HERCULES AND SUPERMAN:
THE MODERN-DAY MYTHOLOGY
OF THE COMIC BOOK

SOME CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

Elaine Caruth, Ph.D.

"Future folklorists will find in them the mythology of the present day."
—Quennell (1941)

A little boy writes to a magazine, "Dear Editor: I love your stories wherein Jimmy goes into the past and meets a hero who is sort of a replica of Superman, such as Samson, Hercules, Atlas, etc. What will you do when you run out of heroes?" (Superman's Pal—Jimmy Olsen, 1964).

The heroes of the early comics were, in fact, not only replicas of mythological heroes from the past, but in some cases have actually seemed to prophesy the future. For example, almost three decades ago the infant Kal-El, surely the world's youngest astronaut, fired the retro-rockets on man's first spaceship, plunged into Earth's atmosphere, and crashed like a meteor onto the farm of Eben and Sarah Kent and into the lives of untold millions of American youngsters.

Separated prematurely from his parents, expelled in cataclysmic fashion from his native planet, Krypton, he discovers himself now a

Dr. Caruth is Clinical Research Psychologist, Project on Childhood Psychosis, Reiss-Davis Child Study Center, Los Angeles.

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of American Orthopsychiatric Association, San Francisco, California, April, 1966.
stranger in a foreign land. Although weak and vulnerable in his adopted identity as Clark Kent, he gradually finds (one suspects in Walter Mitty fashion) relief and protection in a secret identity as the omnipotent Superman. His magic powers, however, would disappear if this secret identity were revealed to the world.

As early as 1940, only two years after Superman had entered the comic book field, his general and fantastic popularity had already surpassed that of such time-honored favorites as Little Orphan Annie, Dick Tracy, and Popeye. “Superman’s appearance triggered an explosion in the comic book world” (Becker, 1951). As a matter of fact, this particular comic book proved of such appeal that not only has it been made into movies and television serials, but in the ’40s was put into a hard-cover book without benefit of cartoons, accompanied by only a few illustrated plates (which, parenthetically, would be of great value in today’s collectors’ market) (Lowther, 1942).

Many have come forward to testify for or against, to justify or vilify, to condone or condemn this intruder into the field of children’s literature. These arguments for and against, however, are primarily of didactic and historical interest (Jenkins, 1934; Wertham, 1954). For while the critics were in action pro and con, the children “bought the comic books, listened to the radio program, heeded Superman’s preferences in literature, clothing, bubble gum, and toys” (Becker, 1951). Man and Superman: he came, was seen, and conquered. Unable to beat the trend, the adults joined it, went one up on it, as it were, and eventually wrote of Supermansion (Potter, 1959). Recently this battle has been revived due to the resurgence of interest in comics, first by the avant-garde adults, and subsequently by the children, and has again become the focus of literary battles (Feiffer, 1965; Schickel, 1965) as well as the basis of a Broadway musical.

Others with such divergent viewpoints as the sociologist, the writer, the political commentator, and the psychologist have come forth neither to praise nor to malign but to understand. As early as 1940 Brown pointed out: “Neither is it, to those versed in primitive myth or to students of the blacker arts of modern demagogy, difficult to understand why the new comics should have become so generally and fantastically popular. For Superman, handsome as Apollo, strong as

---

1 The current popularity of television’s Batman has developed since this paper was proposed and will not be discussed at this time.
Hercules, chivalrous as Lancelot, swift as Hermes, embodies all the traditional attributes of a hero-god."

This relationship to folklore has also been pointed out by the psychoanalytic writer. For example, Martin Grotjahn (1957) has written: "The folklore and fairy tales of yesterday take up where the mythology of the ancients left off. They are, as Freud said, 'the run-down mythology of former times.' Today a new form has been found. It is represented by the movies, the funnies or comic strips, and more recently by the new art of television which is the latest stage in this progression." This relationship to mythology was also noted by Bender and Lourie (1941) who wrote, "Comic books can probably best be understood if they are looked upon as an expression of the folklore of this age. They may be compared with the mythology, fairy tales, and puppet shows of the past ages... that they supply a real need for the child there can be no doubt."

