

Self-Sacrifice and the Transformation of the Hero

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Abstract

The literary notion of a hero is often steeped in great deeds, such as vanquishing the monster, completing Herculean tasks, or protecting the innocent from harm. The medium of the comic book also provides numerous tales of self-sacrifice that add weight to the legitimacy of a hero and their contribution to a particular society or cause. This article will consider certain themes within the self-sacrificing hero narrative in order to gain further insight into this phenomenon and will draw inspiration from Greek and Norse mythology as well as the Superhero genre within comics and film. Finally, this article will consider the cyclical nature of the hero's journey and the importance of continual heroic rebirth in sustaining their legacy for new generations of comic book readers and film audiences. What does their sacrifice mean when the hero and even their universe is reborn at a later date?

Keywords: heroism, self-sacrifice, sacrifice, superhero, journey

The Hero's Journey

The first widely agreed upon feature of sacrifice is that it must involve a cost to the agent performing the act (Van Ackeren and Archer 2018, 302).

In order to attain heroic status, a hero must typically undergo some form of transformation to evolve beyond their current status at the beginning of a story. Noted author Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey consists of a multitude of events that the hero may undertake in the course of their journey. These include the initial 'call to adventure', 'refusal of the call', 'supernatural aid', 'the crossing of the first threshold', and many more until the hero completes their journey and gains something from the experience on a deep level. Ultimately, they are transformed by the experience, and a new threshold of knowledge is attained. Campbell posits that the typical journey of the mythological hero is, "a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (Campbell 1949, 23). Examples of these mythical heroes in Greek culture include Prometheus who journeyed to the heavens, stole the secret of fire from the Gods themselves, and descended with his newfound knowledge. Similarly, Jason undertook a perilous seafaring voyage that avoided the clashing Cyanean Rocks, defeated a dragon and returned home with the fabled Golden fleece (Campbell 1949, 23). As with many tales of heroic deeds in Greek mythology, these heroes often paid a heavy price during their journey, and if the hero should upset the Gods or break an oath, then their punishment would be great. Jason's epic story ends with a broken oath to his wife Medea, who had helped him to capture the golden fleece from her father. Medea's rage was so great that she killed the two sons that she had by Jason, as well as his new bride, leaving him a broken man (Alvanou 2015, 328). Jason's duplicitous nature ultimately transgresses the definition of a hero as Christopher Vogler argues, "A Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others, like a shepherd who will sacrifice to protect and serve his flock. At the root the idea of Hero is connected with self-sacrifice" (Vogler 2007, 29). Therefore, despite his epic quest, Jason has not attained new wisdom and fails to success-

fully complete the hero's journey as posited by Campbell. Instead of dedicating his life to Medea and his two children, his desire for a new bride associated with royalty and power indicates that his motives are purely selfish and not befitting of a true hero.

Self-sacrifice and the Superhero genre

In Superhero mythology, the self-sacrifice of Steve Rogers during World War II arguably paves the way for an entire Marvel Universe, both in the printed comics (*Captain America* 1941) and the Marvel Comic Universe (MCU) (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011). While *Iron Man* (2008) is rightfully considered the first MCU title, the character of Steve Rogers provides an integrity and moral compass for a new generation of superheroes to emulate. Initially rejected by the U.S. Army due to ill-health, Rogers willingly agrees to take part in a risky experiment that aims to augment his physical body and turn him into the costumed Captain America. Fortunately, the experimental formula succeeds and he is miraculously transformed into a 'super soldier' with enhanced strength, durability, and speed. This willingness to risk his very life exhibits the archetypal traits of a 'true hero', as defined by Vogler,

True heroism is shown in stories when Heroes offer themselves on the altar of chance, willing to take the risk that their quest for adventure may lead to danger, loss, or death. Like soldiers who know that by enlisting they have agreed to give their lives if their country asks them to, Heroes accept the possibility of sacrifice (Vogler 2007, 32).

