the advanced technology with stark landscape of the American Southwest, where the military base where Banner is stationed is, creates a visual code of the technological sublime that the imagery of an atomic explosion cannot capture. A panel from issue #3 encapsulates the challenge of drawing the unimaginable. Beneath a caption which reads “His [Banner’s] ear-piercing scream filled the desert air as the scientist lost all sense of time and space…as a strange, awesome change took place in the atomic level of his body” is an image of Banner caught in the exact moment of the gamma bomb explosion. Banner is rendered in an unnatural pink against a red background while dynamic lines, indicating energy in motion, frame a face with a look of terror akin to that of Evard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893) (Lee and Kirby, “Banished to Outer Space” 63). Contrast that sublime terror to the panic of citizens fleeing from the Hulk in issue #2 as a police car blares the warning: “Get off the streets. **Lock your doors!** The Hulk is alive! He’s headin’ **this way**!” (Lee and Kirby, “The Terror of the Toad Men” 27). Their horror is
because his strength is a threat to their physical well-being but their terror is due to his uncanny materiality, that he both does and does not look like a human, which is it a threat to their stable knowledge of the world. Because the Hulk defies categorization, he is abhuman and must be contained.

The duty to contain the Hulk falls on those who are responsible for his creation and the creation of atomic weapons: the military, represented by General Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross, and scientists. However, rather than working together as monster hunters, there is an ideological split in their method. This is due in no small part to the fact that the lead scientist, Dr. Banner, is the Hulk. According to Heather Duda, the monster hunters of previous generations like Abraham van Helsing were both educated and men of action, representing the best of their society, who made the choice to fight evil (11). But the culture of anti-intellectualism of the 1950s split the man of action from the educated; one could be strong or smart, but not both. Additionally, the burgeoning countercultural movement questioned the validity of numerous institutional assumptions, including the uses of atomic energy, leading some to have little faith that either the military or scientists could use the power responsibly.

The role of the monster hunter in The Incredible Hulk is divided between General Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross and Dr. Bruce Banner. General Ross is an authoritarian blowhard with an Ahab-like obsession for the capturing the Hulk, who he views, legitimately, as a threat to national security. His belief is that military might is all that is necessary to disempower the metaphorical monsters threatening society, thereby domesticating them to then be used for national defense. This mindset is reflected in the Cold War arms race, wherein the United States and the USSR stockpiled enough nuclear
weapons to result in mutually assured destruction several times over. There is an irony in appealing to the uncivilized, whether it be weapons or monsters, to protect civilization (Pagnoni Berns and Marino 47). And with the recent stalemate in the Korean War (1950-1953), the Cuban Missile Crisis (16-29 Oct. 1962), and the ongoing police action in Vietnam (1955-1975), some began to feel that the military had lost direction and morality and should not command such destructive forces (Johnson 61). In the communist nations in Marvel Comics, power is consolidated in the military, who typically abuse it. The superheroes are often scientists, even if they are allied with the military-industrial complex—Banner, Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four, Ant-Man (Hank Pym), Tony Stark and Stark Industries in Iron Man; Thor’s alter ego is Donald Blake, a medical doctor; even Spider-Man is an amateur scientist. Though the U.S. military is shown as heroic, they are not the ones who save the day. The military’s inability to prevent alien invasions by the Toad Men and the Metal Master or Communist incursions by the Gargoyle and Mongu also bring their effectiveness into question. General Ross’s situational ethics, which put his soldiers’ lives at constant risk, are displayed in The Incredible Hulk #3 when he manipulates teenager and known Hulk confidant Rick Jones into leading the Hulk inside an experimental test rocket: “Out there, on the launching pad, is America’s newest, most important missile! It must be tested! But there isn’t a man living who could stand the force of its g-pull--except the Hulk! We want the Hulk to ride that rocket, in the interests of national security! No one else can do it! Now, what do you say?” (Lee and Kirby, “Banished to Outer Space” 53; emphasis in original). Once Rick leads the Hulk into the rocket, Ross reveals that by “national security” he meant sending
the Hulk into space, not testing the rocket. The image of a military leader lying to one of America’s youth during the Vietnam War is remarkable. Science and scientists also fail to contain the Hulk. The Hulk is initially presented as a metaphor for nuclear power. Atomic energy had been promoted throughout the 1950s as a safe, renewable energy that would usher in a golden age of consumer convenience. However, it became increasingly clear that the nation’s leaders were solely concerned with the destructive potential of the atom, which only provided a sense of security as long as the United States held a monopoly on the weapons. But the USSR detonated their own atomic bomb in September 1949 and a hydrogen bomb in 1952, matching the U.S.’s developments. In Incredible Hulk #1, Banner’s assistant Igor is actually a Communist spy trying to steal the secrets of the new gamma bomb; it is also Igor who does not delay the detonation, resulting in Banner being caught in the explosion (Lee and Kirby, “The Coming of the Hulk” 3, 9-10). As Rafiel York explains: “Praise of science and scientists soon coincided with doubts, criticism, fear, even hostility. […] From being the heroes that won the war, scientists were almost immediately seen as evil geniuses that created unthinkable horrors: the atomic apocalypse” (“The Fantastic Four” 213). The arms race created an atmosphere of anxious suspense surrounding the world’s potential doom with scientists receiving some of the blame. But Banner becomes a monster hunter not by choice and not only to contain a person of mass destruction. For Banner, the Hulk does not only represent atomic power unleashed. He is also the embodiment of Banner’s repressed, uncivilized self; in Freudian terms, his id.

As a monster being hunted, the Hulk is Othered by the military on a social level and by himself on a psychological level through the Banner/Hulk binary. The former lent
the character an aura of anti-authoritarianism which eventually appealed to countercultural readers. A 1965 poll of student radicals in California named Hulk as one of their favorite icons, alongside Bob Dylan, Fidel Castro, and Spider-Man (Genter 974). The initial issues of *The Incredible Hulk* presented the character as a monster. However, as the protagonist, he could neither truly be punished, thus denying readers a psychological catharsis, nor sublimate negative values through negation. This changed in *Tales to Astonish* as the Hulk’s characterization was reoriented as an alienated man raging against the system that persecutes him. This reflected some reader’s values as they felt estranged from hegemonic values and were sometimes violently attacked as they peacefully protested. The Hulk’s new characterization and readers’ values aligned to fulfill the iconization process.

The Hulk/Banner’s Othering of himself is perhaps the most innovative aspect of the character: the psychological complexity it brings to the superhero convention of the secret identity. Stan Lee explains: “Not wanting to stray too far from the basic [superhero] formula which the fans so ravenously devoured, I tried to figure out how to give the monster a secret identity. Then I remembered [Robert Louis] Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. *Bingo! That was it!” (Introduction, *Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk* Vol. 1 vi). Rather than the traditional costumed identity, the Hulk physically transforms from Dr. Bruce Banner, complete with a different personality, creating an uncanny nightmare reflection of the self. The body horror of the transformation is accompanied by psychological haunting as each personality can vaguely recall the other’s memories and actions. However, like the visual reference to *Frankenstein*, Lee’s appropriation of Stevenson’s novella draws more on the
truth copy than the source material. In the novella, Mr. Hyde is described as dwarfish compared to Dr. Jekyll, but popular representations frequently portray him as large and brutish. Additionally, Dr. Jekyll initially requires a drug to transform into his immoral, evil aspect, Mr. Hyde, but eventually loses control and begins to randomly morph. This process is reversed in *The Incredible Hulk*, beginning without control before being able to regulate the process. In issues #1 and 2, Banner transforms into the Hulk at night and reverts back during the day, throwing a bit of lycanthrope mythos in with other monstrous inspirations. After his trip to outer space in issue #3, where he is bombarded by cosmic rays, the Hulk does not revert but instead enters a zombie-like state, controlled by the mental commands of Rick Jones. But Banner built a special ray to control the transformations, which Jones is able to operate. The image of the Hulk unconscious on a table surrounded by scientific equipment is one of the most direct references to *Frankenstein* in the series (Lee and Kirby, “The Monster and the Machine” 76). Though the ray allows Banner to maintain his intelligence in the Hulk’s form, it results in a personality change as the hybrid Banner-Hulk loses all empathy. The transformation also develops random morphing effects, such as having Banner’s head on the Hulk’s body; fortunately, Banner had a Hulk mask prepared (Lee and Kirby, “The Metal Master!” 133). The constantly-changing nature of the transformations reinforced the Hulk as an embodiment of the category crisis of identity. When the Hulk is reimagined in *Tales to Astonish* with a more consistent characterization, Banner’s transformation into the Hulk is triggered by anger and stress (Lee and Ditko, “The Incredible Hulk” 23). This added a layer of psychological complexity to the character, building on the social acceptance of psychology that became popularized in the 1950s.
All these characterizations of the Hulk thematically mirror *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Jekyll’s drug removes the restrictions placed on the psyche by social conventions and allows the repressed, emotional self to roam free. The Hulk cracks open the repressed negative emotions beneath Banner’s veneer of civilization, revealing that culture is a social construct that is nurtured to cover man’s base nature. In Banner and the Hulk, the id and ego are alienated from each other. Banner seeks to purge himself of his Other through the use of his intellect while the Hulk can only act, wanting to smash “puny Banner.” Each claim to be the authentic self but are really fragments of a holistic being. On a social level, this disparity also reflects the split in the individual between the theory that one is in control of one’s own life and the reality of one’s powerlessness before outside forces (Berger 157). The dichotomy of mind/body, civilized/barbaric, culture/nature is an exaggerated version of what Jeffrey A. Brown argues is a function of secret identities, which is to split masculinity into the extremes of the macho and the wimp. Given the visual nature of comic books, this binary is inscribed on the male body (*Black Superheroes* 168). The contrast between Banner’s great intellect and thin body and the Hulk’s hypermasculine body but miniscule mind emphasizes the latter’s monstrosity.

The macho/wimp binary at play in the Banner/Hulk identity highlights the crisis of masculinity in the 1960s, the anxiety that men were falling short in the performance of the cultural standard of manhood. Genter states: “The most substantial [postwar] shift was the rise of postindustrialism, as the country transformed from a goods-producing society to a service-centered one and the American worker transformed from the brawny, muscular industrial laborer from the turn of the century into the conformist white-collar
worker of the 1950s” (963). Though dissimilar in appearance, the cultural context of early nineteenth-century England in *Frankenstein* and America in the 1960s allows for similar explorations of the theme of dueling masculinities. Victor Frankenstein is a child of wealth and privilege, which allows him to be educated in science and philosophy at the university. But he is also physically weak, illustrated both in comparison with the creature he creates and through his bouts of illness. His monster, who names himself Adam, is a kind of noble savage and leads a rustic life until he swears vengeance on his creator. In this can be read concerns about both class and masculine performance. The Industrial Revolution was shifting work away from the country and towards the city as well as giving rise to a burgeoning middle class. The eighteenth-century patriarchal roles, embodied by Frankenstein, were giving way to the new industrial masculinity, represented by Adam. A similar dichotomy exists between Jekyll and Hyde, though not built around changing masculine roles in society. Whereas the intellectual Jekyll was physically weak, Hyde revels in using his strength to enforce his will.

In the 1960s, white-collar work was considered emasculating and even effeminate because it did not involve manual labor. Concern swirled that this made men morally weak and therefore unprepared for the challenges of the Cold War, with then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy warning on 22 Oct. 1959: “The slow corrosion of luxury—the slow corrosion of our courage—is already beginning to show.” Society developed the conflicted idea that any man who did not conform to the “masculine mystique” of stoic yet emotionally supportive, responsible yet carefree, and strong yet vulnerable, was not fully masculine (Kimmel 222). The media sent conflicting messages on this topic, with some of the most popular shows on television featuring Western cowboys and suburban
It was impossible to synthesize these contrasting masculinities into a holistic image.

*The Incredible Hulk* utilizes the concept of the costumed identity to parody this crisis. As an intellectual with a seemingly weak body, Dr. Banner represents the emasculated American male. When he is overly cautious in testing the gamma bomb because they are tampering with powerful forces, General Ross berates him: “Powerful forces! BAH!! A bomb is a bomb! The trouble with you is you’re a milksop! You’ve got no guts!” (Lee and Kirby, “The Coming of the Hulk” 2). General Ross equates destructive might with masculinity and science and logic with effeminacy (Capitanio 259). This is ironic as it is science that has created the destructive g-bomb as well as inconsistent with stereotypical gender identities where scientific rationale had been considered a masculine trait. But Banner’s passive personality, coupled with his disappearances when he turns into the Hulk, are enough for him to be suspected of being un-American. In *Tales to Astonish* #61 (Nov. 1964), Major Glenn Talbot is brought in to investigate Banner as a potential spy (Lee and Ditko, “Captured at Last” 34). This also sets up a love triangle among Banner, General Ross’s daughter Betty, and Talbot, which reinforces Banner’s heteronormativity.

The Hulk is almost a satirical image of the man as warrior: hard, muscular body; stoic; distrustful of language and emotion; yet still possessing an innate code of honor that leads him to protect others (Kimmel 31; Tompkins 66). He is the hypermasculine embodiment of the idea that real men act while others talk or think. But in the Hulk these traits are taken to an extreme. This radical masculinity denies the potential to form a holistic self and delineates Otherness through his fragmented subjectivity. The Hulk
instead becomes “half-man, half-monster” or, as Banner himself laments, a “bestial mockery of a human—that creature which fears nothing— which despises reason and worships power!” (Lee and Kirby, “The Coming of the Hulk” 1, 14). His frequent rampages show this type of masculinity ultimately to be destructive towards civilization.

The fact that Banner transforms into the Hulk after the gamma bomb detonation reveals the man of action had become repressed beneath the corporate organization and consensus politics of the 1950s (Genter 964). Rather than pitting these different ideals of masculinity against each other, both are necessary for American civilization to carry on during the Cold War. However, even when the transformation ray results in the Hulk retaining Banner’s mind, there is a change in his personality so that this composite being loses Banner’s empathy—a stereotypically female trait. As Scott Bukatman states: “We are confronted with an aggressive hypermasculinity, a compensation for psychosexual anxiety that depends upon a ruthless suppression or an obliteration of the feminine” (Matters of Gravity 61). While brute force and intelligence are necessary in order to defeat many of the Hulk’s foes, the series illustrates that a synthesis of the two characteristics into a new type of masculinity appears impossible. The Banner/Hulk dichotomy could be interpreted as showing that the new American man can also possess a hyper-masculine aspect, but the fact that the duality is characterized by conflict underscores the tension existing in the cultural definition of masculinity.

Banner and the Hulk’s contrasting masculinities also perpetuate racial tropes. Stan Lee reportedly selected the Hulk to have gray skin, as he appears in The Incredible Hulk #1, so as to not suggest any specific ethnic group (Gavaler, “Hulk Is…”). However, due to the printing process and paper quality of the time, the gray was inconsistent
throughout the issue and was switched to the easier-to-print and more iconic green in issue #2 (Cronin, “Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #40). Though green skin marks the Hulk as inhuman, the body and mind reflect racist stereotypes. Jeffrey A. Brown explains that historically-constructed ideals of masculinity place black men “in the symbolic space of being too hard, too physical, too bodily” and have been represented as having a strong body but a small mind (*Black Superheroes* 170, 173; emphasis in original). The Hulk is typically portrayed as less intelligent than Banner, reinforcing the convention of the racial body being policed by hegemonic forces.

The Incredible Hulk’s embodiment of various cultural fears and anxieties allows him to be read in a Gothic mode and reveals him as a multimodal metaphor that can change meaning with the times. Though he does not complete the Gothic matrix, lacking the antiquated space—though the sparse desert of the American Southwest can function in a similar manner—, he is certainly a character with hidden secrets, psychological hauntings, and an oscillation between the natural and the supernatural. However, as previously stated, the Hulk is initially more monster than hero. Though he possesses the conventions of superpower and secret identity, it would take the rest of the decade for the Hulk to develop into a true superhero.

The superhero genre demands innovation of the standard tropes of power, identity, and/or mission for each new title. The deviation in secret identity has been discussed previously. Of the Hulk’s superpower, Lee explains: “Certainly there would be nothing terribly original about someone who had the strength of Superman. But that’s where the fun came in. It would be my job to take a cliché concept and make it seem new and fresh, exciting and relevant” (“There Shall Come…” 74). As Lee points out,
superhuman strength is nothing original. Even Frankenstein created his monster to possess superior strength due to his large size: “As the minuteness of parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionally large” (Shelley Vol. I Chap. III 33). The Hulk was designed with a build similar to that description.

The question was then how should this super-strength be deployed. As the Hulk does not have a pro-social mission, the use of his power does not align with American values. Previous use of atomic power in the bombing of Japan on 6 and 9 Aug. 1945 were viewed within the United States as morally justified in ending the World War II as well as emphasizing the superiority of the American way. Without consensus values, the Hulk’s strength is threatening. It is also deployed in an inconsistent and fluctuating manner across each of the six issues of the first series, as summarized above. They are, as future Incredible Hulk scribe Peter David describes it, an “astoundingly schizoid half dozen issues” (155). Also, the Hulk’s battles cannot be considered fair fights as his overwhelming strength undercuts any dramatic tension, likely contributing to the title’s early cancellation.

In crafting their monster-hero with his super-strength and radical identity, Lee and Kirby left out the pro-social mission. As journalist Sean Howe asks: “You could call the Hulk a superhero, but what was he saving? And from who?” (40). The Hulk causes nearly as much chaos and destruction as any villain. Instead of appealing to shared values, it is the Hulk’s rage which makes the character interesting on a primal level. It invokes a near-universal power fantasy which Danny Fingeroth describes as: “Wouldn’t
it be cool to get angry and smash stuff” (127). It is only when Banner is in control of
Hulk’s body that he actively pursues a virtuous mission: he flies to Asia to protect the
principality of Llhasa from the invading forces of General Fang—a carryover of the racist
Asian stereotypes of World War II (Lee and Kirby, “The Hordes of General Fang!”
116)—and against the alien Metal Master, who had taken over the Earth; for the latter the
Hulk received a full pardon for his previous actions (Lee and Ditko, “The Metal Master!”
149). But as Banner’s control over his transformation quickly disappears, these stories
are outliers to the overall Hulk myth. If the Hulk had a pro-social mission, he would then
represent certain shared values, but his Othering would represent society rejecting those
values. Instead, the Hulk can be read as neutral, like an uncontrollable force of nature.
Between the cancellation of The Incredible Hulk and his stories in Tales to Astonish, the
Hulk interacted with the wider Marvel Universe, firmly establishing him as part of a
superhero milieu. Within Tales to Astonish, the Hulk finally gained a pro-social mission,
even if it continued to be more by circumstance than by choice. Two supervillains were
introduced who could rival the Hulk and add thematic weight to the proceedings: the
Leader (Samuel Sterns) and the Abomination (Emil Blonsky). Both archenemies
received their powers from gamma radiation. The Leader was a blue-collar laborer until
a gamma ray cylinder explosion granted him an enormous brain, as well as the requisite
green skin in Tales to Astonish #63 (Jan 1965 [Lee and Ditko, “A Titan Rides a Train”
56-57]). This sets up the classic confrontation of brains versus brawn, mirroring
Banner’s internal struggle to control the Hulk. The Leader is bent on world domination
and relies on spies and robotic henchmen for physical labor while he plots and plans.
This goal and operating method align the Leader with the actions of what was popularly
perceived as the monolithic Sino-Soviet alliance, making him a proxy for the communist threat.

The Abomination needed no such allegorical filter because he was a KGB spy who, while documenting Banner’s research, exposes himself to gamma radiation and transforms into a repulsive green reptilian creature with strength to rival the Hulk’s in *Tales to Astonish* #90 (Apr. 1967 [Lee and Kane 115]). That the Abomination is visually grotesque, as opposed to the Hulk as “a somewhat nice-looking monster,” is a statement about the moral orientation of their characters. Matthew J. Costello explains:

> The physical deformity of the communist villains in their stories implies that the political economic system they represent is not only ideologically repulsive but morally bankrupt. The representatives of this system must thus exhibit a physical appearance that marks their lack of virtue. In a way, the attractiveness of the Americans necessarily leads them an aura of virtue.” (65)

Battling grotesque supervillains further shifts the Hulk into the superhero milieu. Though he does not have a stated mission, his actions are interpreted as virtuous and reflective of American values. Monstrosity is pushed onto the supervillains which makes the Hulk, through negation, a hero. The fact that the Leader and the Abomination are also powered by gamma radiation makes the Hulk’s victories less a matter of strength than of superior values.

