

An Analysis of the Evolution of Death Narratives in Superhero Comic Books

by
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Dedicated to all who create

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Abstract

Popular culture has been around for centuries. It is representative of the ideas of a certain culture, at a certain time. As the society in which it is based evolves, so too does the culture it creates. Comic books were created in the early 20th century and have evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry, encompassing everything from serialized stories to blockbuster movies. Death is extremely common in superhero comic books, and follows patterns. These patterns change based on when the book was written and are influenced by events on global, national, and local levels. Understanding how popular culture understood these events can give us a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people.

Keywords: superheroes, death, popular culture, comic books

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Introduction

Popular culture provides a snapshot of the past. It is representative of the values held by the society and the rules imposed on its inhabitants. Comic books are no different. Born at the beginning of the last century, comics are a relatively young art form, but they have become an intrinsic part of American pop culture. Superhero comic books, in particular, have evolved from being the propaganda of choice for the US government to being an autonomous vehicle, freely criticizing the government.

My interest in comic books began around the time I became a high school freshman. I was drawn in by the movies and fell headfirst into the world of ARC reactors and costumed crusaders. The spring of my sophomore year in college, I enrolled in a class entitled Forensic Science in Popular Culture. The term project for that class was to examine an element of popular culture that depicted forensic science. I choose to examine death tropes in modern comics. I knew just enough at that time to know that comic characters rarely stayed dead and I wanted to research the reasons for that. Due to time constraints and paper limits, my term paper barely broached the vast amount of information on the subject. This thesis will build upon my previous work, while at the same time, expanding to encompass topics not covered in my original project.

Death is a bit of a misnomer in comics. The science fiction and fantasy elements of the genre allow for many deaths to be reversed or ignored. Whether this is through magic or science is up to the individual author. Deaths have been reversed or ignored since the beginning of the genre. That has never changed. However, the methods of death, who dies and how they come back have evolved. Each age of the comic industry (Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Modern) has commonalities in how characters of that time

die and/or are revived.¹ These commonalities differ depending on the comic book age and are due to cultural shifts and changes in how death and fiction are perceived. Each age is also defined by events outside the comic book world. The Golden Age books are defined by their relationship to World War II. The Silver Age is remembered for the attempts to censor comic publishers during the McCarthy era. The defining books of the Bronze Age are linked to the feminist movement and changing images of women. Finally, the Modern age books are heavily influenced by the misfortunes, difficulties and ethical dilemmas of a newly modernized and connected world.

Understanding how death was and is perceived through the lenses of comic books can be beneficial to understanding cultural attitudes and actions. Cultural ideologies are often passed down through informal ways and children are among the most malleable. These children, once taught these ideologies, will carry them into their adult life. These ideologies often influence courses of action that occur on local, state, federal and international levels. Understanding the dissemination of ideas is part of the larger understanding of historical motivation in socio-cultural events.

¹ These “ages” are recognized by comic historians and while the origins of the terms are unknown, they provide a framework for those interested in the industry to begin their research.

The first bound comic book was published in 1933 and was a collection of comic strip reprints entitled *Funnies on Parade* (21).

Comic strips and comic books were not viewed as true art, and indeed some were even viewed as “undermining literacy and glorifying lawlessness and savagery” (Hajdu 12). Criticism of this sort echoed earlier criticisms of the dime novel and other methods of popular entertainment. This criticism would peter out after the First World War as the strips became an accepted part of the American zeitgeist. Despite this slackening of criticism, comics were still not considered art. At best, they were considered a lowbrow form of entertainment. Those who drew comics viewed the burgeoning world of comics as friendlier than the already established avenues of publication (Hajdu 25). David Hajdu writes that the industry “attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publication as closed to them: immigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts” (25). The comic industry became a refuge for outsiders, and with this refuge came freedom.

Just as the comic industry was friendlier to society’s outcast, it was also more welcoming of their ideas, outrageous as they seemed. Science fiction scenes flourished and the stage was soon set for the first superheroes to appear. The heavily science fiction nature of the genre allowed for modern versions of old ideas, such as vigilantes. Vigilante justice has always been romanticized, from Robin Hood in 14th-century England to Baroness Orczy’s *Scarlet Pimpernel* in 1905. The first vigilante to appear in the pages of comics was a character called The Phantom. The Phantom was created by

Lee Falk and drawn by Roy Moore. He first appeared in February 1936 and appeared as recently as 2010 (Brittanica).

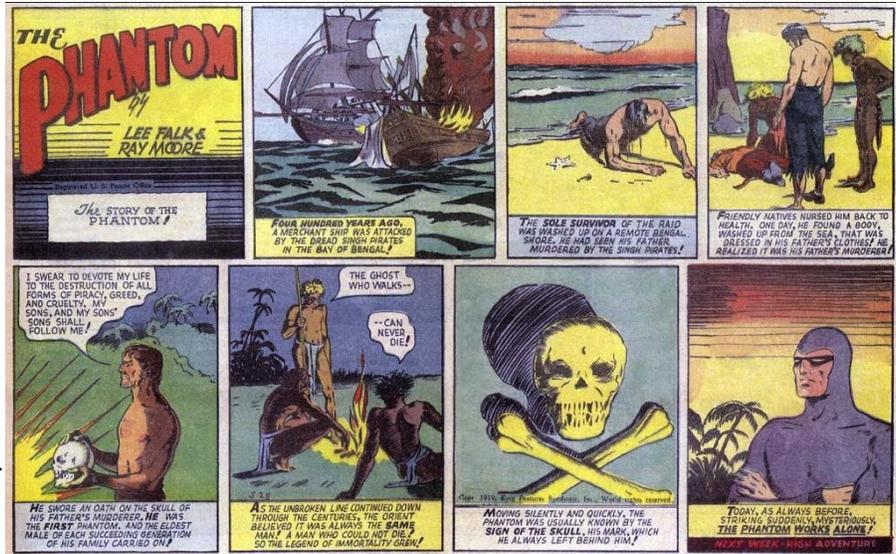


Figure 2: First appearance of the Phantom. The Phantom was the first masked vigilante in comic-book history.

While the comics industry was beginning to coalesce into what would become the modern titan it is, the world was also changing. Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933 and anti-Jewish boycotts and book burnings would soon become the norm. The Great Depression was still in full force in the United States during 1936, Within the United States, the art created during this time was an escape for both the artist and the audience. Children may not have been privy to the ins and outs of their parents' financial woes, or understand what was brewing in Germany, but they understood the escapism that comic books provided. In addition to escapism, comics also provided socialization. Comic books were some of the cheapest means of entertainment available, and were often passed around, either from sibling to sibling or from classmate to classmate. This meant everyone was reading the same stories and everyone could talk

about those stories. Soon those stories would introduce a behemoth of American pop culture: Superman.

Superman was created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster. The two had met while still in high school and created Superman not long after. Siegel and Schuster shared similar backgrounds and were both born into Jewish immigrant families. Cassandra Burris, in writing for the Ohio History Connection, explains how this element of their background influenced the character they created:

They started to include stories of Superman fighting off anti-Semitic people. With Hitler's rise in Europe with his anti-Semitic words and the negative stereotypes of Jewish people, pushed Siegel and Shuster to make a hero that defended the weak. They often would portray Superman protecting the weak and those who were mistreated. He was a hero the world needed as World War II began in Europe. Shuster and Siegel worked hard to tell stories of hope.

Shuster's and Siegel's story of a hero protecting the weak, while popular, was not necessarily newsworthy in the United States. It was newsworthy, however, in Hitler's Germany. The two had been commissioned by *Look Magazine* to write a story detailing how Superman would end the war. The Nazi party caught wind of this and in the April 25,

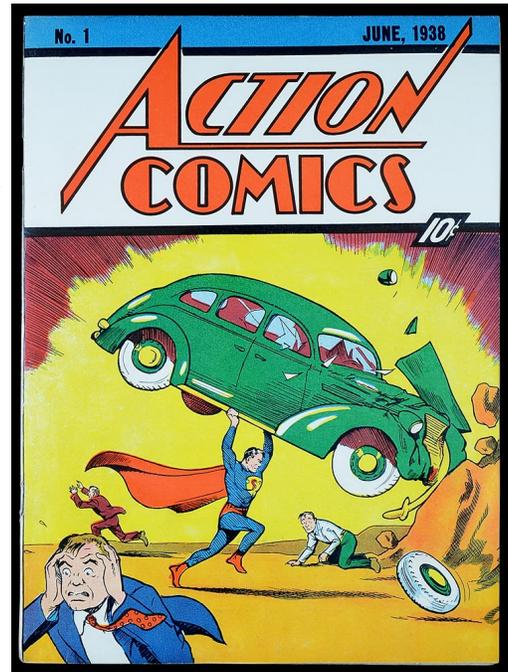


Figure 3: Superman's first cover. The appearance of Superman is widely recognized as the unofficial start of the Golden Age.

1940 issue of the weekly SS Newspaper, *Das schwarze Korps* (*The Black Corps*), they published their response. Their response ridicules Superman for wearing shorts in a combat

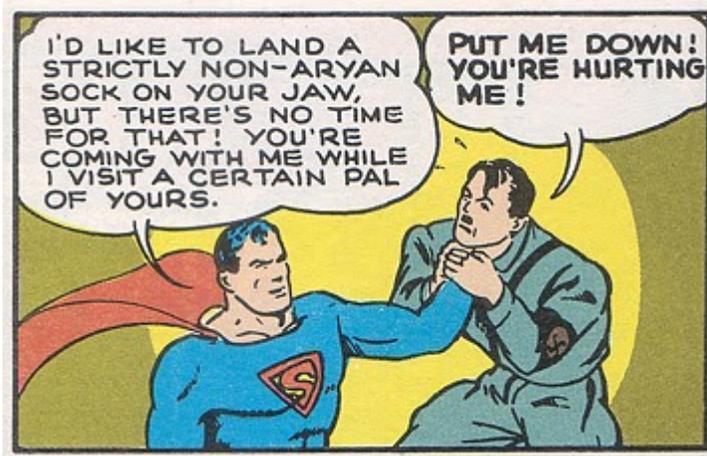


Figure 4: Panel from the *Look Magazine* commission.

zone and forgetting “laws of physics, logic, and life in general.”

