

Supervillains are the real heroes

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This chapter will demonstrate how superhero stories differ from most other types of Western storytelling by giving a role usually given to heroes - that of the agent of change - to their villains. It will discuss the historical and practical reasons for this and show what happens when the nominal heroes do occasionally attempt to effect change, before explaining how supervillains arose to fulfil the need for change in order to drive stories. Finally, the Marvel Comics character Doctor Doom will be used as an example of how supervillains are employed as story engines, and what their inevitable defeat tell us about superhero storytelling as a whole.

Most forms of Western storytelling, from ancient legends to modern blockbusters, can be explained in terms of Joseph Campbell's 'universal myth' (1949). This is a story framework that involves an inexperienced hero being called away to adventure and enduring trials, resulting in changes both to themselves and the world around them. Campbell's analysis was hugely influential on American screenwriting, with screenwriters using it extensively as a template (Field, 1979). Indeed, templates such as 'Save The Cat' (Snyder, 2005) and 'The Hero's Journey' (Vogler, 2007) have since been developed that are designed to help generate outlines based on the plot points that Campbell identified.

Campbell's influence can perhaps most clearly be seen in the original *Star Wars* (1977), in which Luke Skywalker heads out into the wider galaxy and, across various adventures, eventually becomes a hero and destroys the Death Star. This influence has continued to the present day, with more recent movies such as *Barbie* (2023), *Avatar: The Way Of The Water* (2022) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) all featuring a hero who answers a call to action, moves into a wider world and both causes change and is changed themselves.

However, superhero stories, especially those originating in comics, tend not to follow this format (Reynolds, 1994). They use instead a format called 'The American Monomyth', in which an Eden-like place is disrupted by the invasion of evil forces who are then defeated by a lone figure, who arrives from the outside before disappearing back into the wilderness at the conclusion (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002). This story has its roots in western narratives, with the relative calm of a frontier town being disturbed by bandits and the townsfolk unable to defend themselves until a mysterious stranger arrives, take bloody revenge on the bandits, and then rides off into the sunset, refusing all offers of thanks.

In the superhero version of this story the bandits are replaced by super-villains, the frontier town is somewhere like Gotham, Manhattan, or the world itself, and the mysterious stranger is the masked superhero who works only for the restoration of justice (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 47). Or, as the theme to the *Spider-Man* cartoon series (Grantray-Lawrence, 1967) has it, ‘in the chill of night, at the scene of the crime... he arrives just in time’ and then when the action is all over the hero disappears without asking for acclaim because ‘wealth and fame he’s ignored, action is his reward’ (Harris and Webster, 1967).

Superhero comics inherited this story framework from pulp and movie serials such as ‘The Shadow’ or ‘Zorro’ (Walton, 2008). The main reason that the American Monomyth was used for these serials was that it allowed stories to happen in an ‘oneiric climate’ (Eco, 1972, p. 17). This describes a situation where individual episodes of a series exist almost in isolation from each other, with the same characters and settings but only a hazy idea of what has gone before, with the overall storyworld to all intents and purposes being reset at the end of each story.

There are two key benefits to this kind of storytelling. Firstly, it means that little prior knowledge of previous stories is required, so that episodes can be missed or read out of sequence without losing any enjoyment on the part of the audience. This was especially important during the early decades of superhero comics, when distribution could be irregular and there was no guarantee that specific series would be supplied to the same retailers each month (Lopes, 2009).

Secondly, ‘The Heroes Journey’ causes serious problems for serialised storytelling. If every story in every issue of a comic series ended with the lead character being changed then within a few instalments they would become entirely unrecognisable. This is especially the case in storyworlds that exist in shared universes, or that are both transtextual and transmedia. In such storyworlds radical changes to a character in one comics series, for instance, would need to be echoed simultaneously in all other comics from the same publisher, and take into account changes to other characters as well. This becomes even more complex when characters exist across different media. For example, changes to the character Wolverine would need to be made in every single comic, cartoon or television series that they appeared in on a monthly basis, with changes to other characters that he interacted with also being kept up to date. This would be almost impossible to manage and so, as Stan Lee explains, ‘once we’ve invented a hero, that’s it. He’s pretty much the same, issue after issue’ (1976, p. 7).