Duda argues that it is not until the 1970s that the monster hunter displayed monstrous tendencies or were monsters themselves (86). The Incredible Hulk can be read as a precursor to this, a monster who is not a villain but not entirely a hero and who becomes progressively more sympathetic and humanized through his persecution complex. Another humanizing process is belonging to a community, which moves a monster from the periphery into a society (Duda 52). The Hulk follows this path when he
joins the Defenders, a “non-team” composed of other outsider heroes of the Marvel Universe: Dr. Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, and the anti-hero Namor the Sub-Mariner in Marvel Feature #1 (Dec. 1971 [Thomas and Andru]). These characters share in the Hulk’s Gothic-ness, Namor an Atlantean Other and Doctor Strange with his psychedelic mysticism, which both unifies and complicates their superhero adventures.

It took almost a decade for the Incredible Hulk to truly become a superhero. Though he possessed most of the superhero conventions from the outset—power, code name, secret identity, milieu, and a variation on the costumed identity—without the pro-social mission all those elements signify superness but not heroism. Instead, drawing inspiration from Frankenstein and Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Hulk aligns more closely with the Gothic matrix, emphasizing that the character’s monstrosity is meant to be read in a Gothic mode. Though he has vacillated between being characterized as a monster or a hero over the subsequent decades, the Hulk has never lost his air of terrifying menace.
Selling one’s soul to the devil to achieve mortal goals in exchange for eternal damnation is perhaps the ultimate taboo of Christian morality tales. The most famous version is the legend of Doctor Faustus, first published as the anonymously-written 1587 German chapbook *Historia von D. Johann Faustus, dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer und Schwartkünstler* (*The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*) before being adapted into two notable plays: Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1590[?]) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust, A Tragedy* First Part (1808) and Second Part (1832). In *Marvel Spotlight* #5 (Aug. 1972), stunt cyclist Johnny Blaze makes a similar bargain with Satan, resulting in him becoming the flaming-skull superhero Ghost Rider. Each adaptation reflects the aftermath of the clash of significant cultural forces. For Marlowe, it was the Renaissance philosophy of human perfectibility against the Reformation and Counter-Reformation theology of human fallibility as Doctor Faustus rejects religious knowledge for worldly pleasure (Kastan x). Goethe’s Faust has mastered Enlightenment thinking and seeks a transcendental moment, reflecting nineteenth-century Romanticism. For Ghost Rider creators Gary Friedrich, Roy Thomas, and Mike Ploog, the failings of Cold War conservative consensus utopianism and liberal counterculture optimism had given way to the pervasive pessimism of the 1970s. In Johnny Blaze they created a character who could not trust traditional institutions and instead seek a radically alternative solution in devil worship. But this results in a loss of self-determination through a curse which transforms him in appearance to that of a burning skeleton. Blaze
uses his new-found abilities as the reluctant hero Ghost Rider, with less of a heroic ongoing mission and more acting on a sense of duty when he finds others in trouble. *Ghost Rider*’s cover tagline “The Most Supernatural Superhero of All!” is indicative of the superhero Gothic of the era as monsters were becoming more heroic and superheroes more monstrous.156

The 1976 bicentennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence presented a mythologization of the United States’ history and a romanticized vision for the future. Yet this came in the midst of what historian Philip Jenkins terms the “Decade of Nightmares” (4).157 The Seventies were bookended by the 4 May 1970 Kent State Massacre, when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on student protestors, killing four and wounding nine others, and the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis on 4 Nov. 1979, when radical students and militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; the situation was not resolved until 20 Jan. 1981. Internationally, cooperation replaced Cold War containment as America began its prolonged withdrawal from Vietnam in 1969, which ended with a hasty exit during the fall of Saigon on 30 Apr. 1975; President Richard Nixon opened relations with isolationist China in Feb. 1972; and Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) continued between the U.S. and USSR throughout the decade until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on 27 Dec. 1979.158 The moral certainty that had guided the Cold War consensus became less relevant amidst a period of international détente, which in turn weakened the countercultural movement. Consensus culture and the counterculture had been community-building movements, but in the face of energy crises, oil embargos, stagflation (the combination of high unemployment and high inflation), rising crime rates and drug use contributing to urban decay, and several
government scandals, they fractured. The age of affluence, with its faith in unending progress towards an equalitarian society, transitioned into an era of limitations (Costello 86). Without an external enemy and an internal consensus to define the nation, ideas about right and wrong, good and evil, become ambiguous and situational as citizens found themselves left to their own solutions.

A new-found attitude of self-determination and self-actualization led writer Tom Wolfe to describe the era as the “Me” decade. The self-help movement and New Age philosophy and practices offered individuals the opportunity to become their best self. Marvel even introduced a superhuman therapist, the gamma-irradiated psychiatrist Doc Samson, as a recurring character first appearing in *The Incredible Hulk* #141 (July 1971) by writer Roy Thomas and penciler Herb Trimpe. If American exceptionalism no longer seemed possible, individual excellence still was. Stunt cyclist Robert Craig “Evel” Knievel, dressed like a patriotic superhero in a white leather jumpsuit and cape emblazoned with stars and stripes, showed the world that everyone should strive for greatness even if they fall short, as he did in the 8 Sept. 1974 Snake River Canyon jump.159 But the flip side manifested itself in an anxiety of losing control of one’s identity and self, much like the Hulk (Pustz). A fear of brainwashing and cults was amplified by the sensationalistic reporting on events such as the Manson cult murders in Aug. 1969 and the kidnapping and radicalization of heiress Patty Hearst in 1974.

Some viewed this new quest for an authentic self as a loss of traditional moral certainty and evidence that the country was destroying itself from within. The founding of the Church of Satan by Anton LeVay in 1969, who subsequently published *The Satanic Bible* (1969) and *Satanic Rituals* (1972), made it seem as though Satanism could
become a routine part of American life. John Chick’s Christian comic books, known as Chick tracts, warned that new media like heavy metal music or *Dungeons and Dragons* would lead to occultism and damnation, while William Peter Blatty’s 1971 novel *The Exorcist* and its 1973 film adaptation (William Friedkin) suggested that demonic possession could happen to anyone. The reaction to these trends took two significant forms. One was the creation of the Moral Majority, an organization of Christian political action committees to support politicians and laws that reflect their conservative values in the hopes of restoring a previous societal status quo. The other coalesced into the Satanic Panic, the ultimately baseless conspiracy of satanic cults committing mass abuse in daycare centers, which still resulted in several arrests and convictions in the early eighties.

Marvel Comics’ marketing plan stated: “Wherever there is a trend that has been spotted, wherever there is a reading need to be satisfied amongst the ‘now generation’ readership, Marvel makes every effort to capture such trends a fill such needs” (qtd. in Howe 123). And the industry needed new trends to generate sales as it went through a cycle of slumps throughout the decade. Inflation caused cover prices to go up and page counts to go down, paper shortages and oil embargos slowed down printing and shipping, and, given the cultural climate, those agents of the status quo, superheroes, were not as popular as they had been at the height of the Cold War (Sacks 8, 124). The subversion of democracy and capitalism made space for more violent, hard-bodied anti-heroes like the Punisher (Frank Castle) and Wolverine to gain popularity soon after their introductions. Publishers expanded their lines with new takes on war, western, romance, and other genres. Marvel Comics, under the leadership of Editor Roy Thomas beginning in 1972 (Stan Lee was less involved with the day-to-day decisions as
Publisher, though he retained final say on new titles), an influx of younger creators, and an expanded publishing line, followed the trends by creating blaxploitation (Luke Cage), martial art (Iron Fist [Danny Rand], Shang-Chi), and feminist (The Cat [Grant Nelson], Ms. Marvel [Carol Danvers]) heroes as part of their second wave of titles. But there was one genre they were initially unable to introduce due to the Comics Code Authority: monster horror. The code was so strict that, due the clause which prohibited scenes dealing with werewolfism, DC Comics had to asked permission to print credit for writer Marv Wolfman in Jan. 1970’s The House of Secrets #83 (Cronin, Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #119). Underground comix and black-and-white comic book magazines showed there was a market for such stories. Mainstream companies, already chafing under the Code, pushed its boundaries by publishing Gothic thrillers without monsters.

At a June 1970 meeting of the Comics Magazine Association of America, the organization simultaneously denied Marvel Comics’ request to publish an anti-drug storyline at the behest of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Marvel published the story without the CCA Seal of Approval) and agreed to change the Comics Code (Sacks 11). The revised code that went into effect Feb. 1971 carved out space, albeit an elitist one, for monsters, stating: “Vampires, ghouls and werewolves shall be permitted to be used when handled in the classic tradition such as Frankenstein, Dracula and other high caliber literary works written by Edgar Allen Poe, Saki (H.H. Munro), Conan Doyle and other respected authors whose works are read in schools throughout the world;” the words “horror” and “terror” were still banned from titles (Nyberg 172). After a few tentative steps involving both DC and Marvel creating swamp
creatures—Marvels’ Man-Thing (Ted Sallis) in *Savage Tales* #1 (May 1971) by writers Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway and artist Gray Morrow and DC’s Swamp Thing (Alex Olsen) in *House of Secrets* #91 (July 1971) by writer Len Wein and artist Bernie Wrightson— the floodgates opened. DC transitioned several anthology series to horror, gave Swamp Thing (Alec Holland) its own title (*Swamp Thing* #1-24 [Nov. 1972-Sept. 1976]), and Jack Kirby created Etrigan the Demon (Jason Blood) (*The Demon* #1-16 [Sept. 1972-Jan. 1974]). Batman, whose sales had plummeted following the cancellation of its television show in 1969, was revitalized creatively by returning to his Gothic roots. Even wholesome Archie Comics published the horror anthology *Chilling Adventures of Sorcery as Told by Sabrina* (#1-5 [Sept. 1972-Feb. 1974]).

But no company reveled in the new-found freedom of the revised code as much as Marvel, which between 1971 and 1975 launched or revamped twenty-one horror-themed comic books and seven black-and-white magazines. Editor Roy Thomas, a former high school English teacher (Sacks 68), seemed to relish the opportunity to adapt classic (and not-so-classic) tales in a way that combined the old and the new. Anthology series soon gave way to character-focused titles as, in the cultural climate, the outsider monster was being re-evaluated as a sympathetic protagonist. *The Tomb of Dracula* (Vol. 1 #1-70 [Aug. 1972-Aug. 1979]), created by writer Gerry Conway and artist Gene Colan, and *The Monster of Frankenstein* (#1-18 [Jan. 1973-Sept. 1975]), created by writer Gary Friedrich and artist Mike Ploog, easily fell within the CCA’s new rules, with the initial story arcs in each title acting as a re-telling/sequel of the original novels. Even though there is no strong tradition of werewolf literature, werewolves were included in the CCA’s list, allowing for Jack Russell to become the Werewolf by Night (*Marvel Spotlight* #2-4).
One day in 1972, Gary Friedrich approached his old high school friend Roy Thomas with an idea for a new villain for the *Daredevil* series. Among other things, Friedrich had previously written Marvel’s western hero *Ghost Rider* (Vol. 1 #1-7 [Feb. 1967-Nov. 1967])\(^{169}\), a cowboy with a phosphorescent white cape, mask, and outfit, and Skywald Publications’ black-and-white magazine *Hell-Rider* (#1-2 [Aug.-Oct. 1971]), featuring the vigilante Brick Reese, who rode a motorcycle with an attached flamethrower (Sacks 65). Friedrich’s new idea combined aspects of both those series. Thomas states: “When I heard Gary’s general idea of a Ghost Rider villain for *Daredevil*, I took Gary to see Stan [Lee] and, between the three of us, the character quickly evolved into a supernatural hero of his own comic,” with the lead having sold his soul to the devil (Barnhardt). This was part of the editorial trend at Marvel for turning monstrous villains into, if not heroes, at least protagonists of their own series. Thomas then met with his go-to horror artist, Mike Ploog, to design the character.\(^{170}\) It had already been decided that the character would be a skeleton and Thomas suggested an outfit similar to Elvis Presley’s black leather jumpsuit from the singer’s 1968 comeback special (Sacks 65).\(^{171}\) Ploog then wreathed the skull in flames because, according to Thomas, “he just said he thought the character would look better if his head was on fire. Which it did” (Barnhardt). This would also avoid direct association with and possible trademark infringement of the Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang and their “death’s head” skull logo. With Satanism, motorcycles, and stunt performances, Ghost Rider was very much on
trend for the “now generation” readership, but did it have the literary merit the CCA demanded?

Marvel Spotlight #5 introduces the origin of Ghost Rider: Johnny Blaze, orphaned after his father’s death in a stunt cycle accident and never knowing his mother, is adopted by his father’s business partner, Crash Simpson, and his family. While learning to ride a motorcycle, Johnny causes an accident which results in the death of his adopted mother. Before she dies, Mrs. Simpson makes Johnny promise to never ride in a stunt show. However, Johnny secretly practices stunts at night, never planning to perform. This impresses and eventually earns the love of his adopted sister Roxanne, or “Rocky.” After scheduling a performance at Madison Square Garden, Crash reveals he only has a month to live. Hoping to save his adopted father’s life, Johnny turns to the books he read as a child and calls on Satan: “Grant my wish…and I will serve you faithfully through all eternity! I ask only that Crash Simpson…be spared from the deadly disease which is killing him!” (Friedrich and Ploog, “Ghost Rider” 15). Crash, attempting a world record jump over twenty-two cars, fails his landing and dies. After Johnny successfully lands the jump, Satan returns: “I kept my bargain! The mortal did not die of the disease! Now I claim my reward…your very soul! From this day forth…you will walk the Earth as my emissary in the dark hours…and in the light…you will join me in Hades!’ (20-21). But Rocky intervenes, her pure love protecting Johnny from the worst of the devil’s curse. Though Johnny remains free from Satan’s grasp on Earth, at night he transforms into the flaming skeleton Ghost Rider, with the devil constantly after his soul.

The CCA would not have questioned the story for featuring Satan. Not only would such a portrayal have literary merit from Faust, John Milton’s Paradise Lost
(1764), or the Bible, depictions of the devil had never been banned. One story in Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen #65 (Dec. 1962), “The Mysterious Lord of Devil’s Island” by writer Robert Bernstein and penciler/inker John Forte, sees Olsen dream he is trapped on Devil’s Island, where the only escape is to sign a contract to serve Lord L, later revealed as Lucifer. Jimmy signs the contract and then is freed of it after serving the devil angel’s food cake, before waking up. Marvel’s version of the devil, Mephisto, first appeared in Silver Surfer #3 (Dec. 1968) by writer Stan Lee and pencils by John Buscema. Mephisto appears as a thin, red-skinned man with a high widow’s peak, cape, and massive collar extending higher than his head. Satan in Ghost Rider also has red skin but is large and muscular with his face wreathed in shadows. He is also often shown from a low angle to add to his ominous presence.

A bigger issue would be that Ghost Rider is an original rather than a traditional monster. Though there is an artistic tradition of skeletons as memento mori, there is no such legacy for flaming skeletons. Additionally, the CCA held in place its ban on the walking dead. The blaxploitation/horror character Brother Voodoo, created by writers Len Wien and Roy Thomas with penciler Gene Colan for Strange Tales #169 (Oct. 1973) and one of the only horror heroes outside the Anglo-American literary tradition, battled “zuvembies,” a term borrowed from the Robert E. Howard story “Pigeons from Hell” (1938), rather than zombies; Marvel published Tales of the Zombie (#1 [July 1973]) as a black-and-white magazine (Sacks 102). Friedrich and Ploog had to make clear that Johnny Blaze turning into Ghost Rider was the result of a curse and that the character was not dead, even explaining that Ghost Rider’s skeletal appearance is the result of Jonny’s flesh turning transparent, though this does not account for the flames (Friedrich and
Ploog, “Angels from Hell” 15). But by uncannily showing that which should absolutely remain hidden, a skeleton, the creators reveal what Julia Kristeva describes as “death infecting life” (4). According to legend, the first person to be x-rayed, Anna Bertah Roentgen, upon seeing the image of her skeletal hand declared: “I have seen my own death” (Kennedy). Friedrich and Ploog made clear that Ghost Rider’s appearance was not just a curse but justified its literary merit to the CCA by tying the character’s origin to the Faust legend.

Beyond the central conceit of making a deal with the devil, *Ghost Rider’s* adaptation significantly changes the narrative thrust and character dynamics from previous Faust stories. In Marlowe’s play, Doctor Faustus signs a contract in his own blood stating that:

Say, he [Faustus] surrenders up to him [Lucifer] his soul
So he will spare him four-and-twenty years,
Letting him live in all voluptuousness,
Having thee [Mephistopheles] ever to attend on me,
To give me whatsoever I demand,
To slay mine enemies and aid my friends,
And always be obedient to my will. (1.3 lines 90-96)

While Doctor Faustus initially uses this bargain to gain knowledge, he quickly turns to exploring earthly delights. After his twenty-four years have expired, his soul is dragged to hell. Goethe’s Faust makes less of a contract and more of a wager with Mephistopheles, challenging the devil to give him a perfect moment of human satisfaction, which for him would equal the pinnacle of knowledge. Mephistopheles offers his services to facilitate this, saying: “I shall be at service by this bond/Without relief or respite here on earth;/And if or when we meet again beyond, /You are to give me equal worth” (lines 1656-1659). Mephistopheles helps Faust to seduce Gretchen, who
becomes pregnant, drowns the infant, and is subsequently put to death. Yet Gretchen’s love is able to intercede in the end, allowing Faust’s soul to ascend into heaven. While Faust is shown in these versions to have selfish motivations, Johnny Blaze bargains from a position of altruism, seeking to save his adoptive father. And though Rocky’s intervention is similar to Gretchen’s, having it occur at the beginning of the story changes it from the source of ultimate redemption to a driving force in the narrative: Ghost Rider must protect Rocky as her continued love protects him from being trapped in hell.

Though these changes affect the themes and characters of the Faust story, they were necessary to adapt it to the horrors of the 1970s. While Marlowe’s and Goethe’s versions place Faust in control of the demon Mephistopheles, Blaze is placed under the control of Satan’s curse, allowing the early stories to explore the uncertainty of the fragile self. At a time when maximizing personal potential was equated with salvation, loss of self-control equaled damnation (Pustz). This is something Ghost Rider literally illustrates as Johnny feels alienated from his demonic form and frequently anguishes over his loss of control. In Marvel Spotlight #7, he laments:

Safe once more…for the time being…and what better place to seek refuge than a graveyard? For all intents and purposes I am dead…so I may as well seek repose with others like me!
But why must it be this way? Why must I be shut off from society because of what has happened to me? I mean harm to no one! Even though I am possessed of supernatural powers…I would never use them for evil!
Ah…but men naturally hate what they do not understand! And how can I expect them to understand something that looks like me?! (Friedrich and Ploog, “’Die, Die, My Daughter!’” 9; emphasis in original)

The theme is reinforced by Friedrich’s use of second-person narration in Marvel Spotlight #5-7. Not only does this add the sheen of literary quality, it makes it seem as though the
narrator is acting upon Ghost Rider instead of Johnny having a will of his own. When Ghost Rider is harassed by a biker gang in *Marvel Spotlight* #6 (Oct. 1972), the narration reads: “You hear them coming…then turn to see them roaring down on you--but you are not alarmed! For surely not even these sub-human cycle brutes can hope to cope with…the Ghost Rider…” (Friedrich and Ploog, “Angels from Hell” 3). The use of the second-person also creates an uncanny effect, blurring the line between whether Blaze or the reader is being addressed. Johnny’s cursed transformation serves as a metaphor for the despair many readers felt at a lack of control over their own self-determination due to the seemingly unmanageable social, economic, and political conditions.