In addition to mocking the nature of superhero stories, the paper took great pleasure in demeaning Siegel’s Jewish heritage, claiming, “As you can see, there is nothing the

Sadducees won’t do for money!” The author refers to Siegel as “Jerry Israel Siegel” and makes use of other vitriolic, anti-Semitic tropes. It is difficult to know what the SS response would have been had Siegel not been Jewish. Shuster was ignored in the article, for reasons unclear. The SS concludes their article lamenting that Siegel “sows hate, suspicion, evil, laziness, and criminality in their [children’s] young hearts” (*Jerry Siegel Attacks!*, *Das schwarze Korps*, trans. by Randall Btywewk).

The SS attack did not go unnoticed and two other Jewish-American creators would create a protector of the persecuted; Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America in 1941. Superman may have once threatened to punch Hitler, but it is Captain America, on his first cover who punches the Führer right on the jaw. The outsized Nazi response to the story belies the power comic books held. Far from being useless rags, the books held a tangible power on the world stage. Two of the most iconic American comic-book

characters were created, in part, as a direct response to anti-Semitism and the rise of global fascism. Therefore, it is not surprising that as the Golden Age dawned, these characters would play a large role in the propaganda of the time.



Figure 5: Captain America punches Hitler on his first cover.

Chapter Two: Golden Age

The Golden Age began in 1938 and marked a time of creation.² Comic books had survived their infancy and were now headed towards adolescence. Characters such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America dashed across the colorful pages, taking down the bad guys. The bad guys of the Golden Age were usually gangsters or crooked politicians. Batman, especially, took down gangsters and others fighting to disrupt Gotham's peace. These types of villains can be interpreted as an allusion to the real world political machine, Tammany Hall. Tammany Hall was based in New York and had a reputation for instilling political officials prone to accepting bribes (Britannica). The comic industry would have been familiar with Tammany Hall, as New York City was the heartbeat of the comic book industry. It is likely that readers understood these allusions, even if they did not live in New York, and this influenced their enjoyment of the comics. Ace Comics, one of the comic companies operating at the time, reported sales numbering 407,000,000 books in 1943 and that would only increase in the following years (Tilley). The industry was in a good place heading into World War II.

World War II began in the Pacific theater with the 1937 invasion of China by Japan. War began in Europe after Hitler's 1939 invasion of Poland. The United States, ascribing to isolationist policies popular at the time, kept away from direct insertion into the war (The Great Debate). This isolationist stance lasted until the December 7, 1941 attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor. The very next day Congress declared war on Japan and soon after on their allies Germany and Italy. The United States had entered the fray.

² Begun with Superman's first appearance in Action Comics #1.



Figure 6: One of the most iconic propaganda posters from this time.

Propaganda would play an important role in the war. The Office of War Information (OWI) was created in June 1942. The sole purpose of this office was to create propaganda. Workers created posters, pamphlets, took photographs and shot films, all to persuade Americans to support the war effort. The propaganda was supremely effective. The OWI propaganda was aimed at adults. The posters talked of women taking over “men’s jobs” while the men fought, and the training films were intended to encourage

men to enlist. The OWI lacked a direct line to children. Comic books would assist in filling that gap.

The Writers’ War Board (WWB), presented itself as an independent organization “committed to the creation of anti-fascist, pro-American culture.” (Turello). In reality, they were an offshoot of the OWI. The two organizations worked together to weave propaganda into the pop culture of the time, especially comic books. The WWB created a comics committee that would conjure up different storylines involving patriotism or war bonds. These storylines would then be distributed to participating publishers and put into comic books being sold. Publishers saw it as their patriotic duty to participate and if they

were in good standing with the WWB could even receive access to rationed supplies, like wood pulp, a key ingredient in comic book paper (Turello).

These storylines were bombastic, and many followed similar plotlines. While the depictions, themselves, were creative and ever evolving, the content of the stories became shallow: there were few connecting plots. Readers could pick up a book in June after having not read since January and not miss anything. Both Superman and Batman became master propagandists, and the propaganda was not subtle. Many times the heroes would mention war bonds or how they (the superheroes) were not the real heroes and that that honor instead went to those on the frontline. Common storylines include the discovery of a spy, or a connection to the Axis Powers. The Batman storylines usually follow this pattern: Batman and Robin are hunting down low-level gangsters who they discover are attached to the Axis Powers in some way. The two take great joy in pummeling the gangsters and the book typically ends with a patriotic witticism. The two rarely go beyond the borders of the United States, but their appearances across the globe, when they happen, are iconic. *Batman #15*, published in 1943, is titled “The Two Futures” and is one such story. It strikes a darker tone than the previous titles and details what it would be like to live in a world where the Nazis won. Batman and Robin are still vigilantes and when they are eventually caught by the Nazis, fight their way out, with no shortage of pro-America language. The book ends with Batman and Robin realizing that those on the home front will win the war and the two commit to buying war bonds. Batman is the home front hero. In a time where propaganda was focused on convincing American citizens to do all in their power to help those at the warfront, he provided a reliable example.

Superman is evenly split between domestic and international wartime dealings. This could be connected to efforts by propagandists to link him with American might and power on the global scale. He is the All-American hero, ironic given his alien origins. Where Batman is the home-front hero, Superman is the warfront hero. Clark's storylines typically include his editor at the *Daily Planet* giving him an assignment that will put him on, or near, the war front. This allows him ample opportunity to slip into the guise of Superman. Complicating this, however, is the presence of Lois Lane. The two are not in a relationship at this time, and Lois seemingly despises Clark. Clark intentionally presents



Figure 7: Clark hiding his abilities, and Lois responding by handling the situation herself.

himself as meek and mild in their interactions to prevent her from connecting him to Superman. She is treated as a damsel in distress many times throughout the Golden Age. Her storyline is usually connected to her job as a journalist and usually results in her being taken hostage, or

kidnapped. This can be connected back to the OWI propaganda. Lois is a woman in an industry dominated by men. In essence, she has “taken” a man’s job. Her tendency to get kidnapped is indicative of the belief that yes, women could have jobs, but they would fall short in some way, needing men to return and take back over.

Captain America’s story lines are equally as shallow as Batman and Superman’s. He and his sidekick, Bucky, typically get into trouble and have to fight their way out

from behind enemy lines. These three characters are the most famous examples of positive propaganda being shared. This propaganda was also negative as the WWB and WIO often opted for negative, or outright offensive depictions of the enemies.³

These comics were also considered good for soldiers. They were cheap and easily shipped to the front. The GIs could read the propaganda and wake up refreshed to fight another day. They served to raise morale, and in that aspect they did. David Onyan describes it as follows:

The books were seen as something to take their mind off what was to come and what had taken place. They were cheap, easy to carry, and the comic itself did not require a college education to read. It was part entertainment, part instruction manual, and part psychologist for the soldier. (The Political Influence of Comics in America During WWII)

The deaths depicted in Golden Age comics are typically those of background characters. Axis soldiers, mob enforcers and spies are among the characters who commonly die. Common forms of death include falls from great heights or explosions. Many of the deaths are not explicitly shown, but implied to the reader, with the hero rarely, if ever, directly killing someone. Those killed are predominantly men of European descent. Japanese men are sometimes also killed, but not as often, as the majority of stories take place in Europe. The readers would have no emotional connection to these deaths and they serve to emphasize the might of the hero. The heroes rarely, if ever, are shown to have remorse for these deaths. Morality was not questioned in comics at this time. It was not a question of if the death was correct or justified. All Nazis were bad,

³ The propaganda aimed at peoples of Japanese descent, was especially vitriolic and harmful to Japanese-American citizens, who were potentially already at a higher risk for victimhood due to xenophobia.

therefore they could be killed without remorse. The hero would not come to question their culpability or the correctness of their actions until later eras of comic books.

Women and minorities are rarely killed. Prevailing cultural attitudes dictated that whiteness was the norm. The lack of minorities killed does not represent a great moral moment for writers of the era. Minority characters, if depicted, are typically in awe of the white superhero, or occasionally depicted as villains. The truth of the matter is that they did not exist in comics in a meaningful way. They served only to emphasize how “advanced” or moral the superhero was.

World War Two came to an end in 1945, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Golden Age would continue until 1950. Captain America was retired in 1948, as the appetite for intense patriotism began to wane. As the comic industry entered the 1950s, the industry saw a shift: the big sellers were no longer the superheroes, but instead horror comics. Horror comics could mean anything from werewolves to depictions of true crimes. This horrified many Americans who would become concerned with what media their child and other children were consuming.

Chapter Three: Silver Age

The Silver Age of Comics began in 1950. It is known as the Silver Age because it is “when comic books really hit their stride and became mainstream sources of entertainment in America” (Sparkle City Comics). There is no explicit reason for this era to be called the Silver Age. It may be designated as so because many characters now deemed “iconic” were introduced during this age, but the novelty of the industry had begun to wane.

American culture was experiencing a post-war boom. Returning soldiers were given discounts on mortgages, leading many to move their families away from the cities and into the suburbs (Chambers et. al). This shift to the suburbs correlated with the Baby Boom, wherein the number of babies born each year jumped to 76 million (Pollard & Scomeggma). This led American consumers to have a newfound focus on domestic life and what could be done to make their lives as seamless as possible. Between the years of 1945 and 1949, Americans bought more than 20 million refrigerators, 21.4 million cars, and 5.5 million stoves (The Rise of American Consumerism). The focus on domesticity led to a resurgence of traditional gender roles. The men would wake up every morning, go to their 9-5 desk jobs and return home to clean homes and hot pot roasts on the table. The reality may have looked different than this expectation for a myriad of reasons, but this is how the decade of the 1950s is largely remembered and perceived in the collective consciousness. Due to the proliferation of television screens and media promoting sameness, conformity became the norm. Those that dared step outside the lines drawn by society and the government could be labelled as enemies of the state, or worse, communists.