The superhero genre is, of course, by no means the only one that tells this sort of story. In certain kinds of cop shows, especially older ones designed for eventual syndication, each episode can exist in its own oneiric climate where the status quo is reset each time. For example, in *Magnum PI* (Magnum PI, 1980 - 1988) Thomas is always broke and Higgins wants to get the Ferrari back. Even

here, however, change is inevitable as actors grow older and contracts are renegotiated. Comics characters, however, can go on forever without ageing, becoming involved in scandals, or making demands for wage increases.

However, even with this in mind, Eco's description of superhero storytelling has never been entirely accurate. Even in the early days of superhero comics there would be gradual changes to the hero and their world over time, as, for example, new characters were introduced or costume designs were finessed. This accelerated when the concept of 'The Marvel Universe' was introduced in the 1960s, when ongoing continuity and interaction between different series became part of the appeal of the stories (Reynolds, 1994).

However, even when major change does happen it can be reversed, and almost always is. Steve Rogers has been replaced as Captain America many times, with US Agent, Bucky Barnes, Sam Wilson and others taking over, but he has always returned to the role eventually. Similarly Ben Reilly and Otto Octavius have taken over as Spider-man; Dick Grayson, Azrael, Jim Gordon and Jace Fox have become Batman; and Jim Rhodes and Victor von Doom became Iron Man, but in the end Peter Parker, Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark have always returned.

Indeed, it is always strange when self-professed 'true comics fans' protest about such changes, as anyone familiar with the history of such characters knows that they are only temporary. Even when entire storyworlds come to an end, such as in the conclusion of Alan Moore's ABC universe in *Tom Strong* #36 (Moore, et al., 2006) or the destruction of Marvel's Ultimate universe in *Ultimate End* #5 (Bendis, et al., 2016), the characters and, eventually, the universes containing them will inevitably return (Johnston, 2018; Marston, 2019). Tom Strong, for example, was introduced into the DC comics universe in *The Terrifics* #1 (Lemire, et al., 2018) while the entire Ultimate universe was revived in the *Ultimate Invasion* mini-series (Hickman, et al., 2023).

Superhero comics can thus be described as conservative, in that they are averse to change, but they can also be labelled as socially conservative too. For example, in almost all cases the job of the superhero is to protect society in its current form, whether that be by stopping a bank robbery or preventing the destruction of the universe (Lewis, 2013). By presenting the superhero as the central sympathetic character, and their actions defending the status quo as therefore laudable, these stories are conservative because they stress the importance of maintaining the current consensus (Deis, 2013; Costello, 2009).

When stories deviate from this model, with superheroes actively trying to change the world around them rather than preserve it in its current state, there are invariably repercussions. In series such as *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, Sep. 1986 - Oct. 1987), *Squadron Supreme* (Gruenwald, Ryan and

de la Rosa , Sep. 1985 - Aug. 1986) and *The Authority* (Ellis, Hitch and Neary, May 1999 - Apr. 2000) superheroes take a pro-active role, seeking to change society for the better. In each case, the superheroes find that power is corrupting and are depicted as villainous, whether explicitly in the case of Ozymandias in *Watchmen* or implicitly in the satirical storytelling of *The Authority*, reinforcing the idea that the true path of virtue is to maintain the status quo (Coogan, 2006, p. 59; Verano, 2013).

It should be stated that not all aspects of superhero storytelling are necessarily politically conservative. Superman, for example, originally fought corrupt capitalists and Wonder Woman was created to promote alternative ways of living (Curtis, 2019). Additionally, in recent years there have been numerous attempts to introduce characters who do not fit the general default straight, male, white archetype, such as Ms Marvel, Squirrel Girl, and Miles Morales (Ahmed, 2021; Millanzi, 2021). These characters can be seen as modernising forces within the current superhero storyworlds, showing the possibility of overall societal change, however they still act conservatively towards their own narratives in much the same way as previous generations of superheroes.

This conservatism generates a practical problem for creators, in that stories usually require an active 'protagonist' (i.e. one who instigates change) in order for a plot to be generated. As stated, this position is traditionally taken by a story's hero, but with the lead character of superhero stories dedicated to preventing change it is up to supervillains to become the generators of action (Coogan, 2006).