These authors suggest that comics offer a kind of therapeutic effect to the normal child and, in addition, have found them a crucial positive factor in the fantasy life of several emotionally disabled children. They emphasize the predominance of fantasies of omnipotence in their content, now expressed in terms more appropriate to the present day. We are reminded here of Sandler and Nagera's analysis of fantasy (1963) in which they noted that "one of the main mechanisms used by certain children to deal with lowered narcissistic cathexis of the self was the creation of daydreams in which the child could restore his diminished self-esteem through the creation of ideal and satisfying situations in which he played a central and often heroic role."

Our child patients make ample use of comic book heroes for this kind of fantasy as they work with us on their problems. Recently I had occasion to observe several preadolescent girls who, during treatment hours, became deeply involved in a number of comic books which had been deposited there for safekeeping from parental disapproval and disposal. Each of these children happened to have one parent in a professional field; all were extremely bright and well-read in addition to their addiction to the comics; all presented somewhat similar

---

Ekstein, in a personal communication, has suggested that comic books are the "run-down fairy tales of former times." He was aware, of course, as must have been Freud, that the qualification "run-down" is but an expression of the writer's longing to return to literature that had appealed to him in the past.
features in their symptomatology and personality organization. These were children who might best be described as possessing marked oral character traits; they were overweight, one severely so, and the most salient feature of their personalities was an incorporative, devouring mode of relating, alongside of a determined denial of any experienced dysphoric affect.

These were children with seemingly bottomless appetites for things, children who demanded incessantly concrete expressions of interest and approval on the one hand, while on the other hand they denied and desperately strove to ward off any awareness of underlying feelings of impotence and helplessness with all the attendant anxiety and rage. They turned to reading comics during treatment at those junctions when they had to struggle against the eruption of strong feelings of helplessness and anger. They felt that no one could really listen and understand their needs, and acted as if they had determined to turn only to themselves for help. Having once been disappointed in the outside world, they now felt they had to grab for themselves since they were convinced they would not be given to. One child, for example, who was insatiably jealous of her younger sister, revealed that she had decided never again to turn to her mother for help after her appeal had been rejected at an earlier date in favor of the younger sibling's need.

This was a child who initially presented an overlay of phobic symptomatology which was successfully resolved through more conventional play therapy sessions. However, with the gradual emergence of deeper character problems, the play turned from play acting to acting out (Ekstein and Friedman, 1957). She first initiated activities via which she could create a situation designed to involve the therapist in a feeding activity and made elaborate preparations for a feast for which she eventually provided the food. With the deepening of the transference, however, she created a nurturing but communion-like relationship by withdrawing into the world of the comic books through which she both acted out her desires for omnipotence and her feelings that the therapist was helpless. Simultaneously, she maintained communication on a level that revealed the very regressed desire to be loved and understood without any conditions being imposed upon her, to be granted unlimited, "on demand" feeding on this
symbolic level whereby she devoured with her eyes rather than with her mouth.  

Through their reading, the children virtually seemed to re-create a glass wall between themselves and the therapist, reminiscent of the city of Kandor, shrunken and placed within a glass cover by Superman's evil nemesis Luthor. Behind this shield the child is walled up as in a fortress by which she is both protected and imprisoned simultaneously. The tremendous denial of the need and longing for others was graphically portrayed by the one child who decided to create her own comic strip world and call it “Utopia.” Its first inhabitant was a half-man, half-woman figure, truly sufficient unto itself like Superman, about whom it has been said, “Nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin” (Seldes, 1942), and who knew not of earthly needs such as love, affection, or medical and psychological assistance. This child, who desperately clung to a denial of any softer feelings behind the front of an all-powerful self-sufficiency, subsequently read, with blushing insight, the following story: Superman, separated somehow from the gentle alter ego of Clark Kent, turns into a cold, feelingless monster who tries to kill Clark Kent.

Parenthetically, it should be mentioned that two of these particular children were also devoted students of mythology and began to elaborate with the therapist upon the many parallel features of the various gods and the various “super” characters.