The numerous government scandals of the 1970s which contributed to this horror of identity, from the atrocities committed in Vietnam, such as the My Lai massacre, to the revelation of the CIA’s MK Ultra program to Watergate, also found expression in other ways. In *All of the Marvels* (2021), critic Douglas Wolk explains: “As the Watergate scandal unfolds in our world and deals an enduring blow to Americans’ trust in government, a wave of rebellion against patriarchal authority figures emerges in the Marvel story” (340). This became a repeated theme throughout *Ghost Rider*. As part of motorcycle culture, with its pop culture associations with anti-authoritarianism, Johnny is already a rebel. His fight against patriarchal authority begins by defying Satan and extends through the devil’s continued machinations to capture his soul. In the next storyline in Marvel Spotlight #6-8 (Oct. 1972-Feb. 1973) by Friedrich and Ploog, Johnny must battle his adopted father Crash Simpson, whom Satan has promised to return to life if he will kill his daughter Rocky and thus sever Johnny from her protection; Crash is ultimately unable to do so and helps Johnny escape from Hell. *Ghost Rider’s clashes*
with authority persist as he is repeatedly chased by police, usually for speeding (Marvel Spotlight #7 [Dec. 1972]; Marvel Spotlight #10 [June 1973]; Ghost Rider #1 [Sept. 1973]; Ghost Rider #4 [Feb. 1974]) but also dealing with corrupt officers (Ghost Rider #4); it is also revealed that Crash Simpson was once a motorcycle cop (Marvel Spotlight #10). Additionally, Blaze is blackmailed by the Nevada Attorney General Barnett into confronting the criminals Duke Jensen—later revealed as the demonic Roulette (Ghost Rider #4-5 [Apr. 1974])—and Zodiac II (Darren Bentley), who had made a deal with the demon Slifer for power (Ghost Rider #6-7 [June 1974-Aug. 1974]). While Blaze’s transformation reveals a fear over the fragility of identity, his violent confrontations with authority reinforces his individuality. Ghost Rider’s cynical anti-heroism is an expression of the trauma that the failures of the nation had inflicted on its citizens.

Having a sinner as the hero of the series also represents a development in the monster-hunter archetype. Heather L. Duda identifies the 1970s as a transitional period for monsters and monster-hunters. Rather than threatening Others, some monsters became sympathetic protagonists capable of love. But with that love came other emotions: regret and remorse for past deeds leads to a desire for redemption. This is enacted by protecting society from other monsters, leading to the monster-as-monster-hunter (27). Marvel Comics’ monster titles explored the spectrum of monster to monster-hunter. Dracula and Frankenstein’s monster were still portrayed as villains. More sympathetically, the cursed Werewolf by Night was not in control of his monstrous form but could express remorse as a human. Ghost Rider is another step in the progression in the characterization of monsters. Blaze’s initial mission is to protect his love, Rocky, but as he was not a monster before his curse, he does not experience guilt for his past.
Instead of choosing to actively hunt monsters to protect humanity, Ghost Rider destroys the monsters that attack him in order to protect his humanity. He fights for individual salvation, not to redeem society.

The working-class Blaze, with his lack of formal education as a travelling performer, also contrasts with the traditional saintly monster hunter. This contrast is thrown into relief with the introduction of the exorcist Damion Hellstrom. In story split between *Marvel Spotlight* #8-12 (Feb.-Oct. 1973) and the launch of Ghost Rider’s own title (*Ghost Rider* #1-3 [Sept-Dec. 1973])\(^{173}\), the machinations of the Apache shaman Snake Dance to stop Johnny Blaze from jumping Copperhead Canyon, which is on their reservation, are put to a stop by the arrival of Snake Dance’s daughter, Linda Littletree, home from college.\(^{174}\) But Linda’s education included Satanism. Her sorority sisters turned her into a bride of Satan, the Witch-Woman, in a sacrificial ceremony where she forcibly penetrated by a huge, enchanted dagger (Friedrich and Sutton, “Season of the Witch-Woman”). The Moral Majority’s fear that Satanism would become widespread certainly seem justified in this story. Interestingly, Linda’s backstory points to the idea that old traditions and modern society can be equally corrupting. Littletree’s family learn of Damian Hellstrom from an ad in a newspaper and call him to perform an exorcism. Hellstrom is first shown dressed in a suit in his well-appointed private library, disclosing his class and education (Friedrich and Sutton, “A Woman Possessed!” 9). But it is soon revealed that he is only the cultured Hellstrom during the day; at night he transforms into the Son of Satan (Friedrich and Trimpe, “The Son of Satan” 3).\(^{175}\) Now appearing in red pants and a cape with a star emblem on his bare chest, the Son of Satan continues the theme of rebelling against patriarchal authority by freeing Littletree from his father’s

Despite the cover tagline as “The Most Supernatural Superhero of All!” writer Gary Friedrich imagined Ghost Rider as a horror character rather than a hero. Friedrich’s stories are driven by the pathos of Johnny Blaze battling Satan to be free of his curse, not a heroic ongoing mission like trying to stop crime or save the world. However, in the context of the “Me” generation, the ongoing effort to save one’s soul can be read as a heroic mission. Though Ghost Rider has superpowers, including command over hellfire and protection from mortal harm, a “costume” through transformation, and a code name, his secret identity is nebulous. The Copperhead Canyon jump is advertised as starring “Johnny Blaze, the Mysterious Ghost Rider” (Friedrich and Sutton, “Snakes Crawl at Night..” 11) and an announcer introduces him at a demolition derby as “Johnny Blaze--The Ghost Rider” (Friedrich and Mooney, “Death Stalks the Demolition Derby” 15). But this knowledge either does not appear to be widespread or is thought to be theatrics, not superpowers. When people see Johnny as Ghost Rider in the storyworld, their interpretation aligns with Tzvetan Todorov’s uncanny, offering rationalizations for his appearance such as a “crazy glowing helmet” (Friedrich and Ploog, “Angels from Hell” 3) or a “glowing skull mask!” (Friedrich and Sutton, “The Coming of the Witch-Woman” 18) while readers know it is fantasy. Friedrich had a two-year storyline planned for
Ghost Rider that did not include the character becoming a superhero. Blaze even states “one thing I don’t need is a superhero career!” (Isabella and Mooney, “…And Lose His Own Soul!” 17) and “Super-powers? Funny…I never thought of my satannic [sic] abilities that way” (Isabella and Mooney, “Zodiac II” 8). But for Ghost Rider’s continued publication, he would soon have to join Marvel’s superhero roster.

There are many factors for this transition. Friedrich and Ploog had already moved over to create The Monster of Frankenstein, with writer Tony Isabella and penciler Jim Mooney stepping in to finish Friedrich’s storyline. Roy Thomas stepped down as Editor in 1974 and Jim Shooter took over editing duties on Ghost Rider, demanding several changes. Satan’s appearance became visually more generic and characterized as less intimidating. Demons began appearing and acting more like supervillains, threatening the citizens of Las Vegas (Ghost Rider #5) and San Francisco (Ghost Rider #8-9 [Oct. 1974-Dec. 1974]) if Johnny does not give up his soul rather than more subtle manipulations. But while Isabella was making Ghost Rider behave a bit more like a hero, he was also planning to explore the theme of Christian redemption. In Ghost Rider #8-9, Satan forces Rocky to choose between continuing to protect Johnny or freeing her father’s soul from Hell. She chooses to save her father, only for Satan to reveal that he never had Crash Simpson’s soul (a contradiction from the earlier storyline). But before Satan can claim Johnny’s soul, a stranger intervenes. Isabella had intended for this to be Jesus Christ, but Shooter thought this would be seen as religious propaganda and had Isabella rewrite it (Howe 185). Now it is “A Friend” who intercedes, declaring: “Johnny Blaze’s only sin was despair--and that is not enough to condemn him to your domain. Johnny Blaze’s soul is beyond you, Satan. He has earned his second chance” (Isabella
and Mooney, “The Hell-Bound Hero!” 15-16). The Friend would continue to appear to help Blaze make righteous decisions, but Shooter rewrote a page of *Ghost Rider* #19 (Aug. 1976) so that the Friend was revealed as one of the machinations of Satan to give Blaze false hope (Cronin, “Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #106”). As this was done behind Isabella’s back, the writer immediately left the title.


An internal audit by parent company Cadence Industries revealed that Marvel President Al Landau had been overestimating sales figures. Instead of being profitable, Marvel Comics was practically hemorrhaging money, operating at a loss of two million dollars in the first six months of 1975 alone. Landau was fired and was replaced by Jim Galton with the mandate to make Marvel profitable or the company would be shut down (Howe 169-170). Though monster and horror comics had boomed when they were first released in 1971, oversaturation had weakened the market. Among other titles, Galton cancelled thirteen horror comic books and the seven black-and-white magazines (Sacks 164-165).178 *The Tomb of Dracula* continued telling stories of the prince of vampires, but other titles shifted towards the more reliable superhero genre. After Son of Satan received his own title, *Marvel Spotlight* featured superheroes until its cancellation (#27-33 [Apr 1976-Apr. 1977]). *Werewolf by Night* introduced Moon Knight (Marc Spector) in issue #32 (Aug. 1975) and its last issues (#42-43 [Jan.-Mar. 1977]) featured Iron Man.
(Tony Stark). Ghost Rider churned through writers and artists as his series continued, each attempting to make the character more like a superhero, whether through fighting pre-existing supervillains like Trapster (Peter Petruski [Ghost Rider #13 {Aug. 1975}]) or Gladiator (Melvin Potter [Ghost Rider #21 {Dec. 1976}]), starting his own rogues’ gallery with The Orb (Drake Shannon [Marvel Team-Up #15 {Nov. 1973}]) and Water Wizard (Peter van Zante [Ghost Rider #23 {Apr. 1977}]), or teaming up with other superheroes including Hawkeye (Clint Barton [Ghost Rider #27 {Sept. 1977}]) and Doctor Strange (Ghost Rider #29-31[Apr.-Aug. 1978]). The only seeming step left was to join a superhero team.

Tony Isabella had an idea to feature two unused X-Men characters, Angel (Warren Worthington III) and Iceman (Bobby Drake), in a road trip book titled The Champions. New Editor Len Wein insisted that, in addition to Angel and Iceman, the series star three other characters: a woman, someone with super-strength, and someone with their own title. And so, the Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff), Greek god Hercules, and Ghost Rider were added (Howe 158). The ad hoc manner of the series’ editorial creation seems reflected in how the team comes together in The Champions #1 (Oct. 1975) by Isabella and penciler Don Heck. Angel and Iceman are attending UCLA where Natasha Romanoff and Hercules are preparing to give lectures when the campus is attacked; Johnny Blaze just happens to be driving by and joins in. Afterwards, they decide to stay together as a West coast superhero team. But there is never any reason given why these particular characters should work together, with Ghost Rider in particular being an outlier due to his Gothic nature. He fits in much more as part of the Legion of Monsters, fighting alongside Man-Thing, Werewolf by Night, and Morbius the
Living Vampire in *Marvel Premiere* #28 (Feb. 1976) by writer Bill Mantlo and penciler Frank Robbins. Duda argues that the monster-as-monster-hunter must not only have redemptive emotions but also a community of like-minded individuals to help them overcome their isolation and alienation so as to not risk slipping back into their monstrous ways (59). This Legion on Monsters, each battling their own curse to restore their humanity, seems like an ideal group for such stories. Unfortunately, that potential went unrealized as the team only appeared for one issue. Instead, Ghost Rider remained on the ill-fitting Champions for their seventeen-issue run (#1-17 [Jan. 1978]).

As the pessimism of the seventies transitioned into the neo-conservativism of the Reagan eighties, there became less space for heroes who questioned their purpose as the nation re-engaged with the Cold War. Under the creative team of writer Michael Fleischer and penciler Don Perlin (*Ghost Rider* #36-66 [June 1979-Mar. 1982])\(^{184}\), Johnny battled the supernatural threats he encounters while travelling the highways of America. Rather than an ongoing heroic mission, Ghost Rider exhibits a style of sporadic heroism. He is a passive monster hunter, fighting as he came upon threats rather than actively pursuing them. Johnny also begins to exhibit a different personality while transformed as the Ghost Rider (*Ghost Rider* #29)—later revealed to be a spirit of vengeance, Zarathos (*Ghost Rider* #76 [Jan. 1983])—in a manner akin to the psychological bifurcation in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Johnny is eventually able to free himself from Zarathos and settle down with Rocky Simpson in *Ghost Rider* #81 (June 1983) by writer J.M. DeMatties and penciler Bud Budiansky, the final issue of the series. But Marvel would keep returning to the concept of Ghost Rider. Even when other characters take on the mantle, Johnny Blaze is always along for the ride in one form or another.
Ghost Rider is an unsettling character for unsettled times, a theme which has continued through subsequent incarnations: Danny Ketch (Ghost Rider Vol. 3 #1-93 [May 1990-Feb. 1998]) during the end of the Cold War and its postliminary years; Alejandra Jones (Ghost Rider Vol. 7 #1-9 [Sept. 2011-May 2012]) and Robbie Reyes (All-New Ghost Rider #1-12 [May 2104-May 2015], Ghost Rider Vol. 8 #1-5 [Jan.-May 2017]) during the turbulent 2010s; and most recently by the villainous Hood (Parker Robbins) in Ghost Rider: Final Vengeance #1-8 (May -Dec. 2024). But Johnny Blaze forms the mythic gestalt which is constantly returned to (Ghost Rider Vol. 4 #1-6 [Aug. 2001-Jan. 2002]; Ghost Rider Vol. 5 #1-6 [Nov. 2005-Apr. 2006]; Ghost Rider Vol. 6 #1-35 [Sept. 2006-July 2009]; Ghost Rider Vol. 9 #1-7 [Dec. 2019-Sept. 2020]; Ghost Rider Vol. 10 #1-21 [Apr. 2022-Feb. 2024]), revisiting the past trauma of both the individual and national fragile self over and over again into the present. Clearly Gothic, Ghost Rider struggles with being a hero, but then so did many superheroes during the Bronze Age, a movement that would serve as a precursor to the deconstruction of the Dark Age.
Hellboy. The very name evokes the superhero Gothic. Though it is the character’s given name, it follows the superhero codename structure of descriptor plus gender identifier. The descriptor “Hell” conjures religious imagery of devils and damnation, complimenting his red skin, cloven hooves, and tail. The diminutive “boy,” which Hellboy continues to use despite being fifty years old in his first appearance in 1993, carries connotations of youthful innocence which makes the seven-foot-tall demon with a right hand of stone seem less dangerous, creating an ironic presentation of the devil as superhero. Hellboy is summoned to Earth as an infant by Grigori Rasputin and the Nazi occultists of Project Ragna Rok in the waning days of World War II—23 Dec. 1944. Recovered by Allied forces with help from the British Paranormal Society and subsequently raised by classic monster hunter Professor Trevor Bruttenholm (pronounced Broom), Hellboy becomes the world’s greatest paranormal investigator, the apotheosis of monster-as-monster-hunter, as a member of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D) (Mignola and Byrne 3-10). In his first mini-series, *Seed of Destruction* (#1-4 [Mar.-June 1994]) with art and story by Mike Mignola and script by John Byrne, Hellboy learns from Rasputin that he is meant to usher in the end of mankind, making him a demonic superpower in a post-Cold War world. He instead continually chooses fight to protect humanity, both his own and the collective whole. Whereas Batman, the Incredible Hulk, and Ghost Rider bring Gothic elements into a superhero milieu, Hellboy acts like a superhero in a Gothic world.
Creator Mike Mignola worked as an inker and artist for Marvel and DC in the 1980s, but did not rise to prominence until he broke away from the publishers’ house styles and began to develop his own aesthetic beginning in the first DC Elseworlds tale *Gotham by Gaslight* (Feb. 1989) by writer Brian Augustyn, featuring a Victorian Batman battling Jack the Ripper. The rough-hewn, abstracted figures surrounded by ominous, weighty shadows has been described by comic book creator Dave Stevens as “Jack Kirby meets the German Expressionists.” Mignola created a proto-Hellboy sketch for the 1991 Great Salt Lake Comic Con program book of generic-looking demon with a large belt buckle emblazoned with the words “Hell Boy” (Cronin, “Comic Legends: Hellboy’s Surprising Origins”). In a 2006 interview, Mignola stated: “I’d done this drawing for a convention and written ‘Hellboy’ on it as the last thing; I’d done this drawing with a blank space on his belt that I wrote it on. I thought it was funny, but wasn’t serious about doing anything with it” (Mignola, “The Genesis of Hellboy” 5). Instead, Mignola worked as an illustrator on Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* as well as drawing its comic book adaptation (#1-4 [Oct. 1992-Jan. 1993]), written by Roy Thomas for Topps Comics. He drew the *Alien: Salvation* one-shot (Nov. 1993), written by Dave Gibbons, while also branching out into writing, plotting and providing art for *Clive Barker’s Hellraiser* #13 (June 1992) with D. G. Chichester and *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* #54 (Nov. 1993) with Dan Raspler. He was then invited to join the artist-driven, creator-owned Legend imprint (1994-1998) at Dark Horse Comics, similar to the new, popular company Image Comics. Creator Frank Miller described the imprint: “It’s not a publishing company and it’s not a shared universe, but the seven of us feel that if you like one of our books, your will most likely enjoy the rest of them” (qtd.
in Sacks and Dallas 155-156). While the other creators brought their pre-existing characters and stories to the imprint, Mignola had to create something new and turned to his favorite concept: monsters.

“My goal in comics was to just draw monsters,” Mignola declared (Mignola, “The Genesis of Hellboy” 4). He first attempted to create a team book in the style of the Fantastic Four, with Hellboy filling the role of the Thing (3). “I started trying to do a team book, but couldn’t come up with a name for the team, so I settled on the only super-hero name I’d ever come up with that I like, which was Hellboy” (4). Mignola continues: “The kind of book I want to read is occult detective books. I love occult detective stories […]. I knew if I made my occult detective guy a regular guy, I would just get bored of drawing him after 20 pages. […] I made the main character a monster so that, even if he wasn’t fighting a monster, I would be drawing a monster” (4-5). From the humble aspiration to “just draw monsters” has blossomed a complex storyworld referred to as the Mingolaverse, developed with various contributors and encompassing hundreds of characters and dozens of titles published for more than twenty-five years.

This was made possible, in part, due to the comic book industry’s move towards direct market distribution, the rise of creator-owned character agreements, and revisions to the Comics Code Authority. Comic books had typically been sold on newsstands and at drug stores alongside other magazines. Distributors sent the comic books from the printer to the stores for a percentage of the profit and vendors could return any unsold issues for credit. This meant that comic book companies could expect a minimum of 30% of a print run to be pulped, which had to be factored into their expenses. During the 1970s, the direct market developed in which publishers sold directly to specialty comic
book stores, giving the stores a discount without the opportunity of returning them; instead, unsold issues were kept as inventory (Costello 132; Sacks 119-120). More accurate print runs lowered overhead for the companies, who could then publish more titles and invest in better production. It also shrank the market to a devoted fanbase of older readers rather than a casual audience who viewed comic books as an impulse buy. But a stable market allowed smaller publishers to become sustainable. Whereas creators at Marvel and DC were work-for-hire, being paid a page rate with no rights to their creations nor guaranteed royalties, many independent publishers supported creator-owned titles, covering their production costs through profit-sharing while allowing the writers and artists to own their creations, even if that meant that they could take their title to another company. The direct market, accompanied by the increased presence of trade collections in bookstores, also meant the creators and characters could be supported without the necessity of an ongoing series while still telling long-form, serialized stories. Hellboy’s narrative is divided between mini-series set in the present and short stories set in the past, each of varying length, which can leave the reader unsettled as to where they are in the overall narrative. Though the Mignolaverse has expanded through numerous series and mini-series, the central Hellboy titles have been collected into fourteen trade paperbacks.  

The direct market was more open to experimentation and appealing to diverse audiences. The Comics Code had been designed as a standard for a general audience who might come across the titles on newsstands. But at specialty stores, publishers could target readers with specific content. First independent and then mainstream publishers began to bypass the CCA, releasing titles without the seal of approval and, for adult-
oriented stories, labelling the books “For Mature Readers.” In 1989, the Comics Magazine Association of America adopted a new Code which, rather than specific lists of do’s and do not’s, offered more general content guidance so “that comics carrying the Comics Code Seal be ones that a parent can purchase with confidence that the contents uphold basic American moral and cultural values” (Nyberg 175). No mention of monsters and horror is made as they were no longer a major concern. Though “Obscene and profane words, symbols, and gestures are prohibited” (176), the mild profanity “Hell” does not appear to fall in that category by the 1990s. DC Comics had published the mature-reader title *Hellblazer* (#1 [Jan. 1988]) before the revision; Marvel Comics launched a new Son of Satan series titled *Hellstorm: Prince of Lies* (#1 [Apr. 1993]) afterwards.\(^2\) Though *Hellboy*, like *Hellstorm*, may have been permitted by using Hell in the literal sense, the Legend titles appear to have been published without the Seal.\(^3\)

During the collector boom period of the early 1990s, several new comic book companies launched their own shared superhero universes.\(^4\) Most of them went bust soon after the speculation market did.\(^5\) The new superheroes who endure belong to auteur storyworlds of largely singular creative visions—Erik Larsen’s *The Savage Dragon* (#1 [July 1992]-present), Todd McFarlane’s *Spawn* (#1 [May 1992]-present), Kurt Busiek’s *Astro City* (#1 [Aug. 1995]-present). *Hellboy* set itself apart from a crowded marketplace by not invoking the superhero tradition and instead changing the assumed mythic gestalt. To create an uncanny reading experience that is both familiar and foreign, Mignola looked to the genres that were popular just before the creation of the superhero in 1938 and imagined what sort of storyworld might have resulted instead, drawing on a pastiche of science fiction, adventure, costumed heroes, and weird tales of
the pulps and radio as well as mythology, fairy tales, folktales, religious mysticism, and horror literature and film to craft a Gothic milieu. Mignola states: “Basically, it’s taking everything I’ve been reading since high school, everything I ever liked, everything I ever read, old movies, tons of pulp magazines and stuff I read in college, fairy tales—all the stuff I’ve read, going back to Dracula in sixth grade, all that stuff I’ve been thinking about since then, I boiled down and made into Hellboy” (Mignola, “Between Two Worlds” 65). However, given Mignola’s comic book background and that the superhero is a melting pot of genres, it is inevitable that some superhero conventions seep into Hellboy.