The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was formed in 1938. The committee's goal was to root out threats to the American way of life, and by the 1950s, that threat was determined to be communism. According to Harry S. Truman library's website, the HUAC "often pressured witnesses to surrender names and other information that could lead to the apprehension of Communists and Communist sympathizers" (House Un-American Activities Committee). An investigation by HUAC could have devastating consequences. Individuals could be blacklisted in their industry or tried in a court of law (House of Un-American Activities Committee). HUAC is directly tied to the legacy of Senator Joseph McCarthy, originator of the so-called "Red Scare". McCarthy gained prominence in the early 1950s for his claims of communist subversion of the United States government (McCarthyism and the Red Scare). These claims were not wholly unfounded as Alger Hiss, a spy for the Soviet Union, had been convicted of perjury in 1950.⁴ Julius and Ethel Rosenberg became the first American citizens to be executed in 1953, after being convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage, after they sold atomic secrets to the Soviet Union (Jenkins). The threat did exist, but McCarthy's intense response did not allow room for those concerned with civil liberties. If someone disagreed with his methods, they were then the subject of an investigation (McCarthyism and the Red Scare).

This highly-stratified world was the environment comic books were entering. Comics were already a controversial form of entertainment. Many viewed them unfavorably and not as "real art."

⁴ Hiss was originally charged in 1948, but the statute of limitations had run out by the time of conviction, leading to charges of perjury.

Sterling North, a children's author described them as:

Badly drawn, badly written and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems... Their crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. (A National Disgrace)

They were thought to reduce literacy and induce children to delinquent behavior.

In this new world of conform or be questioned, politicians had attempted to pass legislation or to investigate the books. Unable to unearth enough damning evidence, however, these efforts were largely in vain, until April 1954 when Dr. Fredric Wertham published his magnum opus, *Seduction of the Innocent* (History of Comics Censorship, Part 1).

Dr. Fredric Wertham was a German-American psychiatrist. By the 1950s, he had a progressive reputation and his findings on the harmful influence of segregation were used in the landmark civil rights case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Seduction of the Innocent* was a 400-page treatise on the dangers of comic books. Wertham covers the gamut of issues in his book. He discusses the influence of reading violent stories, accompanied by violent illustrations and the impact it may have on children. He gives examples of children copying crimes seen in the pages of comic books. He bemoans the examples set by Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman. He considers Batman and Robin to be poor role models because they are “psychologically homosexual” (Wertham 189). He compares their relationship to that of Zeus and Ganymede. Zeus kidnapped the shepherd, Ganymede, and made him the wine runner on Olympus. Wertham does not explicitly describe why he chose this myth, but it is likely he believed Batman acted in

the same predatory nature as Zeus did, by bringing the orphaned Robin to live with him. Wertham considers depictions of the casual moments of their lives to “like a wishdream of two homosexuals living together” (190). The moments cited include Batman being injured and Robin tending to him and the former being depicted in a dressing gown (190).

If Batman is gay, Superman is a fascist. Wertham writes, “Actually, Superman (with the big S on his uniform- we should I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.)” Wertham made this claim, in part, because of his belief that the hero reinforces the idea that beating those weaker than him protects his place in society. Wertham did not make a distinction between the differing circumstances between fiction and real life. Those beaten in comic books are often as powerful as the hero, if not more, and present a tangible threat to the world around them. Playground bullies are often simply exploiting an uneven power dynamic. Wertham also complained that Superman’s ability of flight and frequent disregard for the laws of physics made him a poor example for children (34).

Wonder Woman is another one of Wertham’s targets. Wonder Woman was created in 1942, by the psychiatrist and inventor of the polygraph, William Moulton Marston. Marston wrote under the pen name Charles Moulton. Marston had close connections to the feminist movement, as his live-in mistress, Olive Byrne, was the niece of Margaret Sanger and his wife, Elizabeth, was a lawyer. The three of them lived together in an unconventional triad. Marston had met Byrne at Tufts University when she was his student. The two began an affair and Marston ultimately gave Elizabeth an ultimatum: Byrne could either move in or he would leave her (Lepore). Despite the exploitative nature of their relationship, Byrne moved in and the three were seemingly

happy.⁵Marston claims that Wonder Woman was inspired by both his relationships with these women and his admiration of the female sex (Lepore).

Early Wonder Woman art was deemed controversial because the heroine was “not properly dressed” (Lepore). The short nature of her dress and her exposed thighs were cited as the reasons for the pronouncement (Lepore).

She courted further controversy due to the heavy use of chain imagery. Marston believed these chains and her frequent breakage and escape from them represented “her emancipation from men” (Lepore). Critics, Wertham included, believed this could invoke thoughts of violent sex and the domination of women. Wertham also believed the heroine promoted lesbianism. Her independence

presented an unworthy ideal for young girls. Wonder Woman and her followers were “anti-masculine”, and, “[f]or boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image. For girls she is a morbid ideal” (193). He goes on to describe Wonder Woman as promoting

“extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian” (193).⁶

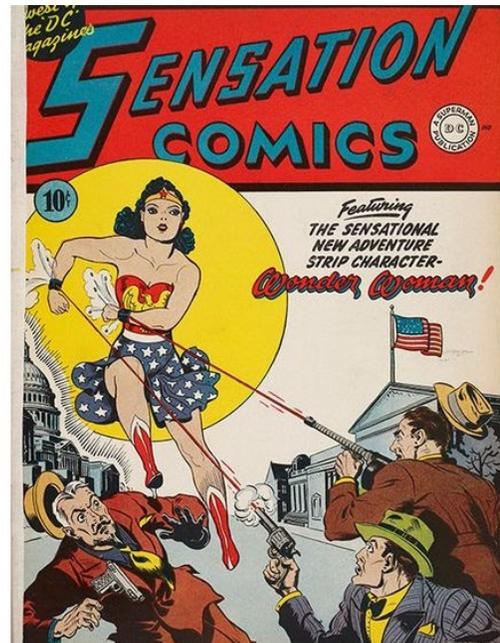


Figure 8: One of Wonder Woman’s first appearances. Her short skirt and exposed thighs scandalized many.

⁵ There is a lack of personal records detailing either Elizabeth or Olive’s feelings, but after Marston’s death, the two women lived together until Bryne’s death in 1990 (New England Historical Society).

⁶ Capitalization added by Wertham.

Much of his “evidence” he claims points towards the ill effect on children is anecdotal. It draws on interviews with children, and recollections of his time at the Lafargue Clinic, a psychological clinic he founded in Harlem. It should be noted that the majority of his findings have been debunked by historian Carol L. Tilley. In reviewing his papers in 2010, Tilley realized that Wertham had “manipulated, overstated, compromised and fabricated evidence” (Itzkoff). This rebuff happened over fifty years after the book was published, however, and when it was published, his findings were taken as scientific fact and galvanized a nation.

Common reactions included parents or schools forbidding comic books, age restrictions and in the more intense cases comic book burnings. Book burnings were often



arranged by schools or churches and typically consisted of children collecting their own and their

Figure 9: A school sanctioned book burning.

neighbors’ comics and bringing them to the fire. Opposition to comics was not new;

Seduction of the Innocent was simply the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

The American government responded by forming the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Book League Defense Fund). The hearing was held in April 1954. It consisted of testimony from psychologists (Wertham included) and those that worked in the comic book industry. While on the stand Wertham repeated his assertions that comics had a relationship to juvenile delinquency, "In many comic books the whole point is -that evil triumphs, that you can commit a perfect crime. I can give you so many examples that I would take all your time" (CBLDF).

William Gaines, a publisher and editor at EC Comics, took the stand soon after. Gaines agreed to testify voluntarily, and was well-prepared for the questions he would be asked. However, once he was on the stand he botched everything. Gaines had developed an addiction to diet pills in the preceding months and miscalculated the amount he took before he went on the stand (CDLF). His responses were slow to come and did not make sense when they did. There is

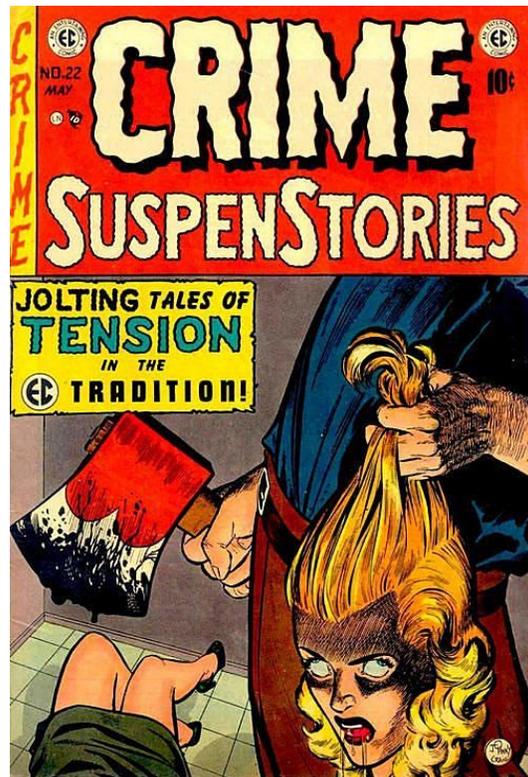


Figure 10: The comic book cover William Gaines defended

one interaction between Gaines and Senator Kefauver that is considered the final blow for an unregulated comic industry. Kefauver was questioning the publisher on how he

decided what would be published. When Gaines replied that good taste was the deciding factor, Kefauver pressed harder.

Kefauver: Your own good taste and saleability?

Gaines: Yes.

Kefauver: Here is your May 22 issue. [Kefauver is mistakenly referring to *Crime Suspensstories* #22, cover date May.] This seems to be a man with a bloody axe 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 blood coming out of her mouth.

Gaines: A little.

Kefauver: Here is blood on the axe. I think most adults are shocked by that (CBLDF).

Gaines's response doomed the industry. The results of the committee gave the industry two options: form a self-regulatory board, or the government would form one. The industry opted to form their own and created the Comic Code Authority, a magazine and regulatory board.

Publishers must get stories approved by the board. The board would affix the CCA's seal to the cover, so parents could know had the board's approval and what did not. The crime and horror comics would be removed and sanitized versions of all stories would come to fill the shelves. The CCA laid out what the publishers could or could not do and if a company failed to work with the CCA, they could be fined and the creator blacklisted.



Figure 11: Comic Code Authority seal.

Some of the rules were as follows:

If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.

Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.

Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.

In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.

No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.

Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited. (CBLDF)

While it was not required that publishers work with the CCA, distributors began refusing to carry books that were not approved by the CCA (CBLDF). In addition, laws were passed on the state and local levels further regulating the books. The strictest laws were passed in New York. They restricted sales to adults only and this could be punished by up to a year in jail (CBLDF). The CCA devastated the comic book industry. The number of titles dropped from 650 in 1954 to a mere 250 by 1956 (CBLDF). It is

estimated that the censorship caused over 800 job losses, in an already small industry. Many companies shut down, either in protest of the harsh rules, or because they simply could not break even.

Superhero books were not the main target of Wertham and the ensuing CCA regulations. Wertham's main concern was content in the crime and horror books. However, superhero books were also affected by the censorship efforts. Stan Lee, of Marvel Comics, made his feelings regarding the CCA and Wertham clear in his biography *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*, co-authored with George Mair. The two titled chapter nine "Seduction of the Gullible".

Iconic characters were introduced, or re-introduced, during the Silver Age. There are very few notable storylines and the majority of the Silver Age included safe storylines, written to conform to CCA standards.

The Silver Age marked Peter Parker's first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy #15*. He would soon go on to headline his own series, and in the first issue, his origin is detailed. He is bitten by a radioactive spider, while in a lab, and grows



Figure 12: Peter realizes his mistake.

to have spider-like abilities. It is the death of his Uncle Ben, by a robber Peter fails to stop, that drives him to be a hero. CCA Censorship can be seen in *Amazing Spider-Man #1*. The death of Uncle Ben is not shown on page. Instead the death is revealed to Peter,

and the reader, by a police officer. It is only when Peter tracks the burglar down, that he realizes it is the burglar he failed to stop.

Spider-Man represented a generational shift in comic books. He is a teenager, while many other heroes are adults. His relatability comes in his youth and social woes. Many times in the comics he is shown being bullied. Later, in his college years, he lives with a roommate and is seen dealing with the typical money struggles of a young adult. Yes, his powers elevate his life, but they also play a role in destroying it. His secret identity is just that: secret. It is never treated cavalierly and he rarely, if ever, reveals his true identities to those around him. While the secret identity element is nothing new, the angst it presents is. He carries the weight of his secret identity far more so than other heroes. This results in self-isolating behavior and intense guilt when his loved ones do come under fire.⁷ He is willing to carry the burden that many other heroes do not: responsibility.

Spider-Man would have a role in destroying the CCA. By 1970, Spider-Man and Marvel Comics were doing well. The Nixon Administration took note and in that year reached out to Lee, asking if he would be willing to craft an anti-drug storyline using the character. Lee agreed, but when he asked the CCA for permission, he was rebuffed. In a remarkable decision, he opted to go ahead and publish the three-part storyline, without approval. He would later say, “I felt that the United States Government somehow took precedence over the [CCA]” (CBLDF). Lee received a mainly positive response from parents and teachers. He did receive some negative feedback from within the community, namely DC’s editor Carmine Infantino who vowed not to publish any drug related

⁷ See Bronze section for more details, specifically, *The Death of Gwen Stacy*.

storylines, unless the code was changed (CBLDF). As a result of the Stan Lee storyline, the CCA began to loosen restrictions, likely due in part, to how Lee had made them look foolish. Marvel officially left the CCA in 2001, and DC followed in 2011. By this point, the CCA held little, if any real power, and merely served as a reminder of a time when comics were ruthlessly villainized.

Chapter Four: Bronze Age

The Bronze Age began in 1970 and lasted until 1985. The era was characterized by a resurgence of darker story lines and morally ambiguous characters, a sharp contrast to the tight morality that characterized the Silver Age. The 70s and 80s were decades of great social and cultural change and the comics written during this period reflected this.

The Kent State Massacre, the 1972 Olympic Hostage Crisis, Watergate and the Iranian Hostage crisis all represented challenges for both the United States and the world. Second wave feminists began rebelling against the suburban utopia fantasies of the 50s, leading to an increase in bodily autonomy and freedom under the law. The 1970s was a decade of increased connection and communication. It was also a decade where the depravity of humans was on display as never before. The 1978 Jonestown Massacre killed more than 900 people, 200 of whom were children. The Jonestown Massacre is one of the largest mass suicides on record (“Jonestown”). Ted Bundy was sentenced to death in 1979 for committing 30 murders, although experts believe he likely committed more (Jenkins). The Son of Sam terrorized New York in the second half of the decade before being caught in 1977. The Cambodian Genocide stretched across four years from 1975-1979, killing more than 1.7 million civilians (“Genocide in Cambodia”). The decade came to a close with the Iran Hostage Crisis, which stretched for more than a year, before being ended by newly inaugurated Ronald Reagan.

These cultural happenings and changes exploded across screens and on the front pages of newspapers, bringing the average person closer than ever before to events happening across the globe. The post-war boom had ended and the belief in American exceptionalism at home and abroad had waned.

The comic book industry was also evolving. The Comic Code Authority (CCA) was fully implemented by the beginning of the Bronze Age in 1970. The Silver Age is remembered for introducing heroes, such as Spider-Man and the Flash, but due to limitations imposed by the CCA, individual storylines were not very memorable. Going into the Bronze Age, however, the cohort that made up the Silver Age readership was growing up and the books had to mature as well or risk losing their readers. The CCA lost most of its power after Stan Lee rebelled against it in 1971 and comics began to take on a darker, grittier tone. The Cold War was in full swing. The war against drugs, the AIDS epidemic and the continuing fight for equal rights would emerge as major social issues during the Bronze Age. Suspicions against governments and other institutions meant to protect ballooned after the events of Watergate. The campy stories of the Golden Age heroes were not going to sell against this newly dark social backdrop.

This era is best remembered for the deaths of two female characters: Gwen Stacy and Jean Grey. These deaths are notable in part due to the established nature of the characters and the fan favorite status of Gwen Stacy.

To understand why Gwen Stacy died, one must go back and examine the shifts in writership at Marvel. Gwen Stacy was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1965. Gerry Conway took over writing for the Spider-Man series from Stan Lee in 1972. Lee had left him with Peter Parker and Gwen Stacy in a relationship while Mary Jane Watson was dating Parker's best friend, Harry Osborn. Conway was ready to make some changes. He thought Gwen Stacy was a "nonentity" and little more than a "pretty face" (Burlingame). He also questioned why she was with Peter. It made little sense to him. "Only a damaged person would end up with a damaged guy like Peter Parker. And Gwen

Stacy was perfect!” (Burlingame). In contrast, he referred to Mary Jane Watson as “the most interesting female character in comics, and he (Lee) never used her to the extent that he could have” (Burlingame). Typically, the easiest way for a new author to guarantee readership is to do something big, or something controversial, such as killing a beloved character and so Conway and artist John Romita Sr. began to mull over who to kill. It was between Aunt May and Gwen Stacy.

Speaking at Emerald City Comic Con in 2013, Conway said, “If she (May) died, it would’ve been sad, but it wouldn’t have been tragic.” At the time in continuity, Aunt May was depicted as a frail old woman. It would’ve made sense for her to die, but as Conway said, “Aunt May was already like, on her deathbed” (Conway). Aunt May’s death lacked the emotional power Conway and Romita Sr. wanted. They turned to Gwen Stacy.

The story arc takes place over two issues, *The Amazing Spider-Man #121-122*. Gwen is killed at the end of the first issue and Parker spends issue #122 hunting down the Green Goblin to take his revenge. Gwen’s death is not in itself strange. Characters die all the time, particularly in comic books. Her death is notable due to Peter’s failure to save her. Before this, the heroes had always succeeded in saving their lady love and were never implicated in her death. Conway chose to write Gwen out by having the Green Goblin throw her off the Washington St. Bridge (Conway). Spider-Man shoots off some webbing in a desperate attempt to save her. He manages to catch her before she hits the ground, but the rebounding force kills her (Conway). Gwen likely would have died either way, whether Peter attempted to save her or just let her fall. Peter is burdened with the catch-22 of this dilemma. Is it better that he “saved” her, thereby dooming her, or should

he have allowed her to fall, thereby absolving himself of direct responsibility for her death?

The Night Gwen Stacy Died marked a point of maturation of the comic book industry. During and after the Bronze Age, heroes began to grapple with the consequences of their actions in a more realistic way. During the Silver Age, while Peter does grieve for his Uncle Ben, it is a rather short grieving period, depicted over only a few panels. Peter does not attempt to get revenge in the same way he does after Gwen's death. Gwen's death should also be



Figure 13: Spider-Man "saves" Gwen.

examined through the lenses of the decade in which it was written. Happy endings were becoming a thing of the past, as things that were once taken for granted (safety, staunch moral codes, etc.) were slowly becoming obsolete.

Gwen Stacy continues to wield an influence over Peter Parker and the rest of the Spider-Man characters. The *Spider-Man: Blue* title depicts how Peter coped with her death. He records messages to her reminiscing about how they met and their time together. He recalls his constant struggle to forgive himself for the role he played in her death. He also thanks her for the impact she still has on her life, because without her death, he and Mary Jane would have never become friends and eventually romantic partners. While the storyline remains controversial, Gerry Conway is adamant that it was the right thing to do, "I really defy anybody to come up with anything memorable that Gwen Stacy ever did other than die" (Conway).

The death of a hero's love interest is now known as "Gwen Stacy Syndrome" and refers to when a romantic interest is killed, solely to impact to the (traditionally male) hero on an emotional level and to wring an emotional response out of the reader ("Gwen Stacy Syndrome" and Sexism in Comic Books). The brutality of the death of Gwen Stacy would likely not be written today. Her death has long been interpreted as a tragedy, due to her lack of autonomy in choosing it. This tragedy has been superseded, however, by the belief that she should not have had to die. There were ways to write out the character, or make her more interesting that did not involve her death. Choosing to use her death as a way to make Peter "grow up" did nothing more than indicate to readers that women are only relevant for the emotional influence they hold over a man.

Gwen Stacy is one of the few characters whose death has never been completely reversed. She may show up here and there as a short-lived clone or in a flashback, but her death has never been completely reversed in regular continuity.