Supervillains first appeared not long after superheroes. The earliest superhero comics featured the heroes fighting the same sort of non-powered villains - bank robbers, muggers or corrupt industrialists - who had appeared in the pulp fictions that preceded them (Levitz, 2013). Not only did these provide the new super-powered heroes with little in the way of a challenge, but they ran the risk of harming their perceived heroism, painting them almost as bullies who beat up those less powerful than themselves (Lee, 1976). Thus, similarly super-powered adversaries were required to carry a real threat of change and thus allow the superhero to remain the protector of the status quo whilst still being involved in the story (Verano, 2013).

Once supervillains were introduced creators quickly realised that they could easily be reused to generate further new stories, and therefore should not be killed off at the end of their first appearance (Thomas, 2004; Lee, 1976). In some ways this made the villains more important than the heroes, as without them there would be no story for the superhero to take part in - as Stan Lee put it:

'Endowed with a group of great heroes ... the main appeal of our frisky little fables must lie with the villains we concoct. What new threats can they pose to our unsuspecting protagonists? What new weapons will they soon unleash upon a dazed and defenceless

world? What new powers can they bring to bear that will give our good guys a run for their dough?’ (1976, p. 7).

Recurring supervillains would often be created as a twisted mirror image of the superheroes, most obviously in the form of their costumes, which would usually be in secondary colours (green, purple, orange) rather than the reds, whites and blues that traditionally belonged to the heroes (Jennings, 2013; Costello, 2009). Similarly, the origins and characterisations of supervillains closely resembled those of their adversaries, differing only in the fact that, at the origin’s conclusion, villains choose a life of crime rather than crime fighting, so that ‘the defect that makes the villain villainous is exactly what the hero resists’ (Coogan, 2013, p. 98). Where heroes tended to have a traumatic event in their past which taught them to help others, villains suffered from ‘a wound - typically psychological and emotional but often with a physical component - that shapes their lives and which they are unable to recover from’ (Coogan, 2006, p. 70). This wound often manifests itself visibly, as some form of disfigurement (Gavaler, 2018). Once again, this serves to demonstrate the heroism of the lead characters, as ‘the villain’s negative qualities highlight the hero’s positive one’ (Verano, 2013, p. 84).

Doctor Doom

Within these definitions, Doctor Doom is clearly a supervillain. This was made explicit in his very first appearance on the cover of *Fantastic Four* #5 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott, Jul. 1962), where he threatens to ‘destroy the Fantastic Four forever’ in a story entitled ‘Meet Doctor Doom!’

He was created in opposition to the Fantastic Four, as ‘the intellectual equal of Reed Richards.’ (Lee, et al., 2015, p. 119) He was an Eastern European dictator who mixed science with magic and always acted alone, in direct contrast to the all-American family unit of the Fantastic Four, who follow the familial, science-based, leadership of Reed Richards (Lee, 1976; Hatfield, 2012).

Doom was an immediate hit with readers and quickly returned, teaming up with Namor The Sub-Mariner in the following issue, and then again in *Fantastic Four* #10 (Lee, Kirby and Ayers, Jan. 1963). According to Stan Lee:

‘Within a matter of days the mail came flying in. And it all carried the same message. Bring back Dr. Doom! Well, there we no flies on us. After the first thousand or so letters we suspected we had a hit! So bring him back we did.’ (Lee, 1976, p. 13)

Doom’s popularity was such that, as the Marvel Universe started to develop into a single storyworld, he began to appear in other series (Hibbett, 2024). Just over a year after his first appearance he guest-starred in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #5 (Lee et al, Oct.1963) and over the course of his first decade also appeared in *Daredevil*, *The Avengers*, *Strange Tales*, *The Silver Surfer*, *Sub-Mariner*, *Thor*,

Captain America, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk and *Not Brand Echh*, as well as a brief run as the second feature in *Astonishing Tales*.

The character's ability to move beyond his source title was in part due to the fact that, unlike many villains, his origin was not explicitly linked to his arch nemesis. Other popular supervillains such as Loki, Lex Luthor, The Joker and The Green Goblin have origins and motivations that require the presence of Thor, Superman, Batman and Spider-Man respectively to work, and so although all these characters have appeared in other series they are overwhelmingly more likely to appear alongside their 'heroes'.