As comic book scholar Terrance R. Wandtke describes, Hellboy “shares some things in common with the superhero (his extremely muscular physique and super-strength), the hardboiled detective (his rumpled trench coat and thick skin), and the adventure hero (his big guns and military supply belt)” (180). The Dark Age was a period of deconstructing the superhero and Mignola was clearly playing against the known tropes. Hellboy has superpowers but no costume; his red skin evokes the skintight outfit while his trench coat flutters behind him like a cape when he leaps about or is tossed around. Mignola explains: “‘He’s red because it’s funny.’ […] It just has to be, ‘The good guys here,’ and then a monster walks in” (“Genesis of Hellboy” 4). Hellboy does not have a code name—his name only sounds like one—and no secret identity. In the first act of his adventures, constituting *Seed of Destruction* through *Conqueror Worm* (#1-4 [May-Aug. 2001])106, Hellboy does not have an altruistic pro-social mission but rather a government job as part of the B.P.R.D. Peter Coogan argues that, during the Dark Age, superheroes’ altruism was becoming problematic and that
“heroes either move ‘up’ into governance or ‘down’ out of superheroing” (216). As the
superhero is reconstructed, the genre is defined less by checklist of compulsory
conventions and more as a contract with the reader. If the creator says a character is a
superhero and the audience agrees, they are a superhero regardless of how many tropes
they contain or the story setting.

Hellboy’s first full-length adventure, *Seed of Destruction*, establishes him as a
superhero in a Gothic world, where it is appropriate that a hero monster fills such a
role. After a prologue showing Hellboy’s origin in World War II, the story jumps to
the contemporary 1994. Hellboy meets with his adopted father, Professor Bruttenholm,
who has mysteriously returned from an Artic expedition, when they are attacked by
frogmen. Bruttenholm is killed during the fight, leading Hellboy, the amphibious Abe
Sapien, and the pyrotechnic Liz Sherman to investigate the Cavendish family who funded
the expedition. They travel to Cavendish Hall, a hundred-and-fifty-year-old manor
slowly sinking into a lake, where the matron Mrs. Cavendish explains that nine
generations of men in the family have been obsessed with searching for something in the
Arctic: “I don’t know what. A dream. A myth” (Mignola and Byrne 33). While Abe
explores the submerged crypt, the frogmen, revealed to be the last Cavendish sons
transformed, kill their mother, kidnap Liz, and drag Hellboy into the basement where he
is confronted by Rasputin. Rasputin monologues that, after summoning Hellboy and the
end of World War II, he retreated to the Arctic temple of the Sadu-Hem, where he
communed with the seven serpents, the Ogdru-Jahad, until he was awakened by
Bruttenholm. He then used Bruttenholm and the Cavendishes to be transported to the
manor, where he will utilize Liz’s power to open a conduit to summon the Ogdru-Jahad
from their prison in deep space, which is being observed by extraterrestrials. The ritual is
interrupted when Abe, possessed by the spirit of Elihu Cavendish, harpoons Rasputin.
Hellboy pummels Rasputin, who begs: “Think, creature, think! If you kill me you will
never know who you are! You will never understand the power inside you.” Hellboy
declares: “Yeah, you’re right. But I can live with it!” landing the finishing blow as the
manor collapses around them (97-98). In a castle in the far north, the remaining Nazis of
Project Ragna Rok begin to thaw from their cryogenic slumber, setting up the next story,
*Wake the Devil* (#1-5 [June-Oct. 1996]).

Hellboy’s appearance, strength, durability, and defense of humanity mark him as
a superhero, but this story is rooted in literary horror, particularly from the American
masters of the Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft. The image of the decrepit
Cavendish Hall sinking into a lake is borrowed from “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

The description of Cavendish Hall reads:

The house is called **Cavendish Hall.** It was built about a hundred and
fifty years ago by the first of the Cavendish family to come to America.
Back then it stood on a promontory commanding a wide view of the lake
and all the land around as far as the horizon. There days it is well on its
way to having a swimming pool for a basement. It’s been sinking since it
was finished.
Oh, did I mention there is supposed to be a curse on the place? Not the
house itself. The land. The lake. […]
You may think curses are just so much eyewash, but I don’t. I’ve seen too
much that makes me think otherwise.
Way too much. (Byrne and Mignola 29; emphasis in original)

The narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher” describes his first appearance of seeing
the house:

I looked upon the scene before me— upon the mere house, and the simple
landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant,
eyeless windows—upon a few rank sedges—upon a few white trunks of
decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no
That imagery is also specifically referenced in *Box Full of Evil* (#1-2 [Aug.-Sept. 1999]). The idea of a cursed lineage perhaps also comes from “Usher,” though the progenitor Elihu Cavendish’s occupation as a whaler may be from Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838); their obsessive personality is reminiscent of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). That Elihu’s obsession began when “In strange ports he learned…strange things” (Mignola and Byrne 32), similar to Cap’n Obed Marsh in Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936), who “faound aout more’n was good fer him in the Saouth Sea islands” (613; spelling in original). Cap’n Obed brought back to New England the pagan cult of the Esoteric Order of Dagon with its concomitant Deep Ones, frog-fish monsters who exchange their riches for sacrifices. Intermingling with the Deep Ones created a cursed lineage of people who will all eventually return to live beneath the sea, an inspiration for Mignola’s frog-men. Additionally, while Mignola places his temple of the Sadu-Hem in the Arctic, Lovecraft explored in the Antarctic a city of the Great Old Ones—an indisputable influence on those cosmic horrors, the Ogdru-Jahad—in the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936). Th novella is itself inspired by the abrupt, Antarctic ending of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* wherein the titular narrator dies suddenly after seeing a large, shrouded human figure of perfect whiteness. Additionally, the mini-series *Conqueror Worm* takes its name and contains extended quotes from the poem in the Poe short story *Ligeia* (1838).
These borrowings create something akin to what adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon describes as a “palimpsestuous” intertextuality, where the references are meant to evoke in the reader memories of the adapted works (21). The evocation of Poe and Lovecraft is deliberate on Mignola’s part in order to create a specific emotional effect or mood. Mignola states in a 1996 interview, that, in developing his storytelling niche, he wanted to be known as “the mood guy”:

The way I would do mood in a comic is certainly not the way a filmmaker would do a mood, but I had the luxury of cobbling together a string of images […] but I also had the luxury at the end of having all that stuff composed on one page, so you get this abstract sequence or pattern that works as a whole page. And as you read across it, it does create some kind of mood. (“Between Two Worlds” 73; emphasis in original)

As Mignola’s style developed through the Hellboy series, he begins to occasionally add non-sequential panels which are there solely to contribute to the tone of the story. The emotion is not just one of horror but a somber, Gothic mood.

Mignola’s other key inspiration was the related genre of occult detectives, such as Sheridan Le Fanu’s Dr. Martin Hesselius or Manly Wade Wellerman’s pulp hero John Thunstone, up through Hellboy’s contemporaries Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) on the hit television series The X-Files (1993-2002; 2016-2018) (Bukatman, Hellboy’s World 69).198 Both the detective and the Gothic emphasize the act of making secrets visible, the former with rational solutions—Todorov’s uncanny—and the later with supernatural ones—Todorov’s marvelous. The occult detective combines the two, applying rational thinking to the supernatural because the genre accepts the extraordinary as normal. Occult detectives are often white-collared gentleman and scholars, such as Professor Bruttenholm. Hellboy is a world-weary paranormal investigator (P.I.) by way of the blue-collar, hard-boiled detective, earning
his knowledge of the supernatural through hard-won experience and exhibiting a “punch first, ask questions later” attitude. Hellboy even dresses in the signature trench coat of the private detective, albeit over his bare torso. If the classic detective story follows the narrative structure of order/disorder/order, with evil being done away with and the status quo being reestablished by a symbol of the hegemonic patriarchy (Duda 73), then Hellboy reveals in the otherness which accompanied the narrative shift in the latter half of the twentieth century towards order/disorder/new order. In this new order, particularly after the end of the Cold War, evil always haunts the present. Even when the detective or the superhero contains it, evil will inevitably return.

The death of Professor Bruttenholm is representative of the end of the Cold War. Much like the United States, it marks a passage for Hellboy to step into an unknown world filled with unfathomable foes as well as questions about identity. Though Seed of Destruction skips over most of Professor Bruttenholm’s life between WWII and his death soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, that he lived through that period marks him as part of a Cold War generation. Hellboy, raised on American values in the late 1940s and 1950s, might be considered a baby boomer, but his attitude is more a reflection of Generation X. According to media studies scholar Mila Bongco: “A connection was apparent between the increased cynicism of major superheroes and an apocalyptic impulse in mass culture and a certain impotence in dealing with it, both of which, not surprisingly, coincides with the prevalent sentiment of the early 1990’s Generation X” (142). After the Cold War, the U.S. questioned its role as the world’s sole superpower. No longer facing mutually assured destruction, the country was forced to handle crises more biblical in scope: plague—the AIDS epidemic; famine—both national and global
hunger; and war. The U.S. led peacekeeping forces into smaller, increasingly decentralized conflicts in the Gulf War (1990-1991), the Somalian Civil War (1991-1995), the Bosnian War (1992-1995), and the Rwandan genocide (1994), often without clear goals related to national interests. These apocalyptic anxieties building towards the end of the millennium inform Hellboy’s world as, with the death of the traditional monster hunter, the past in the form of figures from mythology and folk tales (as well as Nazis) return from unseen or forgotten corners to question mankind’s progress as they seek to usher in the end of the world.

The loss of a stable, external Other against which the country could define itself resulted in a fracturing of American identity into various ideologies, some giving voice to the disenfranchised while others sought to retreat back into tradition. Hellboy’s forceful rejection of Rasputin and the new knowledge about himself can be read as a retreat into his traditional role as monster-as-monster-hunter. As he later tells his colleague Dr. Kate Corrigan: “You know how I live? […] I never deal with what I am. I don’t think about it. I just do my job, which usually involves me beating the crap out of things a lot like me. But I don’t think about that” (Mignola, Hellboy: Box Full of Evil 117). However, as the world’s greatest paranormal investigator, Hellboy invariably seeks out answers to his greatest mystery: himself. In “The Chained Coffin” (Dark Horse Presents #100-2 [Aug. 1995]), he spends the night in the ruined church where he was summoned in 1944 and has a vision of an old woman repenting on her deathbed only for a demon she worshipped in her youth to claim her, telling her she will bear his son in Hell. The story implies that these are Hellboy’s parents (64-73). In “The Right Hand of Doom” (Dark Horse Presents Annual 1998 [Aug. 1998]), he learns that his stone hand is the key to the gates
of Hell which anyone could wield (61-70). Hellboy would like to repress this secret history as it presents an uncanny image estranged from how he views himself. Hellboy struggles to integrate this new information about his past and his destiny into his self-identity, which contributes to the theme of denial and acceptance throughout these early stories. Cultural studies scholar Tony M. Vinci explains: “Instead of simply choosing not to be evil and emulating and protecting the status quo, Hellboy must now espouse a more complicated, idealistic worldview that augments his own self-awareness” (1054; emphasis in original).

Ultimately, Hellboy is forced to accept his past and the accompanying burdens about himself and choose how to move forward.

Other forces seek to label Hellboy to fit the prophecy that he will end the world and he constantly rejects them, reasserting his authentic self. In Wake the Devil, Hellboy finds himself in a netherworld of darkness after a battle with the Greek goddess Hecate where he is given the choice of becoming the harbinger of the apocalypse or dying. Large panels of Hellboy free-floating in inky blackness and crackling energy are a sublime space in the Lovecraftian sense, which Bukatman describes as different from the Kantian or Burkean sublime: “the mind is not exalted by its conceptual engagement with overwhelming powers beyond the scope of human understanding. […] it threatens all that we understand; it threatens human existence itself—hence the experience of horror as opposed to a more straightforward terror” (Hellboy’s World 58; emphasis in original).

Facing the annihilation of the self, represented by the growth of large, demonic horns, Hellboy asserts his free will as he tears the horns off: “Oh yeah? Screw you! I choose door number three! It’s my life, I’ll do what I want with it!” Supernatural onlookers explain: “Born of human woman in Hell, reborn of human designs on Earth…And now,
finally, … he gives birth to himself” (117). Rejecting his birthright and how others seek to define him, Hellboy saves himself by choosing to be a hero.

In *Box Full of Evil*, the occultist Igor Bromhead controls Hellboy and seeks to steal a sign of his power as the great beast, a crown of fire, by using Hellboy’s secret name, Anung Un Rama (Destroyer of Worlds). When the supernatural onlookers ask Hellboy if he is the world destroyer and he denies it, they explain, “Well then, boy, it’s not your name, is it,” freeing Hellboy from Bromhead’s control (99). Hellboy’s rejection of his destiny is similar to other monster-as-monster-hunters who choose humanity over their nature. But unlike them, Hellboy does not need redemption from his past actions; he is a monster but not monstrous. He was raised in a community of monster hunters, the B.P.R.D. When he meets people for the first time, no one ever reacts in fright or comments on his appearance. He was even granted honorary human statues by the United Nations (“The Right Hand of Doom” 62). Hellboy identifies with the best of humanity and, in emulating it, shows that one’s appearance does not make one a monster. The celebration of Otherness in previous decades has progressed to become a tentative acceptance of difference as part of normal society.

Hellboy expects the consideration of one’s choices and actions, rather than one’s appearance, to be extended to other “good” monsters in the B.P.R.D. But he is in denial of how Others have been historically been treated by society. In *Conqueror Worm*, Hellboy and Roger the Homunculus are assigned to destroy a Nazi space capsule returning to Earth. Hellboy is told that, as a failsafe, a bomb has been implanted in Roger. When an outraged Hellboy demands if they are going to do the same to Liz Sherman, who accidently burned thirty-two people to death when her pyrotechnic power
manifested, he is told: “Don’t be ridiculous. Liz Sherman is human. Roger is not” (15). While the B.P.R.D.’s mission is to protect the world from supernatural threats, this statement represents a two-tiered attitude towards many of their own agents. After Roger nearly sacrifices himself to defeat the Conqueror Worm from outer space, Hellboy quits the B.P.R.D. If the government bureaucracy cannot accept Roger as an equal, how long will they accept someone who looks like the devil?

After quitting, Hellboy drops out of superheroing and, according to Hellboy editor Scott Allie, “sprawl[s] out alone into the world, sinking deeper in the world of myth. …Without the framework of the Bureau, Hellboy’s life was about to go crazy” (qtd. in Bukatman, Hellboy’s World 48). He becomes a wanderer in the world of legend and folk tale, learning of his heritage as the last living heir of King Arthur, wielder of Excalibur and rightful king of England (Mignola and Fegredo, Hellboy: The Wild Hunt #6 [Sept. 2009] 113-119); dying (Mignola and Fegredo, Hellboy: The Fury #3 [Aug. 2011] 50-51); journeying through Hell (Hellboy in Hell #1-10 [Dec. 2012-June 2016]), and returning to ultimately fulfill his destiny as the beast of the apocalypse to destroy the human world (Mignola, Allie, and Campbell, B.P.R.D.: The Devil You Know #15 [Apr. 2019] 364-376). Though the Hellboy saga has come to a conclusion, his world and its history continue to be explored through numerous mini-series.

Duda states: “To be an effective monster hunter one must understand the monster without becoming the monster” (17). Hellboy inverts this; in order for a monster to be an effective monster hunter one must understand humanity. It is the increased focus on the human in the superhuman, the “working-class guy who just so happens to also be the beast of the apocalypse” (Mignola, interview by Ervin-Gore), and the contrast between
ordinary within the extraordinary which makes Hellboy a compelling character. Comic book critic Steph Weiner states: “Hellboy’s potency as a fictional character comes from his moral foundation, this contrast between his origins and his aspirations: not only does he refuse to succumb to the terrible destiny he's so often reminded of, he devotes his life to warding off supernatural threats, big and small” (10). In a world increasingly bereft of hope, it is Hellboy’s morality, more than his super strength or appearance, which makes him a superhero.

Hellboy is the heroic monster, a superhero in a Gothic milieu. He and his world are haunted by the past, the unseen things existing in antiquated spaces. When those grotesques threaten to upend laws of nature and normalcy, Hellboy and the B.P.R.D. fight to protect the status quo. Even when Hellboy stops believing in the hegemonic structures, he can still be counted on to help those in need as his adventures enter the twenty-first century.
CONCLUSION—THE SUPERHERO GOTHIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The superhero Gothic creates metaphors for cultural anxieties through monstrous heroes and heroic monsters who sublimate those concerns through their heroism. Batman, the Incredible Hulk, Ghost Rider, and Hellboy were created in response to certain social fears throughout the twentieth century: the collapse of traditional institutions; the threat of atomic energy as well as the emasculation of the American male; the crisis of the fragile self; and the questioning of national identity after the Cold War. But they are malleable metaphors, regularly returning to and reinterpreting their mythic gestalt to reflect contemporary areas of unease. As superheroes, they patrol the borders of law and crime, order and chaos, normal and abnormal. But as Gothic figures, they negotiate those boundaries, questioning what should be considered traditional and Other. The arc of the monster-hero to the hero-monster traces changing American attitudes towards the inclusion and exclusion of difference. And it is a path which continues in the twenty-first century.

Whereas the twentieth century witnessed Gothic decades in the United States—i.e., the 1930s, the 1970s, etc.—the twenty-first century has the potential to become a global Gothic century. The first two decades of the new millennium are bookended between the terrorist attack of 11 Sept. 2001 and a worldwide pandemic, filled in between with war, terrorism, economic crises, ecocide, racial tensions, and politically-divisive culture wars. The access to a constant stream of news and information provided by new
technologies has placed the real-world horrors front and center, undercutting the aesthetic distance traditional monsters need to develop their metaphorical power. Superheroes, with their message that terrors can be defeated, have saturated the market through the popularity of their film and television adaptations, beginning with X-Men (2000; dir. Bryan Singer) and Smallville (2001-2011). Given these social conditions, however, the Gothic and the superhero have never seemed further apart.

As society commodified the ambient fear that saturated day-to-day life (Cohen viii), the power of traditional monsters became less about their ability to inspire horror and more about their longevity, both in and as fiction, as a source of stability. In the aughts, the vampire completely transformed into fantastical romantic object of female desire through the Twilight, True Blood, and The Vampire Diaries novels and adaptations.201 The zombie rose in popularity in the 2010s, notably through the television adaptations of the comic book series The Walking Dead (Oct. 2003-July 2019) created by writer Robert Kirkman.202 Those series, along with the television adaptation (2023) of the video game The Last of Us (2013), are less concerned with the rise and possible defeat of a zombie plague as they are about long-term survival in apocalyptic scenarios.

The disruption and dissolution of the nuclear family has been explored through the trope of spirits and possession in The Conjuring film universe (2013-present), the Paranormal Activity film series (2007-2021), and the Insidious franchise (2010-present).203 These monsters have changed significantly from the original incarnations to suit the times, often seeing their horror replaced with familiarity.

There hasn’t been a culturally-resonate new monster since the collapse of the monoculture at the end of the twentieth century. The glut of media options allows horror
to instead cater to different quadrants of the fragmented audience. As a result, the few new monsters who have escaped the noise of mass media have done so by embracing a multiplicity of meanings. The monster from *The Babadook* (2014; dir. Jennifer Kent) and robot from *M3GAN* (2023; Gerard Johnstone) appeal to different audiences in different ways. Both films explore anxieties surrounding single parenthood, but their monsters have been embraced by the LGBTQ+ community as celebrations of Otherness. But the Gothic has continued to renew itself, whether through new mediums such as podcasts or internet creepypasta like Slender Man, or the postmodern pastiche of nostalgia in shows like *Supernatural* (2005-2020) and *Stranger Things* (2016-present). Its continued relevance has relied less on specific monsters and more on its themes, particularly the examination of trauma in recent years. Critical and commercial success has been found by writer/director Jordan Peele in his examination of racial trauma and by production studio A24 in several of their films’ portrayal of personal, intergenerational, and collective trauma. Current events, such as a global pandemic, will continue to provide fodder for Gothic terrors and horrors; it only remains to be seen what form they will take.