The next notable death of this age was Jean Grey. Jean Grey was an original member of the X-Men, and her powers included telekinesis and telepathy. Jean Grey was first introduced as the hero Marvel Girl and becomes Phoenix after a run in with a deadly radiation flare while on a mission in outer space. The Phoenix Force saves her, and then possesses her. Jean now has god-like



Figure 14: Jean Grey becomes The Phoenix.

powers, and they begin to take a toll. *The Dark Phoenix Saga* was the brainchild of *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont. He wanted to age up and develop the character, as he felt “She’d been the girl next door, Marvel Girl, too long. It wasn’t interesting anymore” (Smith). After gaining the power of the Phoenix Force, Jean becomes a target for the villainous telepath, Mastermind. Mastermind begins to manipulate her, by appearing in false memories and causing Jean to doubt her relationships with her teammates. This manipulation ultimately causes Jean to go insane, and she becomes the Dark Phoenix.

She and Mastermind fight the X-Men in both the real world and the astral plane. Jean, in a testament to how far gone she is, does not react when her husband, Scott, is killed in the astral plane. His body, still in the real world, collapses, but does not perish. Eventually, Jean becomes aware of her mind again, and fights back. She defeats Mastermind and joins the other X-Men on a flight back to their base. The Phoenix Force, once the source of magnificent power, now takes control of her body and mind, and the Dark Phoenix is born.

The Dark Phoenix causes the aircraft to explode and Jean handily defeats every X-Men present. She then escapes to space. The Phoenix Force feeds on energy. To get this energy, it commits genocide. It consumes a star and sets off a supernova that kills every planet in its radius.

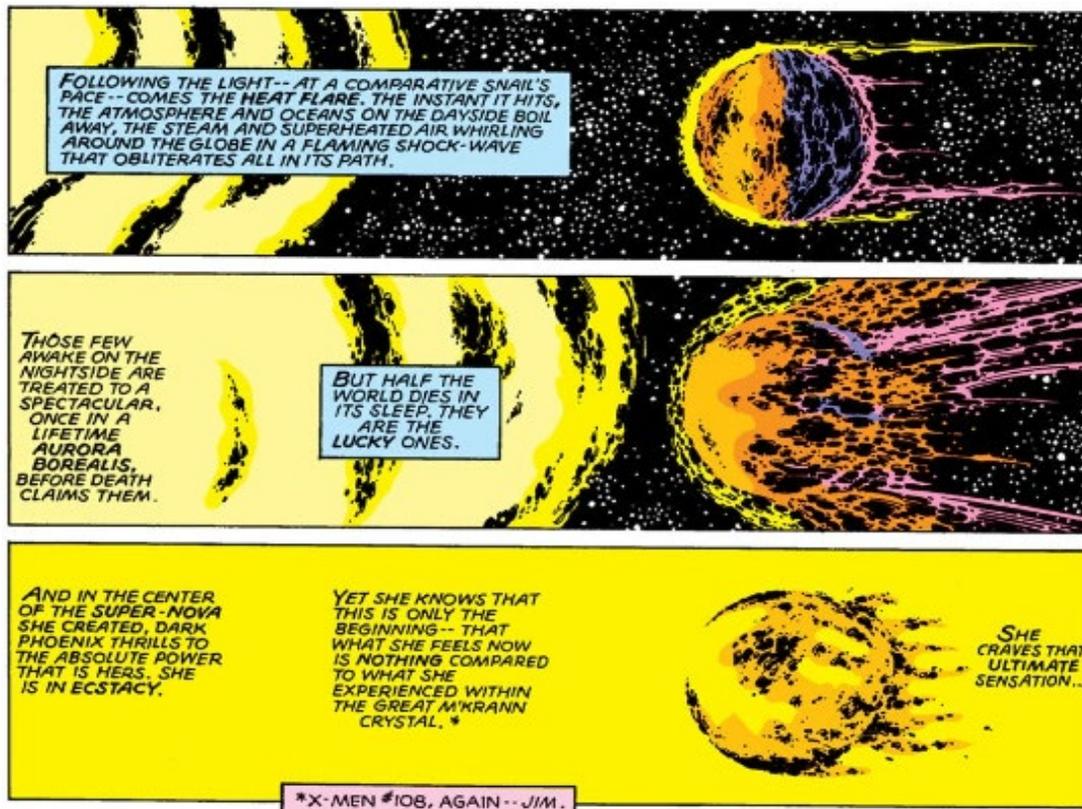


Figure 15: The Phoenix Force consumes a star to gain energy.

The X-Men try to stop the Phoenix Force from inhabiting Jean's mind. They eventually weaken the Phoenix Force and Jean is able to make a decision. She comes to the conclusion that the only way out is to sacrifice herself. She views her relationship with the Phoenix Force as symbiotic, "neither can exist without the other.", "So long as I live, the Phoenix will manifest itself through me. And so long as that happens, I'll eventually, inevitably become Dark Phoenix" (*Uncanny X-Men #137*). In the final pages, she completes suicide and the rest of the X-Men are left to pick up the pieces.

Jean's death differs from Gwen's in multiple ways. First and foremost, Jean is a hero and her death a conscious decision. Gwen is a pawn in the game between Green

Goblin and Spider-Man. There is very little insight into Gwen Stacy's mind during the events leading to her death. By contrast, the reader is treated to a near constant monologue of both Jean and the Phoenix Force. Jean's death is agonizing because the reader knows how desperate she is and how much this hurts her to do. The reader gets

none of that with Gwen. Peter's reaction carries the brunt of imparting the tragedy. At the time of her death, Gwen does not know Peter is Spider-Man. To herself and those around her, she is but an innocent bystander. Peter and the Goblin are the only ones who know how important she is to him.



Figure 16: One of the final panels in *The Death of Gwen Stacy*.

Jean had autonomy in her death, Gwen had none and

that adds a level of tragedy that Jean's death does not have. Gwen was collateral damage. Both deaths are the product of their age. The death of Jean Grey can be read as a negative response to the feminist movement, but it can also be read as one of the first times a female character received a meaningful storyline, not related to having children or a family.

The Bronze Age marked the first time developed characters died permanent or semi-permanent deaths. This was a sharp difference from the Golden and Silver ages, and

indeed Jean Grey's death marked one of the first semi-permanent deaths of a major superhero. Comics have never existed in a vacuum and the darker nature and subject matter of the comics published in the Bronze Age mirror contemporary cultural events and drive that home.

Chapter Five: Modern Age

The Modern Age of comics began with the 1985 publication of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a reset of the DC continuity. While comics were dealing with the ramifications of a major shift, the cultural landscape of 1985 continued to build on the social changes of the 70s and the world continued to grow more interconnected.

The Modern Era of comic books began in 1985 and has given readers some of the most iconic deaths in the comic book canon. It began with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and continued with *A Death in the Family*, the *Death of Superman* saga, the return of Bucky Barnes and the death of Captain America. It also saw other deaths occur in concurrent universes, such as the death of the Marvel Ultimate Universe's Spider-Man.

Beginning in 1985, DC published *Crisis on Infinite Earths*; their attempt to par down their extensive multiverse. Marv Wolfman, who wrote the series, began with the intention of modernizing the DC Universe and bringing the company to a place where it was able to compete with the booming popularity of Marvel Comics (Forsythe). In *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, teams of heroes attempt to save their universe from a villain known as Anti-Monitor. Anti-Monitor relies on antimatter and eats whole universes, thus strengthening his own powers. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* saw the deaths of The Flash, Wonder Woman, Supergirl and multiple universes.

Crisis on Infinite Earths was hugely ambitious. It was a crossover event, meaning heroes from different worlds would interact, as would villains. These heroes can be told apart in the art by subtle differences, the font of a Superman S or the amount of grey hair etc. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* made major changes to the DC canon. Effectively, there are two earths, Earth 1 and Earth 2, and ultimately merge into one Earth. This means that

there cannot be two of a hero. Crisis on Infinite Earths served as a way for DC to retire or kill off certain heroes who were losing popularity or who simply could not exist in this now merged universe. Fan response was varied. Some fans loved the book and believed it ushered in a new era of possibilities. These possibilities took the shape of new heroes or a revamp of old ones. It also opened the possibility of more diversity in the superhero roster. Others hated it, going as far as to threaten violence to the writers and editorial staff. In an interview with SYFY, Jerry Ordway recalls, “There were a few scary comic fans who were threatening violence against the people responsible for killing The Flash and especially Supergirl.” (Forsythe). The death of The Flash was something Marv



Figure 17: The Flash sacrifices himself so the others have time to complete their plan. He has full autonomy in his death.

Wolfman, one of the writers, also struggled with.

The Flash was DC’s first silver age hero and as such Wolfman and Perez initially pushed back on his death, but once they realized he must die tried to write his death as meaningfully as they could (Forsythe). Barry Allen, like Jean Grey, has full autonomy in

his death and is aware of the sacrifice he is making. One of the hallmarks of a hero's death, in the Modern Age, is the belief that the death is sacrificial and that by sacrificing themselves, they will save others. It is telling of the respect the writers had for the character that his actions save multiple earths and give the other heroes enough time to save the rest. Barry Allen's death, which occurs in the issue immediately following the death of Supergirl was a gut-punch to fans, who likely thought that Supergirl's death was not going to be followed by the immediate loss of another fan-favorite.

The deaths of two immensely popular characters was shocking, but for this storyline to work, sacrifices had to be made. DC had a massive universe at this time. If the writers simply killed every hero, except the well-known and popular ones, there would be no emotional pay-off for the reader. By killing The Flash and Supergirl, the writers ensured that readers would become, or stay, invested.

Crisis on Infinite Earths reset the DC Universe. While controversial at times the book was an industry game changer. Never before had something this ambitious succeeded. It was an unprecedented book. It was one of the first "event" books and it still influences the DC universe and while some elements have been reversed the overall story arc has remained untouched.⁸

Three years after *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *A Death in the Family* saw Batman lose his Robin. Jason Todd first appeared in 1983. He became Robin in December of that year and served in that capacity until 1988. He followed in the footsteps of the immensely popular Dick Grayson, who had effectively grown out of the Robin moniker and is now the hero Nightwing. Initially written as a carbon copy of Dick Grayson, the events of

⁸ An event book refers to a book that is a crossover and has far-reaching ramifications.