Doom's origin, on the other hand, is mostly independent of *The Fantastic Four*, despite first being told in *Fantastic Four* #5 and then expanded two years later in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee et al, Sept.1964). It begins with Victor von Doom being born into a poor gypsy family in the small Eastern European country of Latveria. His mother is murdered for being a witch and so Victor is raised by his father, who is later hounded to death fleeing from the evil local Baron after being unable to save the life of the Baron's wife. Enraged by these injustices young Victor becomes a scientific Robin Hood figure, battling the aristocracy with ingenious inventions that bring him to the attention of the American establishment, who spirit him away to University in the USA. Here, his isolation and perceived arrogance lead to a devastating accident and horrific facial injuries. Doom journeys to Nepal in search of a cure, where he discovers an order of monks who help him to combine his technological genius with the mystic arts of his mother. He eventually encases himself in armour and declares:

'From this moment on there is no Victor von Doom! He has vanished... along with the handsome face he once possessed! But, in his place, there shall be another... wiser... stronger! More brilliant, more powerful than ever before!! From this moment on I shall be known as... Doctor Doom!' (Lee et al, Sept.1964).

In many ways this is like a superhero origin, with a rich back story giving wide scope for future adventures, an exciting visual identity, and complex, sympathetic motivations for even his most evil deeds. The difference that makes it a supervillain origin is, as discussed earlier, that Doom seeks to change the status quo rather than maintain it.

To be specific, Doom seeks to change the status quo so that he is the unopposed ruler of the world. He does this in the belief that only he has the intellectual or moral stamina to achieve a future utopia for humanity (Terjesen, 2009; Carpenter, 2013). It is this self-justifying yet theoretically moral world view that makes Doom a complex, often sympathetic, character while still remaining, when all things are taken into account, a supervillain (Coogan, 2006; Conroy, 2004).

As a supervillain, Doom must always be defeated, and, although this is usually the case, there have been several occasions when he has (temporarily, at least) succeeded in his plans. One such victory takes place in the graphic novel *Emperor Doom*. Here Doom uses the psychic powers of The Purple Man to hypnotise the entire planet, who then unanimously elect him as world leader. Doom immediately sets to work and, within a few days, has ended apartheid, solved the problems of world hunger with radical farming methods and the redistribution of wealth, and destroyed all nuclear weapons, ending the threat of nuclear annihilation. This apparent utopia is only brought to an end when the superhero Wonder Man breaks the hypnotic effect and leads a team of Avengers to end Doom's rule. Amusingly, Doom is not actually defeated by the Avengers themselves but more by his own unwillingness to engage with the administrative duties of leadership. Either way, he is overthrown and the status quo is almost immediately reinstated, with apartheid brought back, children left to starve, and nuclear arms proliferating once more.

As the Avengers fly home Hawkeye questions whether they have done the right thing in ending Doom's rule. Captain America answers, unequivocally, that they have. 'The world isn't perfect Hawkeye,' he says, 'but people are free to make their own choices - and that's the way it should be.' (Michelinie, et al., 1987, p. 64)

One could argue that the majority population of South Africa did not have a choice in the matter, and nor did the children born into starvation, who are not free from oppression or hunger in any meaningful way. Captain America's view of freedom has thus been labelled 'negative freedom' in that it refers to freedom from obstacles put in the way of personal expression by the state. However, unlike so-called 'positive freedom', it does not actively help people to overcome imposed difficulties either (Berlin, 1969). Doctor Doom puts forward the idea that this version of freedom is more beneficial. For instance, in the newspaper strip *The Amazing Spider-man* newspaper strip he suggests that his totalitarian regime brings peace, telling Peter Parker:

'Our judicial system is based on reason! Incarceration is fruitless! We seek simple justice! If you kill, you must die! If you maim, you must be maimed! If you steal, you must labour until your theft is repaid! Suffice it to say, there is no crime in Latveria...You think me a despot - but my streets are safe.' (Lee, et al., 2016, pp. 165-166)

Doom's version of freedom is painted here as tempting but ultimately to be opposed, not least because it goes against the fundamental principles of liberty upon which the USA was founded, and thus the principles for which most American superheroes stand. In this way we can see that most, if not all, superheroes who come from this mould exist in a paradoxical state where on the one hand they claim to protect the principles of personal freedom but on the other act in a highly conservative manner, protecting and reinforcing the status quo at all times to ensure that change cannot happen.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that the conservatism of superhero storytelling developed from a need to tell ongoing stories in a serialised format that did not radically alter the main characters. By making the heroes battle to maintain the status quo and painting those who oppose it as villains it generated a way to tell stories where meaningful change was always threatened but could not actually happen, and so provided a stable basis for extending those stories across other media.