Just as the Gothic mutates to meet the needs of the era, superheroes have also transformed for the twenty-first century. The often-one-sided synergy between comic books and their adaptations—the comic books are more likely to reflect the films and tv shows than vice versa—has fundamentally shifted the superhero narrative and its related conventions. Douglas Wolk explains that the Golden Age description of “Vigilante crime fighters with secret identities” is no longer valid: “the ‘secret identity’ paradigm is mostly dead” and “it’s been decades since we’ve seen Black Panther or Doctor Strange or...
the X-Men do anything that actual law enforcement might otherwise handle” (298-299).
In a post-9/11 storyworld, which the superheroes were unable to prevent, the heroic mission has shifted from the idealistic and aspirational—that society is perfectible—to the limits of power to solve human problems (Maverick 158). The increased focus on the human side of the characters as lessened the importance of the secret identity while leaving the costume and code name intact. On a metatextual level of the adaptations, most audiences want to see the movie star’s face, not a mask.

The reconstruction of the superhero conventions after the deconstruction of the Dark Age was accompanied by a restructuring within the comic book industry. Following the financial bust of the late 1990s, including Marvel Comics declaring bankruptcy in Dec. 1996, the early 2000s saw the hiring of new management, an influx of new creators, and the popularization of the “wide-screen” art style. Using bigger panels led to decompressed storytelling, so that a storyline which previously took two or three issues now took five or six, the better to collect in trade paperbacks and sell in bookstores. In order to cut costs after its bankruptcy, Marvel Comics ceased submitting issues to the Comics Code Authority for review and instead instituted its own in-house rating system. Other companies followed suit until the CCA became defunct in Jan. 2011. In order to increase sales, Marvel and DC began running series of crossover events which would create the illusion of paradigm shifts within the storyworld. These editorially-controlled events typically consist of a mini-series telling the main story with tie-in issues united by a banner on the cover. The increased pace and scope of these events, until almost every company title was involved in yearly crossovers, leads me to
term this era the Baroque Age (2000-2016), coming from the art period (1600-1750) marked by its complexity, ornamentation, and excess.

While some of these crossover events could have Gothic undertones\textsuperscript{206}, the superheroes themselves did not typically act in a Gothic mode. The new superheroes who were created and introduced during the Baroque Age were mostly successors to already-existing heroes.\textsuperscript{207} It was a low point for the superhero Gothic, even though horror saw a resurgence outside the big two publishers. But one character continued the tradition by building on Hollywood synergy: Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Overseen by Buffy creator Joss Whedon, Dark Horse Comics published an official continuation of the acclaimed television series (1997-2003) as Season Eight (#1-40 [Mar. 2007-Jan. 2011]), Nine (#1-25 [Sept. 2011-Sept. 2013]), Ten (#1-30 [Mar. 2014-July 2016]), Eleven #1-12 [Nov. 2016-Oct. 2017]), and Twelve (#1-4 [June-Sept. 2018]).\textsuperscript{208}

Created as an inversion of the last girl trope, Buffy the Vampire Slayer stretches the superhero Gothic to its limit. She has superpowers but lacks a costume; per the new superhero paradigm, she does not need a secret identity but does have an alias, the Slayer. Her heroic mission is to fight supernatural monsters. These monsters have abilities that are equivalent to superpowers but, lacking in the other superhero tropes, this does not create a superhero milieu. Nor is the storyworld in these comic books a truly Gothic as the existence of the supernatural and magic is revealed to the world in the comics, creating a paradigm shift in the understanding of natural laws so that this no longer creates a category crisis. Though some monsters are still a threat to humanity, others become celebrities (Epson and Jeanty 1-32). In this context, Buffy and her army of Slayers—Buffy shared her power some women around the world in the television series
finale (“Chosen”)—are viewed as violently policing a new, supernatural minority while their monstrous feminine is simultaneously a threat to the patriarchal hegemony. Season Eight sees Buffy fight against a cabal of magic users and the military lead by Twilight, who is revealed to be Buffy’s former paramour Angel. In this dark fantasy milieu, Buffy is neither a monstrous superhero nor a superheroic monster but rather a superhero-as-monster hunter.

We have entered a new age of superheroes in recent years which has seen many characters return to their mythic gestalt. Batman’s villains have become more horrific with time, but the recent “Gotham Nocturne” storyline by writer Ram V and various artist in *Detective Comics* (#1062-1089 [Sept. 2022-Sept. 2024]) has been a truly Gothic exploration of the secrets that haunt Gotham City. The critically-acclaimed *Immortal Hulk* (#1-50 [Aug. 2018-Dec. 2021]) by writer Al Ewing and artist Joe Bennet explored body horror, the Hulk’s repressed psyche, and the Banner family secrets and how they all connect to gamma radiation. The current run of *The Incredible Hulk* Vol. 4 (#1-present [Aug. 2023-present]) by Phillip Kennedy Johnson and various artists has seen the Hulk travel America and encounter various folk horrors. While one Ghost Rider, Robbie Reyes, became an Avenger (*Avengers* Vol. 8 #1 [July 2018]). Johnny Blaze became the King of Hell (*Ghost Rider* Vol. 9 #1-7 [Dec. 2019-Sept. 2020]) before returning to ride the haunted highways of America (*Ghost Rider* Vol. 10 #1-21 [Apr. 2022-Feb. 2024]); the Spirit of Vengeance has recently transferred to the villain the Hood for a new miniseries (*Ghost Rider: Final Vengeance* #1-8 [May-Dec. 2024]). Though the Hellboy saga ended with the destruction of the humanity (though some remnants escaped into the hollow Earth where they are led by Frankenstein’s monster), stories set in his past
continue to be told. When BOOM! Studios acquired the license to Buffy the Vampire Slayer in 2018, she returned to her mythic gestalt through a remix of her high school adventures from the television show, albeit in the present day (Buffy the Vampire Slayer #1-34 [Jan. 2019-Feb. 2022]). The most recent storyline has seen Giles use magic to attempt to remove Buffy’s trauma, only for Buffy to lose her powers and her friend Willow step into the role of the vampire slayer (The Vampire Slayer #1-16 [Apr. 2022-July 2023]). Other hero monsters, such Marvel Comics’ Venom (Eddie Brock/Dylan Brock), have also explored the theme of generational trauma which seems prevalent in this new era, though there is not yet enough perspective to give this age a name.

The superhero Gothic is one of the foundational subgenres of the superhero, beginning with Batman being created as the second successful superhero after Superman. The superhero subsumes other genres into itself. The Gothic brings greater depth to the superhero through its negative aesthetic. This creates greater entertainment potential for the audience, the primary role of such stories. Terrance Wandtke states: “While this does not mean that they [stories] lack meaning, they are not overburdened with certain meaning and by lacking a specific moral, they become more significant to culture at large; dynamic, pregnant with potential meanings, and consequently full of pass-along value” (186). The superhero Gothic succeeds as entertainment because it presents cultural anxieties from an aesthetic distance by embodying them through metaphor in monstrous bodies. Catharsis is achieved not just by the defeat of the monster but by sublimating those horrors through monstrous heroes and heroic monsters who show that those concerns do not have to be feared but can be processed and accepted. This
ideological project is why the superhero Gothic has lasted for over eighty years and will continue to be popular as long as there are superheroes.
ENDNOTES

1 In *Nightmare on Main Street*, Nathan Edmunson analyzes the attitude of Gothic pessimism in late twentieth-century American culture in a wide range of topics, from popular media to politics to the O.J. Simpson trial. He also examines the countervailing optimism he refers to as “pop transcendance.”

“Self-Reliance” is an essay by the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson and was published in 1841. The short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” was written by Edgar Allan Poe and published in 1839.

2 The first superhero to appear following Superman was Wonder Man in *Wonder Comics* #1 (May 1939). Seeing the success of Superman, magazine publisher Victor Fox asked Will Eisner of the Eisner-Iger Studio to create an imitation of the character (many publishers initially bought content from packaging studios rather hire their own creators). In the story, Fred Carson is given a ring by a Tibetan monk that grants him the powers of super strength, invulnerability, and the ability to leap great distances. Superman’s publisher, Detective Comics, Inc., sued for copyright infringement. In *Detective Comics, Inc.* v Brun Publications, Inc. (1940), Judge Augustus N. Hand ruled in favor of Detective Comics, Inc., stating that, though the idea of a general superhero archetype is not protected by copyright, the specific expression is. Detective Comics, Inc, would use this ruling to litigate against other superhero publishers throughout the 1940s. Comics scholar Peter Coogan views this ruling as the source for his definition of a superhero in *Superhero: Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006).

3 The most in-depth examination of the intersection of the Gothic, horror, and comic books is *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014) by Julia Round. This book explores the history, narratology, and culture surrounding the Gothic and comic books, reserving analysis mostly for graphic narratives in America and Great Britain after 1985.

Round also contributed the essay “Gothic and the Graphic Novel” to *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012). Other essays on the topic include: “Gothic and the Graphic Novel” from *The Gothic* (2004) by David Punter and Glennis Byron; “Gothic and the Graphic Novel” by Andy W. Smith in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic* (2007); and “Gothic Graphic Novel and Comics” by Anna Powell in *The Handbook of the Gothic* (2009). These entries tend to focus on horror comics by British writers (the influx of British writers to American comic books in the late 1980s has been referred to as the British Invasion).

“I’ll Be Whatever Gotham Needs Me to Be” by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet in *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture* (2012) comes the closest to an examination of the superhero Gothic, applying a Gothic lens to Batman comic books and adaptations. But covering the entire history of the character in graphic and filmic narratives in an essay will by necessity require selective reading.


The third chapter of Chris Gavaler’s *On the Origin of Superheroes* is a study of the influence of the Gothic on superheroes, but the mixing of history, biography, and multimedia analysis lacks a self-professed academic rigor (9).


In “The Myth of Superman” (1972), Umberto Eco describes this yearning for redundancy as a form of escapism from an ever-changing society as opposed to the more stable societies of previous centuries: “In a contemporary industrial society, instead, the alteration of standards, the dissolution of tradition, social mobility, the fact that models and principles are ‘consumable’—everything can be summed up under the sign of a continuous load of information which proceeds by way of massive jolts, implying continuous reassessment of sensibilities, adaptation of psychological assumptions, and requalification of intelligence. Narrative of a redundant nature would appear in this panorama as an indulgent invitation to repose, the only occasion of true relaxation offered to the consumer” (161).

Thomas Leitch’s other strategies of adaptation include: Celebration: the faithful transposition or replication from one source to another (96); Adjustment: rendering a text more suitable for another medium through compression, expansion, or correction (98); Neoclassical: adjusting a source for the requirements of different audiences, institutions, and conventions, such as relocating the story in time and/or place (103); Revisions: a rewriting or reassessing of the original work (106); Colonization: filling the text with new meaning due to the different medium (109); and (Meta) Commentary or Deconstruction (111).

In *Adapting Frankenstein* (2018), Dennis R. Cutchins and Dennis R. Perry define a “Network” as the entire potential collection of adaptations of a text and a “Complex” as each individual’s experience with that collection (6).

Related to convergence culture is transmedia storytelling, in which a single narrative is broken up across multiple media platforms, each piece necessary to form the larger whole.

As an example, in its opening weekend (Apr. 25-28, 2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (dirs. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo) grossed $357,115,007.00. Given an average ticket price of $9.01, that means approximately 39,655,406 tickets were sold. It is impossible to calculate how many of those tickets were sold to repeat viewers. That same week, *Avengers Vol. 7 #19* sold 55,224 copies, meaning the comic book sold 0.14% of the tickets sold. In April 2019, *Avengers* related graphic novels sold 7,330 copies in comic book shops. Sales totals for bookstores are not available. *Avengers: Endgame* may be an extreme example of the difference in sales figures, as it is currently the second-most financially successful movie of all time, but it is by no means an outlier in this trend of more people experiencing superheroes through the films than the comic books.

See “Batman’s Canon” (2011) by Kevin K. Durand for more on issues of canonicity.
In “The Tyranny of the Serial” (2007), Jason Dittmer compares the role of continuity as a structuring force in superhero comic book’s serial narrative to the role of popular culture in constructing geopolitical worldviews and national identity.

The famous tagline of Superman originated on The Adventures of Superman radio show. The original version only said Superman battled for truth and justice. “…and the American way” was added during World War II to strike a patriotic note. Variations of this phrase have been used in Superman adaptations for decades.

Linnaean system of domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species is the standard still used to classify organisms.

Linnaeus divided humanity into subspecies largely according to an essentialized view of geography and race: white Europeans, red Americans, yellow Asians, and black Africans; he also included an entry for wild children (*homo sapiens ferus*). This taxonomy, including *homo sapiens monstrosus*, was included in the 1758 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Teratology now means the scientific study of congenital abnormalities and abnormal formations; such were likely the inspiration for many fantastic creatures. The study of monsters has moved into cryptozoology. For more on this tradition, see Mahnke, “In Plain Sight.”

According to Thomas Schatz in Hollywood Genres (1981), successful parody is a sign that a genre’s conventions and ideologies have saturated the audience (38).

In The Philosophy of Horror, Noël Carroll describes this narrative pattern as “normal/abnormal/normal” (201). But this pattern is broad and can be applied to the story structure of many other genres. It also bears similarities to of structure of Joseph Campbell’s monomythic Hero’s Journey of “departure/initiation/return,” as described in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949).

Special thanks to Darrell Johnson for this description.

This chapter has become the focus of “Blood Vessel,” the second episode of the 2020 BBC Dracula mini-series by Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss and of the film The Last Voyage of the Demeter (2023; dir. André Øvredal).

Julia Kristeva expresses this as she describes her experience of the sublime in The Powers of Horror (1980): “For the sublime has no object either. When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinates me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, and think. The ‘sublime’ object dissolves in the raptures of bottomless memory. It is such a memory which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrances to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly” (12).

In this schema, mountains were considered “unnatural Protuberances” or “Warts” on the surface of nature (Botting, “In Gothic Darkly” 20-1).

Burke describes the sublime experience as follows: “In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be noxious; if the pain is carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous to troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful
horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all passions.” (165).

24. The German unheimliche is translated more closely as “unhomely,” from the root heimliche (“homely”). As this does not have the same semantic meaning in English, it has been rendered as “uncanny” to more accurately express the feeling Freud described.

25. Again, special thanks to Darrell Johnson for this description.

26. For more on the functions of monstrosity, see Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).”

27. One such exception is the novella The Turn of the Screw (1898) by Henry James, wherein an unnamed governess and her wards seem to see phantoms of two former employees. It is never resolved whether the apparitions were a supernatural occurrence or the product of overactive imaginations. The use of an unreliable first-person narration, another trope of the Gothic, reinforces the uncertainty because the narrator’s veracity is in doubt (Todorov 83-84).

28. The start and finish of the Enlightenment has been much debated, typically beginning somewhere between the publication of Isaac Newton’s Princiipla Mathematica in 1687 and the death of Louis XIV of France in 1715. The beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 usually marks the end of the Enlightenment, though it continues in some places until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

29. The Gothic is a misnomer begun by Renaissance scholars who disdained the pointed-arch architecture of the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, as it failed to adhere to their neoclassical standards. They inaccurately linked it to the fifth century Goth tribes who sacked Rome (Hogle, Introduction, The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic 3). Gothic then came to signify the opposite of classical, though no one living in the Middle Ages would have thought their buildings as uncivilized or barbaric as they were the height of engineering and technological achievement at the time (Punter and Byron 7; Groom 12-13).

30. Though Walpole called his work “Gothic,” this term was not adopted as a literary genre until the 1920s. Instead, they were referred to as novels in the German style, hobgoblin romances, hobgobliana, horrid novels, or, more universally, romances (Groom 76).

31. English literature scholar Nick Groom considers 1762’s Longsword, The Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance by Henry Leland as the first Gothic novel (70).

32. Various factors may have contributed to this, from the exigencies of the American Revolution to a slump in publishing. Publication of new English novels went down from sixty in 1771 to a mere sixteen per year by 1780 (Clery 32-3). The only new novel to explicitly label itself as an “literary offspring” of Walpole was The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story (1777-78) by Clara Reeve (Groom 81).

33. During the subsequent two decades (1790-1810), the Gothic maintained a market share of approximately thirty percent of new publications (Miles, “The 1790s” 42). This is especially significant when considered in light of the limited number of new novels published each year. In 1788, eighty new novels appeared in print; by 1808, that number had increased to only 111 (Glover 18). Though the number of new Gothic novels decreased after 1808, they still maintained popularity until around 1830.

34. Radcliffe was successful both critically and financially. Essayist Nathan Drake called Radcliffe “the Shakespeare of Romance Writers.” For The Italian (1797), she received £800, three times her husband’s annual income (Groom 83).
Part of the controversy surrounding *The Monk*’s publication stemmed from the fact that Lewis was a member of Parliament and referred to himself as such on the title page.

There are several factors which contributed to the development of an American literary style. A decrease in the number of texts imported from Europe coupled with an increase in the reading audience through immigration and improved education created a demand for original material. This would see not only an increase in public and private circulating libraries, but an explosive growth in the magazine market (Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic* 25). It was in the short story, a staple of the literary magazine, that the American Gothic truly made its mark.

In particular, the Second Great Awakening influenced various religious philosophies such as Transcendentalism, the idea of finding God in nature promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as social movements including abolition, temperance, and women’s rights. Spiritualism became linked to these reform movements.

The initial popularity of spiritualism is attributed to the Fox Sisters, Margaretta (“Maggie”) and Catherine (“Kate”), who held convincing seances beginning in 1848. In 1888, Maggie confessed that it had all been a hoax and that the mysterious knocking or rapping sounds had been created by cracking their toes, ankles, and knees. For more information, see Mahnke, “Passing Notes” and Mahnke, *Unobscured Season* 2.

Spirit photography began when secondary “ghostly” people appeared in the portrait photographs of William H. Mumler in the 1860s. Though he eventually discovered this effect was due to double exposures, he continued to doctor images as a medium until his fraud was discovered. Spirit photography continues to be a part of ghost hunting. For more information, see Mahnke, “Exposure.”

Spiritualism, though less popular in Great Britain than in the United States, may also have contributed to the popularity of ghost stories during the period, as the existence of ghosts questioned the authority of science while offering some proof of an existence beyond this life (Punter and Byron 27). In addition to appearing regularly in periodicals and magazines, it was also tradition to tell ghosts stories on Christmas Eve, which influenced Charles Dickens in writing *A Christmas Carol* in 1843.

This duality was frequently captured in landscape painting, such as the works by the Hudson River School (see Figure 2).

Key figures in the Southern Gothic tradition include William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor.

Poe is considered to a father of the detective story. His detective C. Auguste Dupin appeared in “The Murders at the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). Poe’s science fiction includes “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfall” (1835), recounting a balloon journey to the moon.

Tzvetan Todorov described “The Fall of the House of Usher” as “an instance of the uncanny bordering on the fantastic…” (47).

Part of this transformation of the Gothic resulted from the change in publishing practiced. Novels were frequently first serialized in newspapers and periodicals (Glover 17). The adaptation into plays and operas and diffusion of the Gothic across genres, such as more realistic novels and short stories, also impacted the nature of these narratives, allowing the Gothic to appear in more contemporary settings.

This theme also appears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde.

Notable vampire stories before *Dracula* include: “The Vampyre” (1816) by John William Polidori, written at the same vacation party where Mary Shelly began writing *Frankenstein; Varney the Vampire*, a
penny dreadful serialized between 1845 and 1847 by James Malcolm Rymer; and Carmilla (1872) by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Florence Marryat’s The Blood of the Vampire (1897) was published the same year as Dracula.

47 The frontier line was defined by the Census Bureau as the point beyond which population density was less than two person per square mile. In the “Progress of the Nation” section of the 1890 Census, which analyzed the course of settlement since the first census in 1790, Superintendent of the Census Bureau Robert P. Porter declared: “Up to and including 1890 the country had a frontier settlement, but at present the unsettled land has been broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line” (qtd. in Lang, et al. 291).

48 H.G. Wells’ novels, such as The War of the Worlds (1897) and The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896), utilized Gothic overtones in his science fiction to sublimate anxieties concerning colonialism in the British Empire and English culture.