Crisis on Infinite Earths changed both his personality and his backstory. Todd's original origin story closely mirrored that of his predecessor. They were both born into circus families, and had both witnessed the death of their parents. The only tangible difference is that Todd's parents were killed by Killer Croc while mobster Tony Zucco killed the Graysons.

After the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Todd's origins were reconnected.⁹ Now his origin is that of a street wise orphan. He first encounters Batman when he is attempting to steal the wheels off the Batmobile. His new background meant that contrary to the easygoing and witty Grayson, the new Jason was impulsive, violent, and not very popular. Aware of this, the editor of the book, Dennis O'Neal, decided to let the fans decide what happened to Jason. At the end of the second issue was a page with two telephone numbers, one to keep Jason

alive, the other to let the Joker kill him. This decision was driven in part by Todd's unpopularity, but also the nature of his character. Writers could kill and replace a Robin with relative ease. Because Jason Todd was still a relatively new character, the emotional

Original advertisement — phone numbers are no longer valid.

ROBIN WILL DIE BECAUSE THE JOKER WANTS REVENGE. BUT YOU CAN PREVENT IT WITH A TELEPHONE CALL.

1-(900) 720-2660
The Joker fails and Robin lives.

1-(900) 720-2666
The Joker succeeds and Robin will not survive.



These numbers will work *only* in the U.S.A. and Canada, between the following hours on September 15th and September 16th.

Eastern 9:00 a.m. 9/15/88 through 8:00 p.m. 9/16/88	Mountain 7:00 a.m. 9/15/88 through 6:00 p.m. 9/16/88
Central 8:00 a.m. 9/15/88 through 7:00 p.m. 9/16/88	Pacific 6:00 a.m. 9/15/88 through 5:00 p.m. 9/16/88

You will be charged 50¢ for each call, which will be connected to an acknowledgement message.

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Figure 18: Page with directions to call in and vote as to if Jason Todd survives.

⁹ Reversed or voided.

attachment on the part of the readers would be lower. The decision to use a call-in system was likely made to give readers the belief that they had a say in what happened to Jason. This would have allowed those at DC to gauge the emotional investment its readers had and how involved they would be, if given the chance. Those rooting for Jason were narrowly edged out by nay-sayers and thus, Jason Todd is killed in issue three of *A Death in the Family*.

Jason Todd's death is notable, not just for the manner of determining if he would live or die, but also because the character is a child and as many detractors note, there were ways for the character to be written off that did not include the Joker beating him with a crowbar and then setting off an explosion (Dullea). Speaking with the *New York Times* in 1988, Robert Ingersoll describes the death as "gratuitous" (Dullea). Ingersoll likely had this response because while violence was the norm in many comic books, violence against children, especially violence resulting in death, was, and still is, rare. Jason Todd, however unlikable, is still a child, and his death, ruthless. His unfaltering belief that Batman will save him is painful, and this pain is compounded when Batman arrives too late to save his ward. This is a continuation of the larger theme that began with Gwen Stacy's death. Institutions (in this case superheroes) thought to be infallible, will inevitably fail. Blind faith in these institutions was no longer possible. Like Stacy's death, this was a result of the events taking place in the real world. The world was becoming more disillusioned, more cynical. It was no longer taken for granted that there would always be someone to save the day. This recurring theme of failure helped humanize the heroes.

Superman is the next major DC character to face death. While a mainstay in the industry, interest in Superman was beginning to dwindle during the late 80s and early 90s. The character was still selling, but was falling behind in sales to Batman and The X-Men (Considin). Fans found the character boring and his powers unrelatable (“When Superman Gets Boring”). The cultural landscape had shifted entirely from Superman’s 1938 debut. Instead of focusing on Nazis, the greatest threat lay in nuclear war with Russia. In addition, Superman cuts an almost God-like figure. He is near invincible and possesses an ironclad moral compass. In the decades following World War II, his staunch adherence to a black and white moral code was both unrealistic and unrelatable for readers. J.D. Considine, in writing for the Baltimore Sun, asserts that “There’s no room for a Superman in this world” and “the world Superman was created to protect no longer exists.” Contrary to the sales, the writing team for Superman at the time was considered strong. The writing team were all industry veterans who had pulled the Superman series back from the brink, but as Jermaine Mcloughlin writes, “it was now a struggle to keep Superman relevant in a climate that favored flashier or darker anti-heroes” (Mcloughlin).

It began as a joke. Each year the team writing Superman held a series of meetings in which they would plot out the next year's run (Mcloughlin). At the time, the series ran 52 weeks out of the year and it was imperative the team have an outline of the main plotlines and points prepared for the upcoming year. Clark and Lois were engaged, Lois knew Clark’s secret identity. The editors at DC had already blocked a wedding issue, so the team had to look elsewhere for inspiration. While the fans may have been moving away from the “boy-scout” Superman, the writers still had great respect for the character and thought the fans took his presence for granted. Jerry Ordway had started making the

joke that “everyone dies, the end.” at the start of the writing meetings (Ordway). After the wedding had been shut down, he repeated the joke, but this time, nobody laughed. Mike Carlin recalls his response to the joke being “IF we kill him, THEN what happens?” (Carlin).¹⁰

The *Death of Superman* saga spans nearly 900 pages, divided into three separate collections. The first collection is titled *The Death of Superman* and details the circumstances surrounding the Man of Steel’s demise and the immediate aftermath. The villain is a massive killing machine known as Doomsday. Doomsday does not need to eat, drink, or sleep and easily defeats other members of the Justice League. Once Doomsday arrives in Metropolis he and Superman battle in the street. Superman realizes that the only way to defeat Doomsday is to exhaust the monster. In doing so, Superman also exhausts himself, and both he and Doomsday sustain mortal injuries during the battle. Clark soon dies in Lois’ arms in front of the *Daily Planet* building (65). Clark’s death is reminiscent of both Jean Grey and Barry Allen’s. He realized the sacrifice he needed to make and made it. Superman’s death, more so than Grey’s or Allen’s, is the death of a soldier. He dies while fighting a physical enemy and gives himself up as an “ultimate sacrifice.”

The second collection, *World Without a Superman*, details the world’s mourning. It depicts the large public funeral and the building of a public memorial dedicated to the hero. It also depicts the social unrest in the wake of Superman’s death. The collection follows three main characters: Lois Lane, Ma and Pa Kent, and Lex Luthor. It follows Lois Lane as she mourns. She was one of the few people who knew Clark’s secret

¹⁰ Emphasis added by Mike Carlin and McLoughlin.

identity. Superman may have died, but Clark Kent was only listed as missing in the aftermath of Doomsday's attack on Metropolis. The collection also follows the Kents as they mourn. They had watched their son's death live on television, but would not be allowed to bury him, as he was Superman when he died and not Clark. This takes a toll on both the Kents, and Mr. Kent (Pa) goes into cardiac arrest. Mr. Kent enters the afterlife and is greeted by a vision of his son going through a ceremony on his native planet of Krypton. It is implied that it is some kind of sacrificial ceremony. Pa's time in the afterlife is marked by his insistent belief that something is not right. The vision of Clark convinces him to return to the real world and Pa reawakens, convinced that Clark is still alive. The final character the collection follows is Lex Luthor. Lex Luthor is a Metropolis businessman who moonlights as a supervillain. He is one of the primary villains tied to Superman. Lex Luthor, the businessman, puts on a benevolent front after Superman's death, constructing a memorial to the hero (57). Lex Luthor, the supervillain, sees this as a way to finally exert his will and control over the hero. His inner monologue details this, "Try as I might, I couldn't kill Superman, but sure as hell--I'm going to bury him" (58). The body of Superman remained buried under the memorial for a short time, before being stolen by genetic engineers, who wished to attempt to harvest his cells for replication (105). Luthor's efforts to control how Superman is perceived is emblematic of what happens to an icon after death. Everyone feels entitled to the person, whether they actually knew them or not.

This collection allowed the readers, and perhaps, the writers, to process Clark's death. Grief, and showing emotion, were becoming more-normalized by the 1990s, and this played a role in how writers could depict events such as death and what followed. In

comparison, Gwen Stacy's death was mourned over one issue, and her funeral not even depicted.

The final collection in the saga is titled *The Return of Superman*. A massive tome by comic book standards, *The Return of Superman* is nearly 500 pages long. It picks up soon after *A World Without Superman* ends. Pa Kent has survived and Superman's body is missing from the crypt.

Four individuals, all with an "S" on their chest step forward to try and fill the void left. The four heroes will work together throughout the narrative and are inextricably linked to one another.

The first is a man named John Henry Irons. Irons builds his own suit and adopts one of Superman's nicknames, "The Man of Steel." The second new hero to emerge is Superboy, a half-krypton, half-human teenage clone of Superman. The third Superman is the Eradicator. The Eradicator's job is to conserve Kryptonian culture. After Clark's death, it was The Eradicator who stole the body. The Eradicator is the first of the Supermen to actually claim to be Superman returned from the dead.¹¹ The second is Cyborg Superman.

The final Superman is known as Cyborg Superman and he is the villain of *Return of Superman*. Cyborg Superman and his partner, Mongul, fire on Coast City from space and completely destroy the city, and its seven million inhabitants (*Superman #80*). The Cyborg frames The Eradicator for this, seemingly kills him and takes Superboy hostage. Meanwhile, another Superman arrives in Metropolis.

¹¹ The Eradicator is also known as The Last Son.

This Superman lacks the blue and red suit of the others. His suit is black and silver. He, like the others, claims to be the real Superman returned from the dead. Those present: Superboy, Man of Steel, Lex Luthor and Lois Lane are dubious.¹² This time, however, it really is Clark. The Supermen fly to Coast City to confront Henshaw. In the ensuing fight, Superboy is seemingly killed when he diverts a missile blast. The Eradicator is killed when he throws himself in front of Clark to protect him from a kryptonite blast fired by Henshaw. Once Clark gains



Figure 19: The true Superman returns to Metropolis.

the upper hand, he punches through the Cyborg's chest and "vibrates my arm at an incredible rate," leading to the Cyborg exploding into millions of tiny pieces. The deaths are appropriately fantastic: a missile, a kryptonite blast and vibrating someone to death. These deaths are typical of heroes who did not have enough time for audiences to form relationships with, they are flashy and have little substance to them. The Eradicator and Henshaw are the only actual deaths as Superboy is revealed to be alive. Thus ends the saga of *The Death of Superman*.