The use these nonpsychotic youngsters made of the comic books is in marked contrast to that of an eight-year-old borderline schizophrenic little boy, who did not merely identify with the characters or use them as ego ideals, but rather merged with them in a fusion kind of relationship in which he, as the “Super-Bobby,” could fly, knock down walls, etc. This was a borderline boy whose level of functioning fluctuated rapidly, but generally there was sufficient observing ego function to restrict the acting out of these fantasies to the treatment room. Occasionally, however, there were episodes where the inability to distinguish clearly between himself and the super-identity led to dangerous psychotic acting out.

Although the present paper deals primarily with the so-called action comics, it should be noted that many other types of comics are

*S. W. Friedman, M.D.: personal communication.
also utilized by the patients. One child, who was preoccupied with how much money the therapist was getting, and was convinced that she could be tolerated for no other reason, read and reread about Richie Rich, the poor little rich boy who is turned over to the care of servants and then has the nightmare of being deserted by them after he inadvertently helped them to become wealthy. After several years of treatment, the patient finally revealed her concern that the therapist would terminate treatment after the therapist had “gotten enough money out of my parents.” Another favorite was Archie who, after disobeying his parents and spending money meant for television repairs to gratify his appetite, is trapped in the television set, a helpless, passive onlooker as he is changed from channel to channel, a truly drastic punishment for a greedy, rebellious child.

Since the modern comic book with its specific mythology has meaning much beyond the clinical applications described above, I would like to turn to a brief discussion of the comics themselves. I shall attempt to utilize clinical experience to learn something about their function in the maturation and development of normal children who are not in need of clinical help.

With respect to why the comics have supplanted earlier forms of mythology, Arlow (1961) suggests that, “because the official religious myths no longer fit the internal plights of those who require them, there is a reactivation of the old mythologies. . . . the various media of mass communication, comic books and literature have been issuing forth a stream of reanimated mythological figures indistinguishable from their classical prototypes. Patients in quest of the realization of their narcissistic ego ideals almost invariably introduce evidence of some such identification during the course of their treatment, from various representations of the Greek gods, to the heroes of the comic books.”

The relationship between play and fantasy has been carefully elucidated by Freud in the 1908 paper, “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” and was subsequently elaborated by Eikstein and Friedman (1957) with respect to the genetic development of thinking from the stage of helpless impulsing to that of reality-dominated secondary process thought, along a developmental continuum of different levels of play and fantasy activity.
Freud pointed out that “every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him... he takes his play very seriously... [t]he opposite of what is play is not what is serious but what is real... he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child’s ‘play’ from ‘phantasying’. ... the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams.” Freud goes on to specify that the motive forces behind the production of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes and an unsatisfying reality. Furthermore, these fantasies can be described in terms of very specific temporal characteristics; they hover between the present in which the wish is aroused, the past in which the wish was fulfilled, and the future to which the child assigns the play or fantasy situation when the wish will again be fulfilled.

Ekstein and Caruth (1965) have attempted to re-evaluate this concept of fantasy in the light of newer notions of ego psychology and with specific application to Utopian fantasies. Instead of emphasizing the regressive wish in the service of instinctual gratification as has been the tendency of many writers (who have perhaps overlooked Freud’s own emphasis that the child’s play is dominated by the wish to be grown up and by the attempt to master), they have suggested that despite the seemingly magical, regressively dominated manifest content of the myth or fairy tale or Utopian fantasy (“the grownup’s fairy tale”), the hidden truth behind each fantasy reveals the fact that the world of “immediate impulse fulfillment must be renounced in favor of the world of reality in order to gain the capacity for postponement, delay, and intermittent gratification which must be sought for and worked for ever and ever again.”

The baby’s first play with the spool accompanied with the words, “Mommy go—mommy come,” has been described as his first great cultural achievement (Freud, 1920). He moves thereby beyond the hallucinatory wish fulfillment to play in which he weaves the fantasy around an external object (Waelder, 1932). This embodies the essence of all future play and fantasies and may well be considered the
first Superman fantasy. The baby experiences, in the present, the
frustration engendered by mother's leaving, and remembers the past
gratifications of ego needs as well as instinctual needs attendant upon
her presence. He then works adaptively in the present, via the play,
to enable himself to bring her back; truly a magical feat fit for a Su­
perbaby whose omnipotent fantasies cloak, in Walter Mitty fashion,
the deeper feelings of inner helplessness and impotence of the Clark
Kent-like real baby.