49 Lovecraft expands on this description: “A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (4).

50 The National Origin Act of 1924 perpetuated an isolationist policy in order to “maintain the racial preponderance of the basic strain on our people and thereby stabilize the ethnic composition of the population.”

51 Panic also occurred during radio productions of War of the Worlds in Chile on 12 Nov. 1944 and in Ecuador on 12 Feb. 1949, the latter of which resulted in the deaths of at least six people (Gosling).

52 Universal Pictures had significant success with its slate of monster films from the 1920s through the 1950s, particularly with the film series based on classic monsters that made stars of Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, and Lon Chaney Jr. The Dracula, Frankenstein, and The Wolf Man series each had several films before they began to meet. Dracula consisted of three film (1931-1943); Frankenstein had four films (1931-1942); The Wolf Man only one film (1941) before appearing in crossovers. The shared universe includes three films: Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943; dir. Roy William Neill); House of Frankenstein (1944; dir. Eric C. Kenton); and House of Dracula (1945; Eric C. Kenton). Other notable Universal monster franchises include: the six-film The Mummy series (1932-1955); the two-film The Invisible Man series (1933, 1940); and the late entry The Creature from the Black Lagoon trilogy (1954-1956).

Also notable is the meeting between the monsters and Abbott and Costello as part of film series where the comedic duo met classic Universal characters. Films in the series featuring monsters include: Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948; dir. Charles Barton), which also featured Dracula and the Wolf Man; Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man (1951; dir. Charles Lamont); Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1953; dir. Charles Lamont); and Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy (1954; dir. Charles Lamont). Abbott and Costello met the Creature from the Black Lagoon on live television in 1954 as a segment on The Colgate Comedy Hour.

Hammer Studios created new series for many of these characters beginning in the 1950s through the 1970s. Universal has made several attempts to remake, reimagine, and reboot the franchises beginning in the 1990s, including The Mummy trilogy (1999-2008), Van Helsing (2004; dir. Stephen Sommers). The Wolfman (2010; dir. Joe Johnston), and Dracula Untold (2014; dir. Gary Shore). Following the success of Marvel Studios, Universal announced a similar shared universe of films based on the monster characters called the Dark Universe. The critical and financial failure of the first entry, The Mummy (2017; dir. Alex Kurtzman), cancelled those ambitious plans. The studio continues to develop films based on this intellectual property, beginning with a feminist version of The Invisible Man (2020; dir. Leigh Whannell).
53 *Nosferatu* is a loose adaptation of *Dracula*, but Murnau was unable to secure the rights to the novel and changed the character’s names to skirt copyright law. For example, Count Dracula becomes Count Orlock.


55 In “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964), Richard Hofstadter describes how the rhetorical strategies of conspiratorial fantasy becomes a mode of political expression as the style has more do with that ideas are believed rather than their veracity or falsity.

56 B-movies are called such because they were the lower-budget, less-advertised second billing of a double feature. The term continues to be used in references to low budget and low-quality films.

57 Count von Count first appeared on the 13 Nov. 1972 episode of *Sesame Street* and has been a mainstay ever since.

58 *Rosemary’s Baby* is based on Ira Levin’s 1967 novel of the same name. *The Exorcist* is based on William Peter Blatty’s 1971 novel of the same name; Blatty also wrote the screenplay.


56 This characterization of the masculinized feminine also affected the action heroines and superheroines of the eighties and early nineties, such as Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* franchise and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *The Terminator* (1984; dir. James Cameron) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991; dir. James Cameron).


The *Alien* franchise contains six films: an initial four-film cycle (1979-1997), with two prequels (2012, 2017), and the forthcoming *Alien: Romulus* (2024; dir. Fede Álvarez). A television series is also in production by Noah Hawley for FX. The *Predator* franchise consists of four films (1987-2018) and the prequel *Prey* (2002; dir. Dan Trachtenberg), with an announced follow-up to the latter. Additionally, the two franchises have crossed-over in the two-film *Alien versus Predator* series (2004, 2007).
These lists do not include the numerous ancillary media tie-ins and crossovers, wherein these characters have met in one form or another.


63 The Blair Witch Project has released two sequel films (2000, 2016). A reboot film has been announced.

64 Scream has had five sequels (1997-2023), with a sixth in production.

65 The Franco-Belgium equivalent of the comic book, the bandes dessinées (drawn strips), have been recognized as the “ninth art” since the 1960s.

66 In “Defining Comics?” (2012), Aaron Meskin argues that this definition is too broad as the invention of comics is tied to a specific historical moment and McCloud’s definition would include much older works, such as ancient Egyptian wall paintings (370). Though Meskin is correct as to the term “comics,” McCloud’s definition is meant to be all-encompassing (or at least as much as possible) for sequential narrative.

67 McCloud explains closure as follows: “Comic book panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67).

68 Cool media provides less sensory data or definition than “hot” media (print, radio, film) and therefore requires completion by the audience. In Understanding Media (1964), McLuhan states: “Comics […] being low in definition, are a highly participational form of expression,…” (107).

69 Other scholars have also defined the superhero, but Coogan’s definition is the most concise. Both Mike Benton in The Comic Book in America (1985) and Joseph Michael Sommers in “Negotiating Popular Genres in Comic Books” (2014) include some variation of costume, powers, secret identity, and mission (174; 86). In “The Importance of Context” (2013), comic book writer Kurt Busiek lists superpowers, costume, code name, secret identity, and heroic ongoing mission separately as well as including a superhero milieu (133).

70 Zorro, the costumed identity of Diego de la Vega, was created by Johnston McCulley and first appeared in the novella The Curse of Capistrano, serialized in the magazine All-Story Weekly from 9 Aug. to 6 Sept. 1919. Douglas Fairbanks Sr. starred in the silent films The Mark of Zorro (1920; dir. Fred Niblo) and Don Q., Son of Zorro (1923; dir. Donald Crisp). The sound and color film The Bold Caballero (Wells Root), starring Robert Livingston as Zorro, was released in 1936. The Shadow first appeared as the narrator of The Detective Story Hour radio show, which premiered 31 July 1930. The radio show was sponsored by Street & Smith to help sell their pulp magazine, but The Shadow proved so popular that Street & Smith hired Walter B. Gibson, under the pen name Maxwell Grant, to develop the character for its own magazine. The first issue of The Shadow went on sale on 1 Apr. 1931. In the pulp, The Shadow was secretly Kent Allred but the later radio serial, premiering 26 Sept. 1937, featured the secret identity of Lamont Cranston, first voiced by a young Orson Welles. The Spider (Richard Wentworth) was created by Harry Steeger for The Spider magazine in 1933. The Green Hornet, the crime-fighting alter ego of Britt Reid, was created by George W. Treadle and Fran Striker for The Green Hornet radio program, which premiered 31 Jan. 1936. Mandrake the Magician, created by Lee Falk and first appearing in as a comic strip on 11 June 1934, possessed hypnosis and other magic-based powers. Falk’s costumed adventurer The Phantom premiered as an American comic strip on 17 Feb. 1936.
Multiple characters have used the codename The Flash, sometimes simultaneously, including Jay Garrick, Barry Allen, Wally West, and Bart Allen.

In the origin of Iron Man in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Mar. 1963), a piece of shrapnel lodges near Tony Stark’s heart that cannot be removed without killing him (Lee, Lieber, and Heck 53). Stark wears the Iron Man chest plate to help regulate his heart.

The name Captain Marvel has had a long and convoluted history. The first Captain Marvel (Billy Baston) was published by Fawcett Comics in *Whiz Comics* from Feb. 1940-June 1953. Fawcett ceased publishing comic books following a long copyright infringement lawsuit from DC (that Captain Marvel was too similar to Superman) and the financial downturn of the comic book market in the 1950s.

Marvel Comics then claimed the copyright and began publishing *Captain Marvel* in June 1968. Several characters have used the moniker, beginning with extraterrestrial soldier Mar-Vell (1968-1982) and followed by Monica Rambeau (1982-1996), Mar-Vell’s son Genis-Vell (1995-2002), Mar-Vell’s daughter Phyla-Vell (2006-2007), Noh-Varr (2009-2011) and finally taken up by the former Ms. Marvel Carol Danvers in 2012. DC licensed the Fawcett character beginning in 1972 and acquired the rights in 1992. However, due to Marvel’s copyright, the character could only be referred to as Captain Marvel in story and never on the cover. His stories were published under various titles involving SHAZAM!, the magic word that allows Billy Baston to turn into Captain Marvel. In 2011, DC changed the character’s codename to Shazam, which was reflected in the 2019 film. In 2023, the character began being referred to as The Captain.

*The Myth of the American Superhero* does not actually deal with superheroes per se but rather takes a broad view of American mythic heroes as extraordinary and exceptional.

Most stories from the Golden Age (1938-1954) were untitled. The story titles in this essay come from reprint collections, where titles were added for reader convenience.

The Declaration of Independence’s unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” may have been inspired by John Locke, who defined “property” as “life, liberty, and estate.” For Locke, social institutions are meant to protect said property. In this case, they are defended by agents of the state or, in the case of the superhero, agents acting on behalf of the state.

A similar taxonomy of the supervillain could be created of henchmen, crime bosses, rogues, and equivalent to the sovereign (supervillain being the best name for such a role) to name a few, with the anti-hero existing in a murky grey area between the hero and villain. But such is beyond the scope of this study.

Examples of superheroes from outside the United States which have found global success include the manga *My Hero Academia* (July 2014-present) by Kōhei Horikoshi and *One-Punch Man* (June 2012-present), written by ONE and illustrated by Yusuke Murata.

In 1946, National Allied Publications and Detective Comics, Inc., as well as All-American Publications, were consolidated into National Comics Publications. In 1976, the company was reorganized as DC Comics, Inc. (Cronin, “When Was DC First Officially Called DC Comics?”). Additionally, DC Comics has bought up other publishing companies over the years, including Fawcett, Charlton, and Wildstorm, and integrated their superheroes into the DC Universe. Marvel Comics began as Timely Comics in the 1940s and then became Atlas in the 50s before arriving at its more famous name in the 60s.

While I argue there is a transition approximately every fifteen years, the beginning and end dates provided are not meant to be concrete nor self-contained as it usually takes a few years to define a coherent aesthetic and narrative identity following each transformation.

Some of these ages have been further subdivided. The period of comic book publication before the creation of the superhero has been referred to as the Platinum Age (1933-1938). The post-WWII era,
when superheroes’ popularity was in decline, has been called the Atomic Age (1946-1955). The Copper Age (1992-2000) splits the Iron or Dark Age following the creation of Image Comics. An argument can be made that post-2000 was a second golden age or Renaissance (2000-2008) before the cycle of line-wide crossovers and, perhaps more notably, the rise of Marvel Comics film branch, Marvel Studios.

81 The combination of words and images that would become the comic book began in Western culture in the nineteenth century, though there are antiquarian examples of it, such as the five panels accompanied by proto-speech bubbles discovered in a Roman tomb from the first century CE in Northern Jordan. The artform of Japanese manga dates as far back as the twelfth century CE.

The combination of text and images in modern Western culture is attributed to the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer for his satirical volumes of narrative caricature, or “proto-stories,” including what is considered to be the first graphic novel, *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* (1837).

82 This type of criticism has plagued each new medium and genre that has been introduced since the Industrial Revolution, including but not limited to: the dime novel, film, radio, comic books, television, rock and roll, rap, and the internet. It seems to be a rite of passage for the rising generation to embrace a new medium or genre that is decried by the dominant culture only for the artform to become legitimized as those youth become the dominant culture.

83 An example of how Pulitzer and Hearst’s rivalry played out on the comic page involves the first comic strip star, the Yellow Kid. Created by Richard F. Outcault as a supporting character in *Hogan’s Alley* (1895-1898), the Yellow Kid was a bald child who stood out because his speech did not appear in word balloons but rather on his yellow nightshirt. *Hogan’s Alley* was first printed in Pulitzer’s *World* but then Outcault was hired away by Hearst. However, as Outcault had not copyrighted his character, Pulitzer hired a new artist to continue the strip. This meant that versions of *Hogan’s Alley* appeared in both newspapers for a few years.

The Yellow Kid has also been connected with the origin of the term Yellow Journalism.

84 This was not the first time comic strips had been repackaged. As early as 1903 up to 1935, comic strips were collected into cardboard-covered books that sold for twenty-five cents. These books focused on a single strip but would rearrange the layout from four horizontal panels to a grid. They were also inconsistent in the organization of the collected strips, focusing on the jokes rather than continuity (Harris-Fain).

85 Siegel and Shuster’s initial conception of Superman was as a science-fiction villain in the self-published short story “Reign of the Super-man” (1933). While attempting to get Superman published as a comic strip, Siegel contacted other artists with his idea. In a script to Lee O’Mealia, artist of the *Fu Manchu* comic strip, Superman was a scientist-adventurer who used a time machine one minute before the Earth was destroyed to send himself back to 1934 (Tye 18). (Superman also arrived on earth as an adult in the 1940 premiere of *The Adventures of Superman* radio show.) In a script to Russell Keaton in 1935, a scientist sends a baby back in the time machine (Ricca 101).

86 The first comic work that Seigel and Shuster sold were “Henri Duval,” a *Three Musketeers* homage, and “Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective.” Both first appeared in National Allied’s *New Fun Comics* #6 (Oct. 1935). They would go on to collaborate on titles like “Radio Squad,” “Federal Men,” “Spy,” and “Slam Bradley” before finding success with Superman (Ricca 104-117).

87 *Action Comics* #1 had an initial print run of 200,000. The popularity of Superman was such that soon subsequent issues had initial print runs of 1,000,000 (Daniels, *DC Comics* 22).

88 “Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters” in *Batman* #1 (Spring 1940) by Finger and Kane featuring scenes of Batman hanging a monster man (similar to a lynching) and shooting a monster man with gas pellets, causing the monster to fall off a building. This led to editor Whitney Ellsworth to ban Batman from
killing or using a gun in future stories. This marked the beginning of in-house code of ethics for the
superheroes published by National Allied Publications and Detective Comics, Inc. (Daniels, Batman 42).

89 The Shield was created by writer Harry Shorten and artist Irv Novick for MLJ (later Archie) Comics.
Captain America was created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby for Timely Comics. Wonder
Woman was created by psychologist and writer William Moulton Marston and artist Harry G. Peter for All-
American Comics.

90 Timely Comics publisher Martin Goodman rushed the cover because he feared that Adolf Hitler would
be killed before the comic was published (Cronin, “Was Captain America’s Debut Rushed For Fear Hitler
Would Die ‘Too Soon’?”).

91 The most popular superhero of the Golden Age was not the DC Comics’ characters but Fawcett Comics’
Captain Marvel and the Marvel Family, including Captain Marvel Jr. and Mary Marvel. Created by writer
Bill Parker and artist C.C. Beck and first appearing in Whiz Comics #2 (Feb. 1940), the boy Billy Baston is
granted the ability to turn into the adult Captain Marvel when he utters the magic word “SHAZAM!” DC
Comics sued for copyright infringement on Superman beginning in 1941 and litigating through 1952, with
Fawcett agreeing to cease publishing Captain Marvel related comics and pay $400,000 damages. But,
given the downturn in the market, Fawcett found comic book publishing to be unprofitable and shut down
in 1953. The final issue of Whiz Comics was #155 (June 1953).

92 Superman, Batman (and Robin), and Wonder Woman are the only heroes to have self-titled series
in continuous publication since their inception. Adventure Comics featured Superboy, Aquaman, and
Green Arrow and speedy throughout the 1950s.

93 Crime Does Not Pay was a continuation of the numbering from Silver Streak Comics #21. It was a
common practice at the time for publishers to change the theme and/or title of a series but continue with the
same issue numbering in order to save money on postage permits.

94 Following the practice of changing a title but keeping a numbering, EC began Tales from the Crypt as a
feature in Crime Patrol #15 (Dec. 1949/Jan.1950), introduced the Crypt-Keeper as host in Crime Patrol
#16 (Feb./Mar. 1950), changed the title to The Crypt of Terror for issues #17-19 before switching to the
more recognizable Tales from the Crypt with #20 (Oct./Nov. 1950). The Haunt of Fear took over from
Gunfighter with #15 (May/June 1950), though after three issues they changed numbering, reportedly at the
request of United States Post Office, to #4 (as though #15 had been issue #1). The Vault of Horror
replaced War on Crime with issue #12 (Apr./May 1950). After three issues it relaunched with a new #1

95 For more information on this comic book panic, see The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare
and How It Changed America (2008) by David Hajdzu.

96 Wertham’s definition of crime comic was rather broad to include any comic that depicted a crime,
whether it be Superman or Donald Duck (Schelly 107). Additionally, he accused Wonder Woman,
Batman, and Robin of promoting homosexuality and Superman of being a fascist. Wertham methodology
has been questioned many times over the years, most conclusively in “Seducing the Innocent: Frederic
Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics” (2012), in which Carol L. Tilley compared
Wertham’s notes to his book and noted numerous instances of the doctor manipulating, overstating,
distorting, compromising, and falsifying evidence for his own rhetorical gain.
Comic book publishers had previously regulated content with their own in-house codes. An attempt to establish an industry-wide code in 1948 by the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) was ineffective as the stories were reviewed in-house.


The Golden Age Flash (Jay Garrick) received his superspeed powers after inhaling hard water fumes. The Flash first appeared in Flash Comics #1 (Jan. 1940) and was created by writer Gardner Fox and artist Harry Lampert. The Golden Age Green Lantern (Alan Scott) discovered a magic lantern that he crafted into a magical ring. Green Lantern first appeared in All-American Comics #16 and was created by Martin Nodell.

DC Comics’ Showcase as well as Brave and the Bold were used during the start of the Silver Age as a place to try out new character and concepts before, if they proved popular, giving them their own title.

Batman was already an honorary member of the police force and Wonder Woman was aligned with the U.S. military.

The Incredible Hulk was created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby in The Incredible Hulk #1 (May 1962). Spider-Man first appeared in Amazing Fantasy #15 (Aug. 1962) by Lee and artist Steve Ditko. Daredevil #1 (Apr. 1964) was written by Lee and drawn by Bill Everett.


The Copyright Act of 1976, implemented on 1 Jan. 1978, included protection of intellectual property. This became a sticking point of the creator’s rights movement in the comic book industry as some creators argued that their creations should be their intellectual property instead of being owned and controlled by the companies.

The anti-hero Spawn is Al Simmons, a mercenary who, when killed, goes to hell for his sins and makes a deal with a devil to return to Earth as a superpowered hellspawn. Dragon possesses super strength green skin and a fish-like fin on his head. Savage Dragon initial sees Dragon working as an officer in the Chicago Police Department.


For comparison, in June 1997 only five comic books sold over 120,000 copies; only four years previous, at the height of the boom in 1993, selling 120,000 would have barely cracked the top 100 comics sold (Sacks and Dallas 222).

The nascent superhero concept received increased exposure when the daily Superman comic strip began running on 16 Jan. 1939.

Private investigator Sam Spade first appeared in The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett. The Maltese Falcon was serialized in the magazine Black Mask from Sept.-Dec. 1929 before being published as a book in 1930. The Shadow debuted as the narrator of the Detective Story Hour radio program on 31 July 1930 before becoming the protagonist of The Shadow Magazine in Apr. 1931, as written by Walter B. Gibson under the pen name Maxwell Grant. In the magazine, the Shadow’s secret identity was Kent Allred; however, The Shadow radio program, premiering 26 Sept. 1937, used the secret identity of Lamont...

109 Edgar Allan Poe Park is located in the Bronx where Poe rented a white farmhouse, now known as Poe Cottage from 1846-1849, shortly before his own death. Poe wrote his non-fiction essay “Eureka” (1848) and his last poems “The Bells (1849) and “Annabel Lee” (1849) while living there. It opened as a park in 1902 (“Poe Park”).

110 *Action Comics* #1 had an initial print run of 200,000. The popularity of Superman was such that soon subsequent issues had initial print runs of 1,000,000 (Daniels, *DC Comics* 22).

111 Bill Finger did not receive formal credit as a co-creator of Batman until 2015. Bob Kane had negotiated a contract in the early 1940s that signed ownership of Batman to DC Comics in return for, among other compensations, a sole byline as creator. Kane claimed credit as the sole creator of Batman for decades and it was only late in his life that he acknowledged Finger’s contributions.

112 Leonardo da Vinci’s quote would inspire a story in *Batman* #46 (Apr. 1948). In “The Batman That HistoryForgot,” Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are sent back in time to discover the truth about a document referencing Batman from 1499. They meet da Vinci and help him with his flying invention (Cameron and Sprang 62-74).

