



Image from: [Zein, the last pharaoh. From AK Comics \(2005\) The... in Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics: The Handbook of Language and Globalization](#)

Summary Article: **Superheroes**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

Beginning in 1938 with the appearance of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's Superman in *Action Comics #1* (published then by National Periodical Publications, now DC Comics), the superhero has most often been labeled a cultural descendant of the classical epic hero—the twentieth century's answer to Hercules, Robin Hood, and King Arthur. In simplest terms the superhero is a larger-than-life figure that fights against the forces of evil. As described by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence in *The American Monomyth*, he (or she) is

distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he is resident therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego, his motivation a selfless zeal for justice.

Jewett and Lawrence perceive the superhero as perpetuating a particularly American version of the monomyth. Instead of a rite of initiation, as in the classical monomyth, the superhero's typical plot is a tale of redemption:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil. Normal institutions fail to contend with this threat. A selfless hero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task, and aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition. The superhero then recedes into obscurity.

As Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble summarize in “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?,” this Americanized monomyth “secularizes Judeo-Christian ideals by combining the selfless individual who sacrifices himself for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil.”

In a world at the end of the Great Depression and headed toward World War II, the superhero was an idealistic concept that reinforced the idea that “good” was indeed stronger than “evil.” After Superman's successful appearance in 1938 until the mid-1950s end of the “Golden Age of Comics,” hundreds of superheroes from dozens of different publishers, all variations on the same “superhuman-with-secret-identity” crime-fighter theme, appeared, including Gil Kane's Batman in 1939 and Charles Moulton's Wonder Woman in 1941. Most were quick copies of Superman of varying degrees of quality, and, relatively speaking, only a handful of publishers and characters survived the 1950s emphasis on family and home.

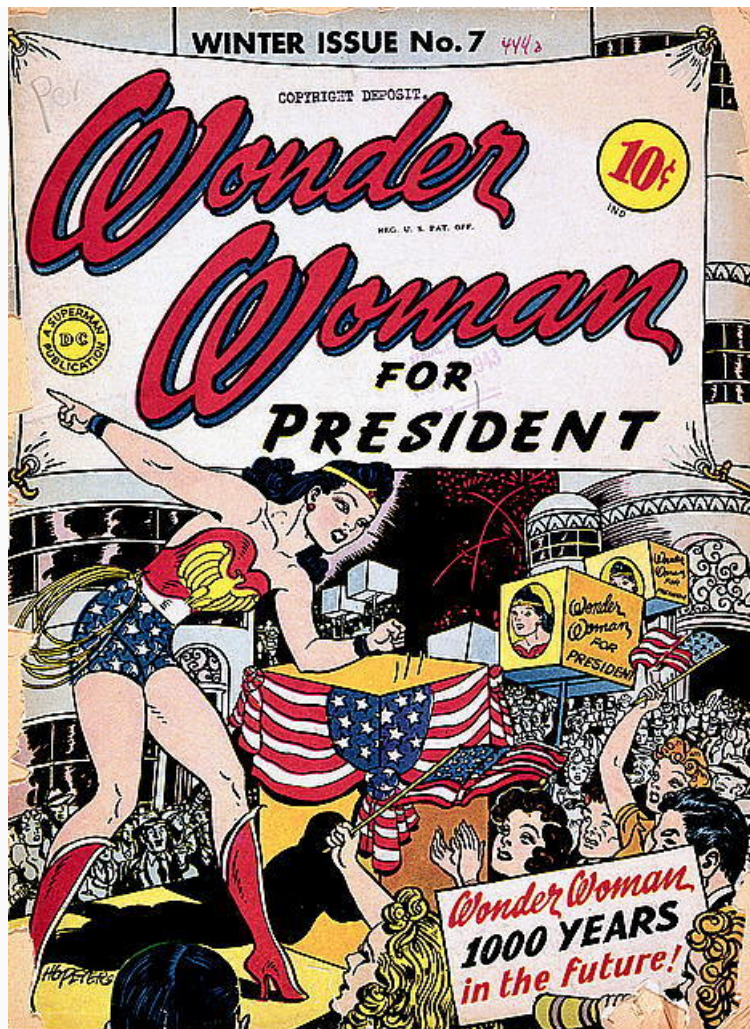
Traditionally, fans blame the end of the Golden Age of Comics on the 1950s debate on comics and morals led by Frederic Wertham and the installation of the Comics Code Authority (1954). From a marketing standpoint crime comics suffered from the resulting fallout of public opinion, but the superhero genre—with its emphasis on the fantastic—emerged as the dominant force in the

mainstream comic book industry, a position it maintains to this day. That is not to say the code did not affect the superhero genre; if anything it cemented what Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones in *The Comic Book Heroes from the Silver Age to the Present* label “stock comic book fare.” About ninety percent of all superhero stories still follow the same formula: a villain commits crimes; the hero hunts the villain, is briefly trapped by villain, but escapes to capture villain.

However formulaic, the genre's continuing dominance is the result, in no small part, of the emergence of Marvel Comics under the direction of Stan Lee (Stanley Lieber) in the 1960s Silver Age of Comics. Lee, most notably with Jack Kirby and Steve Ditka, altered the image of the idealized superhero. While they might have a “superpower” like their Golden Age counterparts, such Marvel superheroes as Spiderman were presented as possibly fallible, with foibles and flaws, just like “normal” people.

Furthermore, while Marvel revamped the image of the individual superhero, it emphasized a relatively new concept—the superhero team as family unit. Earlier “teams” of superheroes existed in the Golden Age (for example, the Justice Society of America), but Marvel broke new ground with such groups as the Fantastic Four. Instead of an “old boy's club” where superheroes met to swap adventure stories, Marvel's teams were made of interdependent characters relying on each other to provide both emotional support and fighting assistance. This emphasis on developing characterization and team interaction eventually affected even DC Comics, where the most traditional members of the superhero genre, such as Superman, were given modernized characterizations. However, throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and much of the 1990s Marvel, with creators including Chris Claremont and John Byrne working on such books as *The New X-Men*, would financially dominate a once-again growing field of comic-book publishers.

Of course, while the superhero is most closely identified with the comic-book medium, it is by no means found only there. In the 1930s and 1940s, a number of superheroes, including Superman, “appeared” on radio and in Saturday morning serials. With more animated shows than could be named here, it is perhaps more important to note that since the 1950s, when children rushed home to see *The Adventures of Superman*, every decade has produced at least one “live action” superhero television show. In the 1960s the campy *Batman* series hit prime time. The 1970s had a bonanza of superhero shows including *Wonder Woman* and *The Incredible Hulk* (which lasted into the 1990s as a series of television movies). And in the 1990s Superman had two series, *The Adventures of Superboy* and *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. Superheroes on the big screen have met with mixed results; while both *Superman* (1979) and *Batman* (1989) spun off several sequels, each was less enthusiastically received by fans and critics alike.



'Wonder Woman for President.' Wonder Woman, no. 7, 1943. DC Comics, Inc. Newspaper and Periodicals Reading Room, Library of Congress.



New York, New York. Children's Colony, a school for refugee children. German refugee child, a devotee of Superman. 1942. Marjory Collins, photographer. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.



DC Comics postage stamps. 2006. U.S. Postal Service.

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