In addition to these generic factors common to the myth, fairy tale,
Superman comic, and Utopia, there are also specific attributes and
characteristics common to each which leads to their varying appro­
priateness and appeal to different age groups and different person­
ality organizations. The fairy tale, for example, is a cautionary tale
which speaks to the child who is struggling to renounce the early
childhood gratifications, the primary process world dominated by
the pleasure principle, for the world of delay, postponement and
work; and to the child who is still in the process of internalizing the
parents and has not yet effected a stable identification with them.

The comic books, specifically the action comics with which I am
primarily concerned here, are of particular appeal to the older la­
tency and preadolescent child who is in more of a transitional phase
between primary and secondary fantasy interests, between infantile
sexuality and latency, between role playing and identity formation.

By primary process fantasy I refer to those fantasies devoid of any
possibility of fulfillment in reality because they are dominated by the
type of thinking found in dreams and fairy tales, that is, prelogical
magical thinking. Secondary process fantasies, on the other hand, ad­
here to the reality principle and are potentially realizable in reality.
Superman and his associates, the Justice League of America, straddle
both worlds, as it were, and are fully committed to neither. The
stories are couched in the language of the secondary process, and the
magical feats are garbed in a pseudoscientific technology. The heroes,
too, are engaged in a kind of superego struggle with their personal
Satan (Luthor) and the inhabitants of Earth 3, a kind of idlike moral
inverse of Earth 1, where all that is good is bad, and all that is bad
is good.

For many children these comics seem to serve the function of a kind
of forbidden game; neither fully fantasy nor fully play, but transi-
tional between these two phases of psychic activity. They have the combined impact of appeal to visual imagery, of the utilization of the magic thinking of the primary process, of a hint of the secrets of the adult world of reality (Bechtel, 1941), and, all too frequently, of the added enticement of parental disapproval.

In many ways the myth of the genesis of Superman is a retelling of the story of a growth-individuation struggle, and the autism-symbiosis conflict. For Superman, prematurely separated from his parents due to the violent destruction of the planet Krypton (suggesting also some archaic birth fantasies), is endowed with superpowers here on Earth where he arrives alone. The price he pays for these omnipotent powers, which must be kept secret, is an autisticlike isolation devoid of object relations. He can maintain this unique primary process secret identity only through the autistic retreat, otherwise he, too, is prey to the destructive forces of evil like all other mortals. On a somewhat different level, we can also see how the Superman-Clark Kent dichotomy is a disguised version of the preadolescent’s disillusionment in the parent who has gradually become stripped of the omniscience and omnipotence with which he had been previously endowed. Thus, we find endless variations of the theme of how to distinguish the real hero from the identically appearing robot or some other kind of imitator, reflecting the internal struggles of this age child with the bipolar images of his parents as well as of himself.

The specific use that individual children make of these borrowed fantasies will vary with such factors as age, the nature of the specific psychic structure with particular reference to ego functions and thought processes, as well as drive organization, and finally with the particular ideological and cultural milieu of the child.

For certain children, as well as for certain adults, there is also no clear-cut demarcation between thought and act, between fantasy and acting out. For example, in more primitive cultures and in more primitive personality organizations, the thought and act may be so closely equated that there can be no maintaining of a stable differentiation in function between fact and fantasy, between inner and outer reality which not only meet but fuse. Thus we may have a kind of “fantasying out” in action or “acting out in fantasy” as with the child who, imagining himself to be Superman or any one of the myriad

*4 The creators of Superman were themselves in their adolescent years at the time.
of magically caped Olympianlike heroes of the Justice League, goes flying off the roof top only to discover instead the sad fate of Icarus.