113 Zorro’s influence on Bruce Wayne has become part of Batman lore. Frank Miller established in *The Dark Knight Returns* #1 (Feb. 1986) and *Batman: Year One* (*Batman* #404-407 [Mar.-June 1987]) that, on the night his parents were murdered, they had gone to the theater to see the 1940 version of *The Mark of Zorro* starring Tyrone Power. This was switched to the 1920 silent version starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in *Batman* #459 (Feb. 1991) (Cronin, “When Did ‘Mark of Zorro’ Become Part of Batman’s Origin?”)

114 *The Bat Whispers* is a remake of the 1926 silent film *The Bat*, based on the 1920 Broadway play *The Bat*, which is an adaption of the 1908 mystery novel *The Circular Staircase* by Mary Roberts Rinehart. Both were directed by Roland West. Being released so close together, it is possible that Kane saw and was influenced by both versions, especially as the silent film’s villain dresses in a distinctive costume with large bat ears and a cape that does not seem to appear in the sound version, which consists of a hooded mask and cape.

115 It was writer Gardner Fox who initially named Batman’s hometown as New York City, which Bill Finger later changed. On how he arrived at the name Gotham City, Bill Finger stated: “Originally I was going to call Gotham City ‘Civic City.’ Then I tried ‘Capital City,’ then ‘Coast City.’ Then I flipped through the New York City phone book and spotted the name ‘Gotham Jewelers’ and said, ‘That’s it,’ Gotham City. We didn't call it New York because we wanted anybody in any city to identify with it” (Steranko 44).

116 It has been identified that Bob Kane swiped from comic strip artists Alex Raymond, Hal Foster, and Henry Vallely in *Detective Comics* #27 alone (Cronin, *Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed* #173). Kane even forged sketches of a “Batman” figure which he labelled as drawn “at the age of thirteen” (1928-29) in order to avoid copyright infringement with the Birdmen race in Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* comic strip (Jones 149). The Birdmen first appeared in *Flash Gordon* on 8 July 1934. They may have also been the inspiration for the name of Kane’s first superhero design, Birdman.

218 Morganthau statement is not quite accurate. When Roosevelt took office in 1933, the unemployment rate was 25.4 percent, compared to 17.2 percent in 1939 (Will).

119 The 1890 census declared that the frontier was closed as there was no discernable tracts of land without settlers. In “Going postal: State capacity and violent dispute resolution” (2020), Jeffrey L. Jensen and Adam J. Ramey trace how the expansion of the U.S. postal system across the nineteenth century as a marker of establishing strong government institutions correlates with a reduction of dueling as an indicator of violent versus non-violent means to resolve disputes.

120 The novel was adapted by D.W. Griffith in 1915 as The Birth of the Nation, the first full-length motion picture. The film contributed to a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was eventually challenged by none other than Superman on The Adventures of Superman radio show. In “The Clan of the Fiery Cross” (10 June-1 July 1946), Superman battles a thinly-veiled stand-in for the Klan, even revealing passwords and rituals. It is popularly believed that this and other Superman radio serials contributed to a decrease in the Klan’s power and influence after World War II.

121 The Empire State Building, including antenna, stands 1454 feet tall. It was the world’s tallest building from its completion on 11 Apr. 1931 until the completion of One World Trade Center on 23 Dec. 1970.

122 The Scarlett Pimpernel was written by Baroness Orczy first as a 1903 stage play and then as a 1905 novel, followed by several sequel novels and short stories. The Scarlett Pimpernel is considered one of the first uses of a codename and secret identity, though it lacks a costumed identity; Sir Percy Blakeney uses a series of disguises, but not a set costume.

123 This is similar to the first Zorro story, The Curse of Capistrano, which featured Zorro and Don Diego Vega throughout and only revealed they are the same person at the end of the story (McCulley, The Curse... 178-179).

124 The Phantom, created by Lee Falk, first appeared as a comic strip on 17 Feb. 1936. He is recognized as the first character to wear a skintight costume, though he does not have superpowers nor makes extensive use of his secret identity in his mission to protect the African nation of Bangalia.

125 The published author of the Bat stories is C.K.M. Scanlon; however, this was a pseudonym used by several different writers. Based on the style of the stories, pulp magazine expert Will Murray believes that the stories were written by Zorro creator Johnston McCulley (ii-iii).

During this period there were also two notable villainous Batmen from the pulps. In Nov. 1935’s Death Reign of the Vampire King by Grant Stockbridge in The Spider magazine, the Spider (Richard Wentworth) battles the Bat Man, who wears a realistic-looking, flying bat costume and commands a legion of poisonous bats. And in The Yacht Club Murders by Charles Greenberg (writing as Robert Wallace) in Jan. 1939’s The Phantom Detective, the Phantom (Richard Curtis van Loan) fights the Bat, who dresses in a black cowl and scalloped cape.

126 Created and largely written by Norman A. Daniels (under the pseudonym G. Wayon Jones), the Black Bat was former District Attorney Anthony Quinn, who had been scarred and blinded by a bad guy (8); he then works outside the law to bring criminals to justice. The Black Bat would continue to be published in Black Book Detective through the Summer 1953 issue.

There was a previous character named Black Bat in the six-issue Black Bat Detective Mysteries from 1933-1934. This character was a detective who went by the nickname Black Bat.

Batman did borrow one element from the Black Bat: the row of fins along the forearm of Batman’s gloves, which first appeared in Detective Comics #36 (Finger and Kane, “Professor Hugo Strange” 99).
Detective Comic, Inc., and Black Bat publisher the Thrilling Group nearly went to court with competing copyright infringement lawsuits until Batman editor Whitney Ellsworth, who had previously worked for the Thrilling Group, brokered a deal where each character would stay in their respective medium (Daniels, *Batman* 28).

With the comic book business booming, the Thrilling Group entered the field as Nedor/Standard Comics and began publishing adaptations of the Black Bat stories, though they changed character’s name as per their agreement with Detective Comics, Inc. (Cronin, “What Golden Age Superhero…”). In *Exciting Comics* #1-2 (Apr.- May 1940), he appears as the Owl, wearing a vaguely owl-shaped cowl with his business suit. However, Dell Comics had already trademarked, though not yet published, the Owl, so in *Exciting Comics* #3 (June 1940), he become the Mask, wearing a generic hooded mask and business suit (Cronin, “Comic Legends: The Other Golden Age…”).

Initially, Batman drove a nondescript red car, though it gained a bat-shaped hood ornament and was referred to as the Batmobile in *Detective Comics* #48 (Feb. 1941 [Finger and Kane, “The Secret Cavern” 89]). He also possessed the distinctive yellow utility belt from the beginning but did not utilize it until *Detective Comics* #29.

There was a potential lawsuit between DC Comics and Black Bat publisher Thrilling Publications, but editor Whitney Ellsworth, then with DC but previously with Thrilling, arranged an agreement to allow both series to continue publication (Cronin, *Comic Book Legends Revealed* #179).

Dr. Fu Manchu first appeared in the 1913 novel *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*. Under the pseudonym Max Rohmer, Arthur Ward wrote thirteen more novels, as well as various novellas and short stories, featuring the criminal mastermind until his passing in 1959. The character would be adapted into film, radio, television, comic strips, and comic books, including on the cover of *Detective Comics* #1 (Mar. 1937), drawn by series editor Vin Sullivan, and reprints of Leo O’Mealia’s *Fu-Manchu* comic strip in *Detective Comics* #17-28 (July 1938-June 1939). The fact that the mastermind in *Detective Comics* #35 is a white man in yellow-face may point to the fact that white actors portrayed Fu Manchu in film adaptations, such as Warner Orland in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (Rowland V. Lee, 1929) and Boris Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

Created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tarzan was first serialized in the pulp magazine *The All-Story* beginning in Oct. 1912 before being published as the novel *Tarzan of the Apes* in 1912. Burroughs wrote over two dozen Tarzan novels and short stories. Tarzan had been adapted into four silent films from 1918-1927, four silent film serials from 1920-1929, a Broadway play in 1921, a comic strip from 7 Jan. 1929-26 Aug. 1939, a radio program from 1932-1936. Sound films began to be produced in 1932 and appeared regularly through 1968.

The weaponized dirigible likely reflected concerns about Germany’s militarization and their invasion of Poland in Sept. 1939.

Though Gardner Fox is credited as the writer of *Detective Comics* #33, the two-page origin was most likely penned by Bill Finger (Cronin, *Comic Book Legends Revealed* #488).

Will Murray speculates that at least part of Batman’s origin is plagiarized from the Bat’s first story (i-iv). The scene when Clade Dawson chooses his costumed identity in *The Bat Strikes* is remarkably similar to the last panels of “The Batman and How He Came to Be!”:

> He was still thinking. Just what the character would be that he intended to assume was still vague in his mind. He only knew that it would have to be some nubilous creature of the night that lurked in the shadows.

> He glanced at the oil lamp burning on a table. Then he swung around, suddenly tense. In the shadows above his head there came a slithering, flapping sort of sound.
Slade leapt back instinctively as something brushed past his cheek. Again the flapping of wings—a weird rustling sound. Terror overcame him for an instant as something brushed against his hair, caught in a tangled lock. Something that seemed unspeakably evil. He reached up, tore at it with hingers that had grown frantic. He flung the thing aside. As he did so he saw that it was a bat. An insectivorous mammal, with its wings formed by a membrane stretched between the tiny elongated fingers, legs, and tail. As the creature hovered above the lamp for an instant it cast a huge shadow upon the cabin wall.

“That’s it!” exclaimed Clade aloud. “I’ll call myself ‘The Bat’!” (McCulley, The Bat Strikes! 16)

Though it is documented that both Kane and Finger regularly read pulp stories, it cannot be confirmed that either read the brief run of the Bat. Whether the Bat had direct influence on Batman remains speculation.

135 Gardner Fox had an illustrious career in superhero comic books, helping to create Golden Age Flash (Jay Garrick), Hawkman (Carter Hall), and the first superhero team, the Justice Society of America. He would return to writing Batman stories in the Silver Age, as well as creating the Justice League of America and, in his final Batman story, Batgirl II (Barbara Gordon).

136 Les Apaches were violent Parisian street gangs from the turn of the twentieth century known for their distinct fashion (Mahnke, “Gangs of Paree”).

137 The Man Who Laughs is directed by German Expressionist Paul Leni and based on the 1869 Victor Hugo novel of the same name. The plot centers on Gwynplaine (Conrad Veidt), an English peer who is disfigured by political rivals so that he has a permanent grin and eventual becomes the star of the freak show in a travelling carnival. Attempts are made to restore Gwynplaine’s status, but he escapes to be with his true love in the carnival.

There are several precursors to the Joker in pulp magazines. Theodore Tinsley also wrote a short story, “The Grim Joker,” which featured a crime boss named the Joker who wore a clown mask in the July 1937 issue of The Whisperer. (Though the titular pulp hero does not appear in Tinsley’s story, it is worth noting that the Whisperer’s secret identity is police commissioner James Gordon.) Additionally, Tinsley wrote Death’s Harlequin for May 1939’s The Shadow magazine, which had the vigilante fighting a murderous clown. And on 10 Mar. 1940, The Shadow radio show aired “The Laughing Corpse” by Sidney Slon, which features a poison that causes laughter before death. Writing in 2007, Jerry Robinson claims these predecessors are all coincidental: “I have no idea if Bill Finger was aware of the earlier Joker that had appeared in The Whisperer in 1937, or the murderous Harlequin the Shadow encountered in 1939. I was certainly unaware of either predecessor” (Robinson 4).

138 One notable exception to Batman’s involvement in World War II is the 1943 Batman movie serial, directed by Lambert Hillyer. In it, Batman (Lewis Wilson) and Robin (Douglas Croft) battle Dr. Daka (J. Carrol Naish), an agent of the Japanese government.

139 One of the more infamous examples of this is the cover of Action Comics #58 (Mar. 1943) by Jack Burnley. It features Superman powering a press printing poster which read “Superman Says: You Can Slap a Jap With War Bonds and Stamps!” with an accompanying image of a hand slapping a caricatured Japanese face.

140 Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman are the only superheroes to have their own self-titled series in continuous publication, with Robin almost always appearing alongside Batman. Superboy, Green Arrow (Oliver Queen) and his sidekick Speedy (Roy Harper), and Aquaman were in continuous publication in Adventure Comics from the late 1940s through the 50s.

141 Ace the Bat-Hound was created by Bill Finger and penciler Sheldon Moldoff and first appeared in Batman #92 (July 1955). Batwoman was created by writer Edmund Hamilton and penciler Sheldon
Moldoff and introduced in *Detective Comics* #233 (July 1956). Bat-Girl was created by Finger and Moldoff in *Batman* #139 (Apr. 1961).

After the cancellation of his own title, The Incredible Hulk appeared in *Avengers* #1-3 (Sept. 1963-Jan. 1964), *Fantastic Four* #25 (Apr. 1964), and *Amazing Spider-Man* #14 (July 1964). Following a full-length story to introduce the Hulk in *Tales to Astonish* #59 (Sept. 1964), he became a co-feature with Giant-Man, each character, featured in half the issue, beginning in *Tales to Astonish* #60 (Oct. 1964). At the time, Marvel Comics’ distributor was owned by DC Comics, who limited Marvel to only eight titles a month. Martin Goodman and Stan Lee maximized their content by having two features sharing one book or by shipping a book every other month, allowing them to have more titles on the newsstands.

President Kennedy called for human exploration of the moon in a joint session of Congress on 25 May 1961. His Address at Rice University on Nation’s Space Effort, which includes the famous “We choose to go to the moon” passage, was given on 12 Sept. 1962.

Other examples of the “Marvel style” of “superheroes with super problems” include Spider-Man (Peter Parker), created by writer Stan Lee and artist Steve Ditko, who is emotionally tormented by the fact that he didn’t use his powers to stop a robber who went on to murder his Uncle Ben Parker (“Spider-Man!” *Amazing Fantasy* #15 [Aug. 1962]); Iron Man, designed by Jack Kirby with story by Stan Lee, script by Larry Leiber, and art by Don Heck, who appears invincible but has a literal wounded heart, which his chest plate helps regulate (“Iron Man is Born!” *Tales of Suspense* #39 [Mar. 1963]); and Daredevil, created by Stan Lee and artist Bill Everett, who reflects the saying “Justice is blind” in that the radioactive chemical spill that blinded attorney Matt Murdock also heightened his other senses, granting him the abilities to become a costumed hero (“The Origin of Daredevil,” *Daredevil* #1 [Apr. 1964]).

Lee’s recollections on creating his famous characters were documented years later and mixed with a healthy dose of hyperbole and self-mythologizing, so they aren’t entirely trustworthy. But they are the closest to a first-hand account available.

This extraterrestrial Hulk has continued to make several appearances in the Marvel Universe, albeit renamed Xenmu, beginning in *Marvel Feature* #3 (June 1972).

Jack Pierce was the lead makeup artist for the Universal monster films, creating the iconic appearances for Frankenstein’s monster, the Mummy, and the Wolfman and their sequels.

Marvel Comics did not fully embrace the superhero concept until almost a year after the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1 in Aug. 1962. The first appearance of the Mighty Thor (Dr. Donald Blake) on the cover of *Journey into Mystery* #83 (Aug. 1962) announced the character as “The Most Exciting Super Hero of All Time!!” (Lee, Lieber, and Kirby 185) while *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Aug. 1962) introduced Spider-Man with a cover that features powers, costume, codename, secret identity, and mission—he is carrying a bystander to safety (Lee and Ditko, “Spider-Man!” 139).

The exception to this is the Human Torch, whose design was based on the Golden Age superhero of the same name. Created by writer-artist Carl Burgos, the original Human Torch first appeared in *Marvel Comics* #1 (Oct. 1939) and was an android named Jim Hammond who burst into flame when exposed to air before learning to control his power.

In *Incredible Hulk* #1, the Hulk is grey. However, due to the four-color separation printing process, the grey was inconsistent throughout the issue. The Hulk’s color was changed to easier-to-print and more iconic green in *The Incredible Hulk* #2 (Cronin, *Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed* #40).

*The Scream* is the popular title given to this painting. The original German title is *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*) and the original Norwegian title is *Shrik* (*Shriek*). Recent research points to the
color of the sky in the painting being the being inspired by the atmospheric conditions resulting from the 1883 Krakatoa eruption.

Some have questioned the political correctness of portraying the military as an antagonist during the Vietnam War. Stan Lee responded:

One final question that I’m often peppered with has been: ‘Since the Hulk was always being pursued and threatened by General Ross and the U.S. military forces, were you trying to get some sort of political message into those stories? My answer is a thunderous, deafening, resounding ‘No!’ Just think about it for a moment. Here we have the strongest living being on Earth. Nothing can harm him. Nothing can stop him. But we have to put him in danger somehow. Who or what could be powerful enough to give him something to worry about? It hadda be the Army, right? I never tried to make the troops look like bad guys. They were heroic soldiers doing their duty. And General “Thunderbolt” Ross wasn’t a bad guy, either. He truly believed it was his duty to destroy the green-skinned monster who was a menace to our whole nation.” (Introduction, Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk Vol. 2 vii)

Marvel Comics would introduce their own version of Mister Hyde in Journey into Mystery #99 (Dec. 1963), a year and a half after the introduction of the Incredible Hulk. Created by Stan Lee and artist Don Heck, Dr. Calvin Zabo is inspired by Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to create the Hyde Formula, a drug which unleashes his giant, bestial form.


The tagline “The Most Supernatural Superhero of All!” appeared on 19 covers: Marvel Spotlight #5 and #7 and Ghost Rider #1 and #5-20. A second tagline, “Is He Alive…or Dead?” appeared on 10 covers: Marvel Spotlight #5-11 and Ghost Rider #2-4. Ghost Rider #1 featured the line “Wanted: Dead or Alive!” A final tagline, “Now, at Last—The New Ghost Rider,” appeared on 7 covers: Ghost Rider #21-26 and #28. The remainder of Ghost Rider’s 52 covers did not have a tagline.

Many historians disagree on which events define the cultural Seventies. Philip Jenkins brackets his “Decade of Nightmares” between 1975 and 1986, arguing that those years created the conditions to transition from the optimism of the Sixties to the conservative reaction of the Eighties. But this seems too late to represent many of the events and trends that define the culture of the Seventies. Though I will be defining the cultural Seventies as closely aligned with the calendar decade, Jenkins’s evocative descriptor still works.

SALT resulted in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks Agreement (SALT I), signed 26 May 1972, which capped the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers for the U.S. and USSR at existing levels. SALT II, which would restrict the production of strategic nuclear weapons, was signed on 18 June 1979 but never ratified by Congress due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Evel Knievel’s fame in the 1970s led to various toys bearing his likeness from the Ideal Toy Company, who in 1974 partnered with Marvel Comics for a free Evel Knievel promotional comic book. Marvel Comics had introduced their own version of Evel Knievel, in Stunt-Master (George Smith), a semi-
recurring character first appearing in *Daredevil* #58 (Nov. 1969) by writer Roy Thomas and artist Gene Colan.

160 Tom Hanks’s first lead role was in the television movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982; dir. Steven Hillier Stern), in which his character becomes obsessed with a *Dungeons and Dragons*-type fantasy role-playing game which results in a psychotic break where he becomes unable to distinguish reality from fiction.

161 Created by writers Roy Thomas and Len Wein and artist John Romita Sr., Wolverine (Logan) first appeared in *The Incredible Hulk* #180-181 (Oct.-Nov. 1974) by Wein and artist Herb Trimpe before becoming one of the most popular X-Men characters beginning with * Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975) by Wein and artist Dave Cockrum. The Punisher (Frank Castle), created by writer Gerry Conway and artists Romita Sr. and Ross Andru, first appeared as an antagonist in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (Feb. 1974). He made several appearances as a counterpoint to traditional superheroes like Spider-Man, Daredevil, and Captain America, as well as his own mini-series, before receiving his own series in 1987.