Unfortunately, Vogler's definition appears problematic when we consider the violent means of the soldier/terrorist, or dictator, which places their extreme ideals and group mentality above the fundamental rights of others. It could be argued that all forms of military conflict provide catalysts for myriad forms of heroism and sacrifice, but that they also provide horrific accounts of mass killings, torture, and violence against civilians on both sides. In contrast to the 'hero as soldier', authors Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagnucci argue that a Superhero, 'represents the best qualities of humanity: altruism, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and responsibil-

ity. Superheroes fight because they have to, but their messages still resound without the violence and without the hard-edged personas' (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, 119). Author Travis Smith also posits a balanced view on Captain America's heroic qualities and notes the evolution of the character from war hero, to someone who is willing to help the oppressed regardless of their country, race or creed, 'He might even join them in fighting for their own liberty, providing inspiration and a model to emulate, but he would not come as a conqueror. Captain America does not rule, despite all of his excellences, because he stands for a government based on self-rule, individual and collective' (Smith 2018, 104). Romagnoli, Pagnucci, and Smith appear to select the more altruistic and humane aspects of the Superhero archetype, thereby promoting heroes with an ethical and moral maturity suitable to help a global society and the rights of the individual. However, it is not certain that Captain America stands for any government, as his involvement in global conflicts and 'cosmic' antagonists, often brings him into conflict with the government and military forces both in the printed comic and within the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

Although Steve Rogers wants to play his part in World War II by serving his country in the battlefield, his initial desire to join the war effort arguably stems from a need to belong, as noted by Parker Shaw and Tonya Hammer, 'Steve's personal narrative reflects a person who may not feel as if he matters. Steve's desire to contribute and be seen to contribute appears to be an innate need' (Shaw and Hammer 2016, 119). By becoming more than human, this enhanced soldier has found his place among other fighting men who are willing to lay down their lives for a shared goal. His new body has enabled him to find a purpose that his former frail body could not, but his capacity to fight when the odds seem overwhelming are what truly set him apart from most men. His apparent death at the end of World War II in the frozen Arctic, and subsequent 'rebirth' decades later is another sacrifice that Rogers makes in order to save others. Unfortunately, this sacrifice and continuation of his hero's journey cruelly robs him of his place and status in society. When Rogers re-emerges, he is now something of a cultural relic, who must adjust to the complexities and nuances of modern society. While the character of Captain America remains a fixture in the comic books, the culmination of the recent MCU 'Infinity Saga' (*Endgame*, 2019), fi-

nally enables Steve Rogers to revisit his past and reclaim the decades that he sacrificed. In many ways, this represents the completion of his hero's journey. He has overcome the ordeal, travelled back in time to place the powerful Infinity stones in their rightful places as a final act of duty, and has returned to his first and only love Peggy Carter with renewed life experience and wisdom. It is perhaps the only moment where he has allowed himself to act upon his true desire, while retaining his heroic integrity by ensuring that others are not put in danger.

The Superhero genre is replete with heroes who have self-sacrificed aspects of themselves to help others. For example, Norrin Radd is transformed into the cosmic Silver Surfer in order to save his home planet (Zenn-La) from the ravenous 'planet-eater' Galactus. The genesis of a Superhero character's story arc often establishes a similar self-sacrifice that defines the values attributed to that character. Those familiar with the story of the Silver Surfer are constantly reminded of his self-sacrifice via his transformation from the human-like Norrin Radd to the cosmic Silver Surfer that rides his board through the universe, attempting to find planets suitable to temporarily sustain his Master's hunger. Such comic book characters may evolve and change over time, but their genesis is typically one of self-sacrifice in order to protect others from harm.

Self-sacrifice, reboot culture and death of the hero

Superhero comics, occasionally undergo cyclical periods where entire universes are formed, re-purposed and reset. In many ways the entire pantheon of the comic book publishing house is forced to participate in a collective hero's journey that sweeps every character into an ordeal that is so profound that their very universe is placed into peril. For example, Marvel and DC regularly 'reboot' their titles via grandiose story arcs such as DC's *Flashpoint* (2011) and Marvel's *Secret Wars* (2015), in a bid to boost sales and position their 'house' in a new creative direction. These limited series typically build to a crescendo of potential threat and danger to myriad superhero characters, before finally coalescing into a new Marvel or DC 'Universe'. The resulting reboot often reimagines popular characters, or incorporates versions of existing superheroes from other universes, such as Miles Morales joining Peter Parker as another version of Spiderman. The following extract from Marvel.com ex-

emphasizes their attempt to represent and attract a more diverse readership by adding new characters like Miles Morales to their line up,