In somewhat similar fashion, we have also the individual who is so fully convinced of the power of the thought to become a reality that there may occur a kind of “voodoo” death; the very thought that one was being acted upon by another’s thoughts creates a corresponding fantasy of such potency that it may create a complementary reaction or “acting in” on the part of the subject; a theme not entirely alien to these types of comic books. Testifying to the growing recognition of the importance of such mechanisms, a case has recently been reported in which a fatal asthmatic condition developed in a previously healthy adult male, following his mother’s prophecy of “dire results if he went counter to her wishes” (Mathis, 1959). Mathis concluded that there was an indirect connection between the mother’s death wish and the final fatal outcome, and suggested that “fatal psychosomatic conditions can be modifications of the more primitive and direct ‘voodoo death.’” The equation of thought and act which links the child, the dreamer, the schizophrenic, and this kind of religious and superstitious belief is a frequent theme in the Superman kind of comics where superpowers, such as super-vision, flying, etc., have little allegiance to everyday principles of physics, psychology, and physiology.

It is of interest to note that Arlow (1961) has recognized that such regressive aspects as the concrete, audible, and visible forms in which the mass media mythology is communicated may have important bearing not only on ego structuring and fantasy formation during childhood, but on the general problem of acting out as well.

Comic books are an integral part of today’s literature for children, and their reading fulfills an important psychic function in the inner life of those latency and preadolescent children whom they attract. In both form and content they seem to appeal to a transitional phase of development, marking the shift from a predominantly infantile pleasure-principle-dominated level to a more mature reality-principle-dominated level of functioning; and like the myth and the fairy tale, they facilitate the working-through process. They do so in part by externalizing the conflict, enabling the child to identify and come to grips with some of the conflicts and reflect on a variety of potential resolutions, facilitated in this by the opportunity for catharsis, abreaction, identification, etc. It has been suggested that “myths must
originally have served an ego need; to explain existing phenomena, albeit in a prelogical fashion. . . . Superman readers regress to that prelogical state in order to relax for a while and become all the more logical thereafter."

In addition to the use made of comic books by many healthy children, they may well be of specific importance in the inner development of children experiencing certain psychological difficulties. It has been found clinically that some children turn to reading the comics during the therapy session at moments when this activity can be understood as a meaningful communication about, and reflection of, the nature of both the transference and the resistance. The nature of this communication varies considerably. At times the act of reading comics during a therapeutic interview can express a need for and experience of a regressive, communionlike, infantile relationship in the transference. In other instances this activity fulfilled a necessary defensive function that served as a brake to slow down the eruption and expression of more intense conflictual feelings, as may well be true of the act of reading any material during the therapeutic session. At times it appeared as an ego-syntonic piece of behavior reflecting a characterological tendency of the type of child who feels fully identified with the controlling self-sufficient parental role; at other times it served as an activity which symbolized an underlying need for endless and limitless feeding. Further, as was noted above, it may represent a kind of temporary retreat from the pressures of secondary process reality-oriented functioning to a more primitive world of the primary process dominated by the pleasure principle.

Finally, for those parents and educators concerned with possible detrimental effects, let them be reminded that: "Superman has about him something of Goethe's 'Sorcerer's Apprentice,' of Dr. Faust, of Hercules, and of Atlas. To be sure, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells also make their contribution to his costume and trappings, but essentially he owes his effect to the vanishing remnants of ancient mythology, that collective memory of mankind which has been combined with Utopian anticipation" (Politzer, 1963). Furthermore, "honest and incorruptible, . . . he is on the side of angels . . . in favor of slum clearance, [and] . . . he would not strike a mother except in self-defense" (Seldes, 1942).

\(^5\) Maria Piers, Ph.D.: personal communication.
References


BROWN, S. (1940), Coming of Superman. New Republic, 103:301.


HORNE, S. (1940), Coming of Superman. New Republic, 103:301.


QUEEN, P. (1941), Comic strips in England: future folklorists will find in them the mythology of the present day. Living Age, 360:21-23.

QUEEN, P. (1941), Comic strips in England: future folklorists will find in them the mythology of the present day. Living Age, 360:21-23.