If the writers were concerned with fans taking Superman for granted, they need not have worried. The issue where Superman dies was the most sold comic book of 1992, bringing in more than 25 million dollars on release day (Comichron). Interest in the character surged as fans and critics alike wondered if Superman would return. DC did not

¹² Superboy had managed to escape and return to Metropolis to warn Irons.

announce, beforehand, if the hero would return and this caused those outside of comics to take an interest in the character's seemingly permanent death. Although he would eventually return, the death of Superman created ripples across pop cultures, and affected generations, from grandparents who read the first issues of Superman, to their grandchildren who grew up with the Christopher Reeves' movies. Superman is a cultural icon, and his death helped cement his legendary status.

Nobody is safe in the comic book industry. Any character can die at any time. Some writers are driven by sales and others are driven by the desire to push a character to their breaking point. Motivating factors influence how a death is perceived and a poor motivation, i.e., the desire for profit or shock value can lead to poor execution such as poorly written stories or needlessly convoluted story lines. *The Death of Superman* is a rare death-centric storyline that involves neither of those things. The writing-team of *The Death of Superman* saga was driven by the desire to see a world survive without its Superman. They were tired of the hero being shunted to the side as a boy-scoutish representation of the American ideal. The saga helped humanise Superman and those around him. The key characters, who had existed since the 40s, had become untouchable and near invincible. Superman's death changed that. Not only did it cause a fundamental shift in the character with Superman reemerging as a darker version of himself, but it also allowed the audience the chance to witness character grief. Lois Lane, the ace reporter, is devastated by the public death of Superman, and the private death of Clark, whom she cannot mourn the way he deserves to be mourned. Seeing Lois struggle in the wake of Clark's death serves to humanize the hero and the world in which he lives, or dies. Never

before had so much space been dedicated to the death and aftermath of a hero. The focus on mortality also reminds readers of how fleeting life is.

It would take almost a decade for the next major superhero story dealing with death. In these ten years, heroes would die and resurrect, but none of these stories was particularly notable. Ed Brubaker, author of *Winter Soldier*, read comics growing up. He related to Captain America's sidekick, Bucky, given their similar childhoods. Once he signed a contract with Marvel, he channeled his younger self and pushed for Bucky's return. Brubaker was not the first to suggest Bucky return (Reisman). He was just the one that succeeded. Brubaker saw Bucky's death as a defining tragedy of Steve Rogers' Captain America (Reisman). "If you're going to take away Cap's biggest tragedy, you had to replace it with another huge tragedy, or you would lose that marble to play." (Reisman). In this way, Brubaker's treatment of Bucky mirrors that of Gwen Stacy. He is a pawn to be used against Steve.

Bucky Barnes dies in the closing days of World War II. He and Captain America are in pursuit of Baron Zemo's plane. Bucky jumps on the wing of the plane in an attempt to stop it and becomes stuck. He calls to Steve, who is on the tail, to let him know it is going to blow. Steve watches in anguish as he bails, not realizing Bucky is stuck. Bucky is thought to be killed in the explosion.

It is revealed that Bucky had been able to detach himself in the moment before the explosion. He was still injured, and he lost his left arm, but he was alive when he hit the water. A Russian General, Vasily Karpov, is searching for the body of Captain America, when he instead comes across Bucky. He and his crew take the body to Moscow where they discover that due to his extensive injuries, Bucky has no memory of his life, but he

retains his training. The Russians supplement this with a brainwashing regimen consisting of code words that will enable them to control Bucky. They outfit him with a bionic left arm and the Russian super-assassin, the Winter Soldier, is born.

The Winter Soldier is kept in “stasis” in his time between missions. This stasis is never fully explained, but is common in comic books. It typically takes place in a tube, full of blue or green liquid. It is almost a forced coma, or vegetative state, although the comic book scientists are able to accomplish this with little to no ill impact on the individual’s muscles or abilities. This stasis explains why Bucky appears the same age as he does in the closing days of the war.

Bucky’s reemergence devastates Steve. He had come to terms with Bucky’s death and had mourned him. Bucky’s reemergence meant he no longer had to mourn his death, but instead what could have been.

Brubaker recalls that once he wrote the name down, there was no changing it (Riesman). The name Winter Soldier can be read as a reference to multiple things from American history. The first is a quote by Thomas Paine, writer of *Common Sense*, “*THESE* are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”¹³ This implies that the winter soldiers are those willing to do whatever it takes. The name could also allude to the Winter Soldier investigation conducted in 1971 by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). While not a traditional criminal investigation, the investigation was planned as a way to publicize war crimes and atrocities committed by US soldiers following direct orders

¹³ Emphasis added by Paine.

(Riesman). Bucky's death and reemergence was influenced by this treatment of soldiers by governments. A government would order them to commit atrocities, swear them to secrecy, and then provide little, if any, kind of mental help. Many soldiers suffer from PTSD and while Bucky may not have willingly committed crime as the Winter Soldier, his actions still haunt him. In the final pages of the Winter Soldier, Steve uses the Cosmic Cube to restore Bucky's mind, ridding him of the brainwashing and restoring his memories. Now aware of the extent of the crimes he committed as the Winter Soldier, Bucky tells Steve, "You should've just killed me" (*Captain America: Winter Soldier* #14). He then leaves Steve and goes on the run, both from real enemies and the ghosts of his past.

Brubaker was driven by the unfairness of Bucky's original death when he began writing the *Captain America* series (Riesman). This allowed him to treat the resurrection of Bucky Barnes in a unique way. As opposed to catering to fan service as Jason Todd's writers did, or writing in a death that challenged preconceived notions of a character as the Superman authors did, Brubaker wrote a story that matches, and indeed surpasses, the original tragedy of a teenager falling from a plane. Brubaker describes his series as not a revenge story, but instead "a redemption story" (Riesman). At first glance, the story is not redemptive. However, the core of Bucky's death and resurrection lies in the lack of his autonomy. He is never given a choice. He is a soldier told to accompany Captain America. He is then treated as a pawn by the Russians, forced to live in a way antithetical to his values. Steve again robs him of his autonomy by forcing his memories to return, forcing him to relive nightmarish memories over and over again. Steve, while trying to do a good thing, ends up hurting one of the people he cares the most about. The redemption

element lies in Bucky's newfound ability to make his own decisions, even if they take him away from Steve. This allows him to heal fully and reconcile who he is now with who he was before the war.

Bucky's storyline can be understood in a few different ways. One of the questions it asks readers is, "What makes you, **YOU**?" Are you still that person even if you have no memory of that life? It asks the reader to ruminate on this element of identity as well as the dangers of blind acquiescence. Bucky is a victim of brainwashing and genuinely has no knowledge of his actions. Parallels can be drawn, however, to those who commit atrocities, usually in a military setting, and then defend themselves, saying they were just "following orders."

The next far-reaching Marvel event was *Civil War*. *Civil War*, published in 2006, was a reckoning of the Marvel superhero universe. It is the first time heroes are responsible for large-scale collateral death. This storyline forces the heroes to take responsibility for any deaths that they cause. It begins with a team of amateur heroes, the New Warriors, attempting to take down a team of supervillains. One of the villains detonates a bomb and the explosion kills every person within the bomb's radius, including students at a local elementary school. The explosion kills over eight hundred individuals and functions as a narrative wake up call. It is easy to see the similarities of these deaths to the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

After this event, the Superhero Registration Act is passed into law. The Act calls for those with special abilities to register with the government. While not explicitly stated, it is implied that the act would require every individual with special abilities to register, regardless of if they plan to don a costume and fight crime. It would also mean

the heroes were under the tutelage of the American government. The heroes would no longer be able to decide if they should or should not step into a situation. If they disobeyed an order, they would be prosecuted. This fractured the superhero community. The pro-registration side was led by Iron Man and Mr. Fantastic. Those against the Act were led by Captain America. Captain America was against the act because if the government is the only one calling the shots, it decides who the villains are (Millar). Captain America assembles a team of now rogue heroes, known as the Secret Avengers. The Secret Avengers function in much the same way they would have before the Registration Act was passed. They just had to operate in secret, or risk arrest.

The notable difference between the teams is that those who were pro-registration led largely public lives. Iron Man, Mr. Fantastic, and Ms. Marvel were synonymous with the names Tony Stark, Reed Richards and Carol Danvers. Those against the registration were more likely to keep their crime fighting abilities secret, like the blind lawyer Matt Murdock who moonlights as the vigilante, Daredevil. The lives of those who were pro-registration would likely not change. Both their super-hero persona and their “real” persona are public. This is a level of accountability that the Secret Avengers lack. On the other hand, the Secret Avengers, have for various reasons, opted to keep the two spheres of their lives separate. Signing the act would mean this privacy would have to be given up.

The climactic fight pits hero against hero in the streets of New York. It comes to an end when Captain America, realizing his team is unlikely to win, and that the fight is causing civilians to be injured, surrenders and is taken into custody. He is the only one to face prosecution as he asked for clemency for the others on his team.

Civil War is read, in part, as commentary on the Patriot Act. The Patriot Act¹⁴ was signed into law in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Patriot Act was designed to expand the American government's ability to surveil and intercept individuals suspected of terrorist plotting. Opponents of the bill accused it of invading privacy rights and questioned if it would even accomplish anything. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said of the bill, "Congress and the Administration acted without any careful or systematic effort to determine whether weaknesses in our surveillance laws had contributed to the attacks, or whether the changes they were making would help prevent further attacks. Indeed, many of the act's provisions have nothing at all to do with terrorism" (Surveillance Under the USA/Patriot Act). The bill has, however, been credited with preventing over 25 other attacks (Hudson). The central question in discussions of the Patriot Act revolves around when the right of the individual is superseded by national security rights. *Civil War's* answer is that reasonable efforts to protect national security trump individual liberties. *Civil War* was created in response to the events of its time, but is still relevant in a world that has become increasingly polarized on issues such as gun control, the role of police, and how far the government's arm should reach.