As a young Afro-Latino from the Spanish-speaking side of Brooklyn, Morales is a great reminder of just how much personal struggle is involved with taking on universe-crossing threats like Galactus. He's a person of color who not only has to balance his Super Hero identity, but his cultural and social identities as well [...] Like the real New York, Marvel's New York sees Miles Morales interacting with peoples of multiple cultures, and even has him slip into the occasional Spanish when just living his everyday life (Valdez 2019).

Issues of colour, language and diversity of cultures are prevalent in the statement above, which clearly indicate a willingness to imagine and embrace new forms of narrative within the Superhero genre. The resulting stories attempt to merge a sense of contemporary culture and social identity alongside more conventional Superhero tropes. The story of Miles Morales and other publishing 'reboots' arguably represent another form of Campbell's hero's journey, as a 'special event' narrative that culminates in the death of the hero (or Universe), and their subsequent rebirth into a new era that reflects contemporary society.

In addition to the death of a comic book universe, individual comic book characters such as Superman have died and subsequently been reborn on several occasions over the years. Their resulting rebirth may arise from the publishing house seeking to reboot the character for a contemporary audience, or it may simply be a way to temporarily generate increased sales for a particular comic book title, as noted by Jeffrey Brown, 'For example, the sense that the recent *Death of Superman* issue is "hot" encourages investors to purchase at least one if not multiple copies of the issue on the speculation that the monetary value of such a landmark issue will increase dramatically' (Brown 2005, 309). Brown's statement focuses purely on the monetary value of the issue rather than its impact on the fans, or if the subsequent reboot of Superman affects his character traits, powers, and surrounding cast of characters. This continual cycle of death and rebirth appears to remain a steadfast component

of the Superhero genre, and typically draws inspiration from the self-sacrifice of a heroic figure to save the lives of others. Therefore, as readers we are left with the question: What does their sacrifice mean when the hero and even their universe is reborn at a later date?

Writing in response to the 2011 death of the Fantastic Four's Human Torch, Bob Gough explains, "all that matters for fans who have been through so many of these dramatic demises [...] is the story. Is it a good death? Do the other characters react well? [...] What are the collateral consequences [...]? How about the resurrection? Is it handled well? (Bahlmann 2016, 47).

The previous statement suggests that these characters are expendable (albeit temporarily), if it serves the purpose of the character's story arc, and it has been handled sympathetically by the artist and writer. The issues of collateral consequences and resurrection also allude to the commonality of such events, as readers expect a considered approach to the death of the character in that particular universe and their seemingly inevitable rebirth at a later date.

The alternative to this never-ending cycle of death and rebirth, is of course a scenario in which the hero fades into old age and loses the ability to help others. Few comic book authors and artists have dared to broach the subject of old age afflicting the hero, with the exception of creatives such as Alan Moore (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* 1999) and Frank Miller (*The Dark Knight Returns* 1986). More recently the Marvel trope of 'Old Man' limited comic book series, such as the post-apocalyptic world featuring Wolverine in *Old Man Logan* (2008), have added futuristic dystopias that elderly heroes must face, so that even in their advancing years the theme of self-sacrifice is still ingrained in their character's DNA. The very concept of the elderly comic book hero is one that the French artist Gilles Barbier explores in his sculptural installation *L'Hospice (Nursing Home, 2002)*. The installation depicts Superman relying on a white zimmer frame for support, a frail Hulk sits meekly in a wheelchair and a bald Mr Fantastic is unable to control his flaccid limbs as he passively reads a book. The heroic cycle of death and vital rebirth has been replaced by a disturbing scene that depicts stagnation and ennui, which are negative aspects of life. The ageing bodies

on display are at odds with the familiar iconography of the heroes costumes that symbolize youth, strength and vitality. Fortunate then for the heroes, that these subversive titles and artworks are not the prevalent narrative and visual aesthetic in the Superhero genre.