In recent years, however, this view of superhero storytelling has been challenged by the success of live action superhero storytelling, particularly in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Here the characters are played by actors who do age and do renegotiate contracts, and so change becomes inevitable.

Two key examples of this can be found in the film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), in which Iron Man dies and Captain America is allowed to age and retire, with the actors who played them - Robert Downey Jr and Chris Evans respectively - retiring from their roles. Both of these developments were respected and reinforced by subsequent movies and television series, while other changes have been integrated into the ongoing storyline. One notable example is of the so-called 'blip', where Thanos killed half of the population of the universe at the end of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) only for everybody to return five years later during *Avengers: Endgame*. This event has been referred to in almost all films and television shows since as a source of trauma for the world and an integral part of further stories.

However, there are signs that this acceptance of change may only be temporary. As the three different *Spider-man* movie series have shown, once a character has begun to change too much from their original format, or the actor has aged beyond the range shown in the comic series, then they can be rebooted, with all stories reset to the beginning again. *Spider-man: No Way Home* (2021) showed a way that this commercial need could actively be drawn into the narrative, with previous versions of the franchise shown to take place in alternate universes which can interact with the current version. This is a way for the studios to have their cake and eat it - accepting and celebrating past output, while reserving the right to tell the same stories again.

Deadpool & Wolverine (2024) took this further by not only introducing characters from previous franchises into the MCU but also having Chris Evans, the actor who played Steve Rogers, return to play his previous role as the Human Torch from *Fantastic Four* (2005). This was done for humorous effect in *Deadpool & Wolverine*, but if the proposed *Avengers: Secret Wars* movie is even vaguely similar to what online rumours suggest it will not only see all previous versions of Marvel movies entwined within the current continuity but will also allow for reboots, re-starting individual character franchises with new actors where necessary (Prom, 2023).

The Human Torch and the rest of the Fantastic Four will be part of this, with the movie *Fantastic Four: First Steps* due to appear in 2025, alongside their old adversary Doctor Doom, who is due to be the lead antagonist in both *Avengers: Doomsday* and *Avengers: Secret Wars*.

Although at time of writing little else is known about the content of these films, it has been confirmed that Victor von Doom will be played by Robert Downey Jr (Armstrong, 2024). How this will work is as yet unknown, although there have been multiple theories suggested (Hibbett, 2024). What is clear however is that, by casting an actor as high profile and highly paid as Downey Jr in the role, Marvel Studios are intending to make Doctor Doom the focus of 'Phase 6' of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Further evidence of this can be found in the fact that the next two Avengers movies are named after classic comics storylines - 'Doomsday' in *Fantastic Four* #59 (Lee, et al., 1967) and *Secret Wars* (Hickman & Ribić, 2015-2016) - which had Doom as the lead character.

The *Secret Wars* series saw different worlds from the Marvel comics multiverse brought together by Doctor Doom into a single world, in order to save them from destruction by an alien race of super-beings. This allowed different versions of the multiple characters to interact with each other in a similar way to that done in *Spider-man: No Way Home* and *Deadpool & Wolverine*, although on a much larger scale. It is rumoured that the movie *Avengers: Secret Wars* will follow a similar path, and allow Marvel to not only bring franchises such as The X-Men into the main MCU but also reboot other series with new actors (Marvel Movies Fandom, 2024).

While it is tempting to speculate on the nature of these alterations, and what they will mean for the larger MCU moving forward, it would be unwise to do so... except to say that if the future of this ongoing narrative is anything like that detailed in the comics upon which these stories appear to be based, then ironically Doom may finally have succeeded in bringing about change.

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