The events of *Civil War* lead directly to Captain America's death and as such the events of *The Death of Captain America* pick up soon after. Captain America is being led to the courthouse to stand trial. He is surrounded by a mob, some who support him and some who view him as a traitor. After saving one of the police escorting him from a

¹⁴ The Patriot Act expired in 2015, and was replaced the next day with the Freedom Act, which contained many of the same elements.

sniper, he is shot in the chaos that unfolds. He dies on the steps of the courthouse, in Sharon Carter's arms.

His death sends ripples across the universe. The mini-series, *Fallen Son*, depicts how different heroes are impacted by the death, *Fallen Son* is divided into five parts, each part titled after a different stage of grief that details how the hero depicted in that section deals with the aftermath of Steve's death.¹⁵ It is an emotionally stirring title, with the final section dedicated to Tony Stark. Despite being on opposite sides during the Civil War, Stark still cares deeply for Steve.

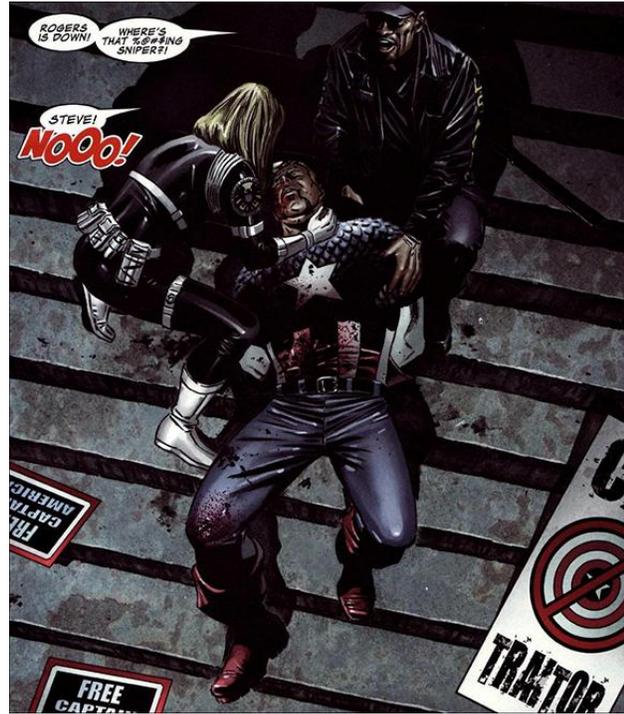


Figure 20: The death of an American icon.

After the large public funeral where Steve received top military honors, Stark takes his body to the arctic. What follows is a deeply personal moment for Stark. In a rare moment of vulnerability, he allows his mask to slip as he says goodbye. He says, “I don't know if I can do it without you... I certainly won't do it as well...” (Loeb 124). In a circular narrative moment, Steve's body is then released to the sea, where he once lay for 40 years, as Janet Van Dyne says, “One era ends. And a new one begins. We're going to have to accept that now, right, Tony?” (Loeb 128). Steve's death is similar to that of Superman. There is a

¹⁵ The first section is titled “Denial” and follows Wolverine, who refuses to believe Steve is dead. The rest of the sections follow the same pattern with anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

public memorial to both heroes, but Steve is granted the private burial, denied to Clark. Steve is a role model for many and that extended beyond the comic universe. Tony's goodbye to him mirrored the thoughts and emotions of fans, many of whom had never lived in a world where Captain America did not exist. His death also made waves in the real world; *The New York Times* published an article titled "Captain America is Dead; National Hero Since 1941". It served primarily as a summary of the events leading to his death, but the fact that Cap's death made real life news is impressive in its own right.

Fallen Son is not the first book Marvel published depicting the impact of death on a hero. Beginning in 2002 Marvel began publishing what became known as the Marvel Colors series. It consists of four titles: *Daredevil: Yellow*, *Spider-Man: Blue*, *Hulk: Gray* and *Captain America: White*. Each title follows the hero as he attempts to come to terms with the loss of a great love. The series does not shy away from talking of the impact the loss had, primarily as a motivator for the hero. Except for Captain America, each love is romantic. Daredevil's Matt Murdock mourns the death of his girlfriend, Karen Page, who had been killed by an assassin. Peter Parker grapples with the loss of Gwen Stacy, who was killed by the Green Goblin. Bruce Banner (The Hulk) recounts the early days of his new existence after the gamma ray explosion gave him his powers. He laments his inability to be with Betty Ross, a beautiful scientist, who is still alive, but whose father, General "Thunderbolt" Ross, is hunting the Hulk. Captain America remembers how he lost Bucky in the war, and ruminates on his responsibility he feels for his sidekick. These books, much like *Death of Superman*, allowed readers to catch glances of the humanity that is all too rare in superhero stories. Each hero ruminates on the responsibility he feels

for his loved one's death or the harm he has caused them. The deaths are used as a way for the hero to mature and work as a motivation for the hero to be better. The series illustrates how these losses still affect the hero and the ways in which they now approach their job of being a hero, and what it means to be a hero in the face of great loss.

The next major book to grapple with these questions of life, death, and resurrection is *Dark Phoenix: Endsong*. *Endsong* begins with the resurrection of the long-dead Jean Grey, who has been dead for over twenty years in the real world. She is resurrected by an ember of the Phoenix force carried to Earth by an insect. Jean fights the Force, but she is too weak, initially, to do much of anything. She is able to warn Wolverine and tell him to get help. Jean is still struggling to gain control and urges Wolverine to help her kill herself. He agrees, but every time he tries, the Phoenix Force prevents her from dying. After a while, Jean gains control as the repeated efforts have weakened the Force.



Figures 21 & 22: Wolverine tries to weaken the Phoenix Force enough for Jean to take control.

The X-Men arrive soon after, intent on battle. The Force finds a host in X-Man, Emma Frost, and becomes intent on destroying the team. Jean Grey, now free of The Force, is able to fight it. Eventually she wrests the power back from Emma and into her own body. The difference is now she is able to control it and becomes something new: The White Phoenix.

Jean Grey, like Gwen Stacy, is not autonomous. The closest descriptor to Jean Grey and the Phoenix Force is that of a demonic possession. Jean does not want to return to life. She tries her hardest to kill herself, but the Phoenix will not let her. Jean is not in control of the Force. It is not her, nor is it taking her desires into account. It does use her memories, but that is to manipulate. The Phoenix Force is violating her, in a way rarely seen in male superhero stories. She is merely a vessel for The Force to gain what it desires. Her appearance at the end as the White Phoenix is poetic, because she reclaims herself and her body. The color scheme of the Dark Phoenix is red and gold. Red is associated with strong emotions: lust, anger, hatred and desire to name a few. The white of her final costume calls to mind purity and is representative of Jean's control over her, now pure, body and mind.

The way Jean carries herself is different as well. The Phoenix Force presents itself in a very sexual manner. Her legs are spread and her chest is presented to the audience. Contrast that to the White Phoenix. The White Phoenix is demure, by contrast. Her legs are together, she is covering her chest and her hair is now tamed. This may have been intentional, on the part of the artist, to showcase the intrinsic difference between the two.



Figure 23: Jean Grey as the Red Phoenix. The reader should observe how she is drawn and what this conveys.



Figure 24: Jean Grey as the White Phoenix. Note the differences in body language and the appearance of her hair.

This also calls to mind the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Jean is either the untamed Dark Phoenix, sensual and wild, or she is the White Phoenix, emotive and chaste. She is not allowed to be in between. She is reduced back to the virginal girl next door, only a little older.

Comparing Jean's two storylines, her death in 1980 and her resurrection in 2005, the original 1980 storyline is the one that treats her with more respect and a higher level of autonomy. The reader is given insight into how Jean feels and understands how the choice to end her life. By contrast, throughout *Endsong*, Jean rarely reveals her inner thoughts, and other characters rarely refer to her as Jean, instead she is referred to as the "Phoenix" or "Dark Phoenix". This indicates that the other characters no longer see her humanity.

The fictional suffering of women tends to be more pornographic than the suffering of their male counterparts. That is not to say that male characters do not suffer.

They do, but their pain is rarely shown in the same ways as a female character's is. Women are more likely to be depicted crying or to be depicted being violated in some way, whether that is sexually or mentally, as in *Endsong*. In addition, the suffering of women tends to be for the benefit or growth of the male character(s) they are close to. Female characters are treated as vehicles for narrative tragedy, tragedy that would not be applied to their male counterparts. This is seen particularly in the early 2000s as the market for female comics expanded. It is still seen today, but less so, as the desire for more diverse female driven stories that do not revolve around children, marriage, or some kind of emotional hardship has emerged.

The modern era of comic books has gifted readers with iconic deaths and we can trace the evolution of the industry in relation to the events occurring simultaneously in the real world. In addition, prevailing cultural attitudes can be seen in the depictions of the deaths.

Conclusion

The world has changed in many ways since comic books first emerged. These changes are evidenced by changes in vernacular to shifts in laws. Mass Popular culture, as we understand it today, was in its infancy in the first part of the twentieth century. Over the ensuing decades, popular culture would become an intrinsic element of understanding the effects of cultural evolution.

Popular culture ballooned during the 1900s. It is not an exaggeration to say that its evolution occurred at a warp speed. It went from books to radio to TV to computers in the span of less than a century. This whirlwind left its impact on those who partook in it. Many remember crowding around the radio and listening to FDR's fireside chats or watching the moon landing. Popular culture is not meaningless, nor is it transient.

One's understanding of death is influenced by the myriad of factors that make up that specific person. These factors include, but are not limited to, one's family and friends, one's religion and one's culture. These factors are in turn influenced by the events occurring around them. Popular culture enables us to trace the evolution of ideas through time.

Comic books are not always taken seriously. It is a shame, for if there is an element of popular culture that is best suited to the whirlwind nature of modern society, it is the comic book. It is unhindered by long print times as books may be, or certain time slots as TV shows are. The very nature of the comic book allows it to speak on rapid change. The short print times (typically comics are printed once a week) allow for changes to be made up until the last moment. It is a quick moving industry, for a quick moving world.

Comic books began as war propaganda and evolved into moral tales before reaching their final form as a varied genre featuring everything from educational comics geared at schoolchildren to web comics about parenthood. Death evolved from killing nameless background characters, to deaths directly impacting the hero, to deaths with far-reaching moral questions. These questions should not just be limited to the comic book heroes. How readers interpret death today influences how the people of tomorrow will choose how to live.

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