162 The position would not be named Editor-in-Chief until 1978, when Jim Shooter took over the position.

163 Imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, Carl Lucas volunteered for an experiment which granted his super-strength and unbreakable skin. Escaping from prisoner, he renamed himself Luke Cage (a.k.a. Power Man) in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 (June 1972) by writer Archie Goodwin and penciler George Tuska. After his family’s plane crashes in the Himalayas, Danny Rand is rescued by the mystical city of K’un-L’un, where he is trained in martial arts until he can defeat the dragon Shou-Lao the Undying and claim in the power of the Iron Fist in *Marvel Premiere* #15 (May 1974) by Roy Thomas and penciler Gil Kane. *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* and *Iron Fist* were eventually merged into a single title, *Power Man and Iron Fist*. As part of a licensing agreement with the Sax Rohmer estate, Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu, was created as the son of Dr. Fu Manchu who rebels against his father in *Marvel Special Edition* #15 (Dec. 1973) by writer Steve Englehart and artist Jim Starlin. Created by writer Roy Thomas and penciler Wally Woods, the Cat (Greer Nelson) first appeared in the short-lived *The Claws of the Cat* #1 (Nov. 1972), written by Linda Fite and penciled by Marie Severin; Nelson is transformed in the cat-woman Tigra in *Giant-Size Creatures* #1 (July 1974) in a story by writer Tony Isabella and penciler Don Perlin. Carol Danvers was originally a supporting character in *Captain Marvel* but was revealed to had received superpowers in an explosion of alien equipment in *Ms. Marvel* #1 (Jan. 1977) by writer Gerry Conway and artist John Buscema, wherein she also becomes the editor of *Woman Magazine*. These titles, except *The Claws of the Cat*, were written and drawn by white men, so their approach to race and gender could come across from well-intentioned to cringe-worthy but rarely authentic.

164 An anthology series, *The House of Secrets* #83 (Jan. 1970) opens with the host Abel (the companion series *House of Mystery* was hosted by Cain) introducing the first story as “told […] by a wandering wolfman…” with the next page giving script credit to Marv Wolfman. A side effect of getting around the CCA’s restriction was all the creators began to receive printed credit in DC’s mystery comics, which they had not before (Cronin, “Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #119”).


166 Despite Wein and Conway being roommates at the time, they claim to have developed their characters independently (Sacks 53). Skywald Publications reintroduced a 1942 swamp monster, the Heap, in *Psycho* #2 (Mar. 1971).
There are two early published forms of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: the A-Text from 1604 and the B-Text from 1616, the latter having additional lines and scenes added. While the A-Text ends with Faustus's
soul being brought to hell (5.2 lines 113-116), the B-Text includes that he was physically torn apart before the descent (5.3 lines 6-12).

173 All issues are written by Gary Friedrich. The Copperhead Canyon portions of Marvel Spotlight #8 were penciled by Jim Mooney, who also drew Ghost Rider #2-3. Marvel Spotlight #9-11 and Ghost Rider #1 were penciled by Tom Sutton. Marvel Spotlight #12 was drawn by Herb Trimpe.

174 When Johnny Blaze does not show up for the Copperhead Canyon jump due to Witch-Woman’s interference, stunt supervisor Bart Slade, wanting impress Rocky and show he can do anything Johnny can, steps in. In a moment likely inspired by Evel Knievel’s failed Snake River Canyon jump, a gust of wind blows Slade into the canyon wall, killing him.

175 Following the success of The Tomb of Dracula, Stan Lee proposed a new series titled The Mark of Satan, to feature Satan himself as the protagonist. Roy Thomas, fearing backlash from religious readers, changed the title and concept to The Son of Satan (Sacks 102).

176 The cover of Ghost Rider #10 (Feb. 1975) featured the Hulk, but the story was a reprint of Ghost Rider’s first appearance from Marvel Spotlight #5.

177 Ghost Rider’s earlier appearance in Marvel Team-Up #15 (Nov. 1973) was more likely to help promote the character’s new series.

178 Skywald Publications, citing the competition from Marvel’s black-and-white horror magazines, folded in 1975 (Sacks 165).

179 The three remaining horror titles (Chamber of Chills, Tomb of Darkness, and Weird Wonder Tales), which at featured reprints of previous stories, were also cancelled by 1977.

180 Trapster first appeared as Paste-Pot Pete in Strange Tales #104 (Jan. 1963) by writers Stan Lee and Larry Lieber and penciler Jack Kirby. Gladiator was created by writers Stan Lee and Denny O’Neil and penciler John Romita Sr for Daredevil #18 (July 1966). This is not to be confused with the Gladiator (Kallark), leader of the Imperial Guard of the extraterrestrial Shi’ar Empire, created by writer Chris Claremont and penciler Dave Cockrum in X-Men #107 (Oct. 1977).

181 The Orb, who wears a motorcycle helmet designed to look like a giant eyeball, is the former business partner of Crash Simpson. He was created by writer Len Wein and penciler Ross Andru. The Water Wizard (water being the natural opposite of Ghost Rider’s flames) was created by writers Jim Shooter and Gerry Conway and penciler Don Heck.

182 The black-and-white magazine Legion of Monsters #1 (Sept 1975) was anthology featuring individual stories of various monsters rather than a team-up.

183 It would not be until the early 1990s that Johnny Blaze and the second Ghost Rider (Danny Ketch) would find a monster-hunting community as part of the Midnight Sons. In addition to Ghost Rider II and Johnny Blaze, the Midnight Sons included Doctor Strange, Morbius the Living Vampire, the Nightstalkers (vampire hunters Blade and Frank Drake and vampiric private detective Hannibal King), and the Darkhold Redeemers (Victoria Montesi, Sam Buchanan, and Louise Hastings) appearing in Darkhold: Pages from the Book of Sins. They first appeared in Ghost Rider Vol. 3 #31 (Nov. 1992).

184 Don Perlin drew the majority (77%) of this run. Perlin began drawing Ghost Rider with issues #26-34 (Oct. 1977-Feb. 1979) and joined Michael Fleischer on issues #36-42 (June 1979-Mar. 1980) and #45-60 (June 1980-Sept. 1981).
Also, Hellman would sound similar to a brand of condiments.

The names British Paranormal Society and Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D.) may have been influenced by the British Psychic and Occult Society (B.P.O.S.), founded by David Farrant in 1967 and popularized during the Highgate Vampire media sensation in the 1970s. The British Paranormal Society is based on the occult societies of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as explored in the Hellboy spin-off series Sir Edward Grey: Witchfinder.

DC’s Elseworlds, similar to Marvel Comics What If…?, was an imprint which presented alternate versions of DC characters in different times or different histories. Mignola returned to this imprint to pen Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham (#1-3 [Nov. 2000-Jan 2001]), with co-writer Richard Pace and penciler Troy Nixey, in which Batman battles Lovecraftian cults and monsters in the 1920s. In Jan. 2023, Elseworlds was announced as the label for DC film and television projects which will exist outside its new continuity.

Mignola also produced a commissioned sketch of the demon for the Utah comic shop Dr. Volt’s Comic Connection (Cronin, “Comic Legends: Hellboy’s Surprising Origins).

Topps Comics was created by the trading card company in Mar. 1992 to participate in the comic book collector boom of the early 1990s. The division closed in 1998 after the collector market went bust.

The creators at Legend, who referred to themselves as “The Magnificent Seven,” were Arthur Adams, John Byrne, Paul Chadwick, Geof Darrow, Dave Gibbons, Frank Miller, and Mike Mignola (Sacks and Dallas 155).

Additionally, Mignola has written three Hellboy original graphic novels (House of the Living Dead [Nov. 2011], art by Richard Corben; The Midnight Circus [Oct. 2013], art by Duncan Fegredo; and Into the Silent Sea [Apr. 2017], art by Gary Gianni) and one original anthology collection (Hellboy in Mexico [Apr. 2016]). Hellboy’s stories have also been collected as seven oversized library editions and as six omnibuses.

Magician John Constantine, the titular Hellraiser, was created by writer Alan Moore and penciler Rick Veitch in Swamp Thing #37 (June 1985). Hellraiser #1 was written by Jamie Delano and drawn by John Ridgeway. Hellstorm: Prince of Lies #1 was written by Rafael Nieves and penciled by Michael Bair.

While Hellboy would have fit within the CCA’s new Code, other Legends titles, such as Frank Miller’s Sin City, would not.


Early in the history of the Legend imprint, John Byrne and Mike Mignola laid the groundwork for a shared universe of characters. Byrne’s Torch of Liberty was present for Hellboy’s WWII arrival in Seed of Destruction and Hellboy cameoed in Byrne’s Danger Unlimited (#1-4 [Mar.-June 1994]). But they quickly realized coordinating creator-owned characters would be too difficult. Mignola states in a 1996 interview: “I never wanted there to be a big, giant Legend universe. I think John [Byrne] kind of liked that idea a little more than I did, which is why Hellboy showed up a couple of times in Danger, Unlimited. Little by little, I decided I wanted to play with my own toys” (“Between Two Worlds” 81-82).

Unless otherwise stated, all Hellboy stories cited are written and drawn by Mike Mignola.

Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 collection of short stories and novellas entitled In a Glass Darkly is presented as selections from the posthumous papers of Dr. Martin Hesselius; notably, it is Dr. Hesselius’s correspondence with the protagonist/narrator Laura which forms the framing device for the lesbian vampire novella Carmilla. John Thunstone is a scholar and playboy created by Manly Wade Wellman for a series of short stories in the pulp magazine Weird Tales in the 1940s; Wellman would write two Thunstone novels in the 1980s.

The series of mini-series and one-shots titled Hellboy and the B.P.R.D. recount a young Hellboy’s adventures working for the Bureau beginning in 1952. They have been collected into eight trade paperbacks.

Vinci is specifically analyzing Hellboy’s characterization in the film Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008; Guillermo del Toro), but this description also applies to his character in general.

The Twilight series by Stephanie Meyer consists of four novels (2005-2008), two companion novels (2015; 2020), and one novella (2010); has been adapted into a five-film series (2008-2012) with a television adaptation reportedly in the works. The thirteen-book Southern Vampire Mysteries (2001-2013) and related short stories by Charlaine Harris were adapted into the HBO series True Blood (2008-2014). The Vampire Diaries (1991-2014), created by L. J. Smith, consist of thirteen novels and related short stories by various authors. It has been adapted for television as The Vampire Diaries (2009-2017), The Originals (2013-2018), and Legacies (2018-2022). The tv shows have, in turn, inspired their own series of novels (2010-2015).

The art in black-and-white The Walking Dead comic book was provided by Tony Moore for issues #1-6 and by Charlie Adlard for issues #7-193. The television series adaptation ran for eleven seasons from 2010-2022 and has been spun off into Fear the Walking Dead (eight seasons [2015-2023]), The Walking Dead: World Beyond (two seasons [2020-2021]), Tales of the Walking Dead (one season [2022]), The Walking Dead: Dead City (2023-present), The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon (2023-present), The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live (2024) and various digital, short-form series. The anthology series More Tales from the Walking Dead Universe is in development.

The Conjuring franchise consists of the three main Conjuring films, with a fourth in development, the three Annabelle films, two The Nun films, and The Curse of La Llorona. The found-footage Paranormal Activity franchise consists of seven films. The Insidious franchise consists of five films with another in potential development.


The forthcoming Marvel Comics’ event Blood Hunt (#1-5 [July-Sept. 2024]) by writer Jed McKay and penciler Pepe Larraz offers a possible example. When the sun is blocked by the Darkforce, vampires are suddenly given free reign on Earth, which the superheroes will fight to contain and then stop. Given the global scale of the event and reading of vampires as a metaphor for disease, parallels to the COVID-19 pandemic are evident even before publication.
Examples include the paranoia in Marvel Comics’ *Secret Invasion* (#1-8 [June 2008-Jan. 2009]) by writer Brian Michael Bendis and penciler Lenil Francis Yu, where it is revealed that the shape-shifting extraterrestrial Skrulls have been replacing heroes and villains with *doppelgangers*; it was advertised with the tagline “Who Do You Trust?” DC’s *Blackest Night* (#0-8 [June 2009-May 2010]) by writer Geoff Johns and penciler Ivan Reis is a superhero variation of the zombie invasion.

Examples include Batman’s son Damian Wayne as Robin, created by writer Grant Morrison and artist Andy Kubert in *Batman* #655 (Sept. 2006); Miles Morales as Spider-Man, created by writer Brian Michael Bendis and penciler Sara Pichelli in *Ultimate Fallout* #4 (Oct. 2011); and Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, created by writer G. Willow Wilson and artist Adrian Alphona in *Ms. Marvel* #1 (Apr. 2014).


*The Bat Whispers*. Directed by Roland West, United Artists, 1930.


*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* Directed by Robert Wiene, Decla-Film, 1920.


Costello, Matthew J. Super Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold


*Dracula.* Directed by Tod Browning, performance by Bela Lugosi, Universal Pictures, 1931.


Englehart, Steve (w), Sal Buscema (p), Vince Colletta (i), Linda Lessmann (c), and Artie Simek (l). “Captain America Must Die!” *Captain America and the Falcon #176* (Aug. 1974). Marvel Comics, 1974.


---. “Legend: The Batman and How He Came to Be!” *Detective Comics #33* (Nov.

Finger, Bill (w), Bob Kane (p/i), and Jerry Robinson (i). “The Cat,” *Batman* #1 (Spring 1940). *The Batman Chronicles* Volume 1, DC Comics, 2005, pp. 165-177.


Finger, Bill (w), Sheldon Moldoff (p), and Stan Kaye (i). “Ace, the Bat-Hound,” *Batman*


Fox, Gardner (w), and Jack Burnley (a). “Shanghaied into Space,” *All Star Comics* #13 (Oct. 1942). All-American Publications, 1942.


Fox, Gardner (w), Bob Kane (p/i), and Sheldon Moldoff (i). “Batman Versus the Vampire, Part One,” *Detective Comics* #31 (Sept. 1939). *The Batman Chronicles* Volume 1, DC Comics, 2005, pp. 39-49.


Friedrich, Caspar David. *Der wanderer über dem Nebelmeer (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog).* 1818, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.


Friedrich, Gary (w), Mike Ploog (p), Frank Monte (i), and Herb Cooper (l). “’Die, Die, My Daughter’,,” *Marvel Spotlight* #7 (Dec. 1972). Marvel Unlimited, 2019.


Friedrich, Gary (w), Tom Sutton (p), Syd Shores (i), George Roussos (c), and John Costanza (l). “A Woman Possessed!” *Ghost Rider* Vol. 2 #1 (Sept. 1973). Marvel Unlimited, 2019.


*Friday the 13th*. Directed by Sean S. Cunningham, Paramount Pictures, 1980.


*Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* Directed by Terry O. Morse and Ishirō Honda, Trans
World Releasing Corp., 1956.


Isabella, Tony (w), Gary Friedrich (story), Jim Mooney (p), Sal Trapani (i), Phil Rachelson (c), and Artie Simek (l). “Zodiac II,” Ghost Rider Vol. 2 #6 (June 1974). Marvel Unlimited, 2020.


Isabella, Tony (w), Jim Mooney (p), Jack Abel (i), Phil Rachelson (c), and Alan Kupperberg (l). “…And Loses His Own Soul!” Ghost Rider Vol. 2 #7 (Aug. 1974). Marvel Unlimited, 2020.


---. Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Effort, 12 Sept. 1962,


Lee, Stan (w), Steve Ditko (p), George Roussos (i), and Sam Rosen (l). “Captured at Last!” *Tales to Astonish* #61 (Nov. 1964). *Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk* Volume 2, Marvel Comics, 2012, pp. 31-40.


Lee, Stan (w), Jack Kirby (p), Dick Ayers (i), and Art Simek (l). “Banished to Outer Space,” The Incredible Hulk #3 (Sept. 1962). Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk Volume 1, Marvel Comics, 2009, pp. 50-74.


Lee, Stan (w), Jack Kirby (p), Steve Ditko (i), and Art Simek (l). “The Terror of the Toad Men,” The Incredible Hulk #2 (July 1962). Marvel Masterworks: The Incredible Hulk Volume 1, Marvel Comics, 2009, pp. 25-49.


Lee, Stan (w), Larry Lieber (w), Jack Kirby (p), Joe Sinnott (i), Stan Goldberg (c), and Art Simek (l). “Thor the Mighty! and ‘The Stone Men from Saturn!’” Origins of Marvel Comics, edited by Stan Lee, Simon and Shuster, 1974, pp. 185-198.


Mantlo, Bill (w), Frank Robbins (p), Steve Gan (i), Janice Cohen (c), and Karen Mantlo (l). “There’s a Mountain on Sunset Boulevard!” *Marvel Premiere* #28 (Feb. 1976). Marvel Comics, 1976.


---. *Sex and the Superman: Gender and the Superhero Monomyth.* 2022. Duquesne University, PhD dissertation.


Miller, Frank (w/p), Klaus Janson (i), Lynn Varley (c), and John Costanza (l). *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* #1-4 (June-Dec. 1986). *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, 2002.


---. “Mike Mignola on *Hellboy*.” Interview by Gary Butler. *Rue Morgue Magazine* #38,


--- (w/a), Dave Stewart (c), and Clem Robins (l).  Hellboy in Hell #6-10 (May 2014-June 2016).  Hellboy in Hell: The Death Card, Dark Horse Books, 2016.


Mogen, David, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski.  Introduction.  Frontier


*The Phantom of the Opera*. Directed by Rupert Julian, performances by Lon Chaney and Mary Philbin, Universal Pictures, 1925.


Simon, Joe (w), Jack Kirby (w/p), and Al Liederman (i). “Meet Captain America,” *Captain America Comics* #1 (Mar. 1941). Timely Comics, 1940.


Smith, Matthew J. “The ‘Triangle Era’ of Superman: Continuity, Marketing and Grand


Thomas, Roy (w), Ross Andru (p), Bill Everett (i), and Art Simek (l). “A Titan Walks Among Us!” Marvel Feature #3 (June 1972). Marvel Comics, 1972.

Thomas, Roy (w), Gene Colan (p), Tom Palmer (i), and Jean Izzo (l). “They Walk by Night!” Doctor Strange #183 (Nov. 1969). Marvel Comics, 1969.
Thomas, Roy (w), Herb Trimpe (p), John Severin (i), and Art Simek (l). “His Name Is…Samson!” *The Incredible Hulk* #141 (July 1971). Marvel Unlimited, 2018.


Wein, Len (w), Dave Cockrum (p/i), Peter Iro (i), Glynis Wein (c), and John Costanza (l). “Deadly Genesis!” *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975). Marvel Comics, 1975.


CURRICULUM VITA

Name: John Darowski

Education:

Ph.D., Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville, completed Mar. 2024. Dissertation: *The Superhero Gothic: The Monster Hero to the Hero Monster in the Twentieth Century*

M.A, Comparative Studies, Brigham Young University, completed Dec. 2007. Thesis: *The Mythic Symbols of Batman*

B.A., Humanities, Brigham Young University, completed Apr. 2004.

Awards:

2019 Recipient of the 2018 John A. Lent Award for Comics Scholarship Comics and Comic Art Area, Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association.

Positions in Professional Organizations:

Member of Editorial Board, *Terror: Estudios Criticos*, Universidad de Cádiz, 2023-Present.

Co-Chair, Comics and Comic Art Area, National Popular Culture Association, 2022-Present.


Membership in Professional Organizations:

Association of Humanities Academics (AHA), University of Louisville, 2013-2024.

Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, 2006-Present.

**Publications:**

*Articles as Chapters in Books:*


**Articles as Chapters in Books (Co-Author):**


*Articles in Scholarly Journals:*


*Presentations at Professional Meetings:*


“FrankenCastle: Monster Hunters, Monstrous Masculinities, and the Punisher.” Presentation at the Fifty-Second Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Virtual, April 2022.


“Superman’s Mediation of Mid-Century American Identity.” Presentation given at the Forty-Eighth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Indianapolis, IN, March 2018.

“Toward a Definition of the Superhero Gothic.” Presentation given at the Forty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, San Diego, CA, April 2017.


“The Fluttering of Bat Wings: Adaptation from Comic Book to Film in *Batman Begins*. “
Presentation given at the Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Seattle, WA, March 2016.

“‘Evil Mutants (Communists) Will Stop at Nothing to Gain Control of Mankind!’: X-Men and the Cold War Culture.” Presentation given at the Forty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Chicago, IL, April 2014.


“Legacy and Identity in Captain America in the Twenty-First Century.” Presentation given at the Forty-First Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, San Antonio, TX, April 2011.


“Perception and Identity in CLAMP’s Tsubasa and xxxHOLiC.” Presentation given at Fortieth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, St. Louis, MO., April 2010.


“Spirited Away as a Gothic Film.” Presentation given at the Thirty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Boston, MA, April 2007, and at Life, the Universe and Everything: The Marion K. “Doc” Smith Symposium on Science Fiction and Fantasy XXVI at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, February 2008.

“Confessions of a Murderer: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Black Cat,’ H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Rats in the Walls’ and Mark Millar’s Wolverine ‘Prisoner Number Zero’.” Presentation given at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Atlanta, GA, April 2006.

**Roundtable at Professional Meeting:**


**Books (edited):**


Books (co-edited):