Self-sacrifice and ‘permadeath’

As the ongoing dominance of the cyclical narrative prevails in the Superhero genre, it is therefore quite rare for a comic book character to achieve a death that remains (currently) permanent. One such example can be witnessed in the anti-hero Walter Kovacs (Rorschach), who stands firm to his beliefs and is quickly obliterated by Dr Manhattan in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* (1986). Kovacs is very much cast in the mold of the anti-hero, as his troubled childhood and propensity for extreme violence cast him as a misfit in society. It could be argued that Kovacs does not belong, even in the fringes of the heroic tradition. The shifting nature of his latex mask is an unsettling reminder of the myriad forms of depravity and evil that the unhinged Kovacs sees in the world, and his revulsion of the events leading up to his death leaves him with few options. His tragic self-sacrifice shields humanity from the knowledge that the interdimensional ‘psychic squid’ that has killed half of the population of New York, is an artificial monster created by Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias). His final act transforms the ruthless Kovacs into a sympathetic character willing to sacrifice his life for the ‘greater good’ of the planet.

While the printed comic relies upon the rebirth of many of its most popular characters in order to revitalise sales and indeed the aesthetic and approach to storytelling, the MCU currently relies upon actors who age over time and lose some of the vitality of youth. Robert Downey Jr’s depiction of Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008), reveals a ruthless and driven futurist at the height of his hubris. He revels in his mastery over advanced weapons and the lifestyle that they afford him, without a thought for the collateral damage that they inflict on innocents. Couch the arrogance of youth within Tony Stark in the first movie with that of the man that returns from deep space at the beginning of *Endgame* (2019), and we see a broken individual, haunted by failure and the death of the teenage Peter Parker who regarded him almost like a father figure. His hero’s journey appears to have come to an end, not only at the hand

of Thanos, but also by the broken promise of the Avengers to protect humanity. By the end of the movie Tony Stark sacrifices himself by using the Infinity Gauntlet in order to save countless lives, not least the recently resurrected Peter Parker, as well as his wife and young daughter. The older Stark atones for his younger digressions, as he embraces a final act of self-sacrifice. He has completed his hero's journey, but more importantly he must sacrifice himself in order to retain the mantle of hero before time robs him of his vitality and purpose.

Conclusion

The role of the hero in literature and comic book culture is one that continues to proliferate throughout society. The Superhero genre relies upon the self-sacrifice of myriad characters in order to give them purpose and to protect their fictional communities and universe in general. Many of these iconic figures have established a strong presence in popular culture, but as emerging forms of competing entertainment such as videogames have gained popularity, there is an increasing push towards characters that represent the growing diversity of race and cultures within the United States in particular. Heroes do not depend upon gender or physical attributes to resonate throughout the ages, but they do rely upon new adaptations and narrative cycles to keep them alive and relevant for current readers, moviegoers, and younger generations. The ongoing cyclical death and rebirth of Superhero characters and entire universes suggests that publishers and the entertainment industry in general are continually refining and remodelling the notion of the hero in contemporary culture. The example of Miles Morales as an alternative Spiderman, suggests that the Superhero industry is willing to diversify in order to gain new readers, while hopefully retaining their loyal readers and film fans.

But what of the Superhero who dies only to be reborn several issues later? What does their sacrifice mean when death seems to hold no power over them? This author posits that while comic book and film fans mourn the passing of a hero in some act of self-sacrifice, there is solace in knowing that their hero's journey has come to an end. There is a sense of fulfillment; of a life lived with real purpose and a vitality that is preserved in the death of the character involved. However, it should be noted that with the almost in-

evitable rebirth of that character, there is a real danger that their legacy and iconic status may be diminished for the foreseeable future. This is especially pertinent if comic book fans and moviegoers sense that the Superhero has been sacrificed simply for news story headlines and a temporary boost in sales figures, without due consideration to the meaning and aftermath of their loss, and subsequent 'reboot' within the narrative structures of the comic book or cinematic universes.

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