Chapter 3
The Definition of the Superhero

Su•per•he•ro (soo'per hîr'o) *n., pl.* -roes. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. —**superheroic**, *adj*. Also **super hero**, **super-hero**.

The Primary Conventions

In his ruling that Wonder Man copied and infringed upon Superman, Judge Learned Hand provided a kind of definition for the superhero. The definitional characteristics of mission, powers, and identity are central to Hand's determination that Wonder Man copied Superman and provide the basis of my definition of the genre presented above.

Mission

Hand refers to both Superman and Wonder Man as "champion[s] of the oppressed" who combat "evil and injustice," thus summing

up the heart of the superhero's mission. The superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda.

The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero. But it is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed...sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need," i.e. to "benefit mankind" (Siegel, *Action Comics* #1 June 1938, 1). This mission is no different from that of the pulp mystery man Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it" (Robeson, *Man of Bronze* 1964, 4). Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of the dime novel or pulp and radio heroes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[9] Without this mission, a superhero would be merely an extraordinarily helpful individual in a crisis (like Hugo Hercules, the eponymous super-strong hero of J. Kroener's 1904-05 comic strip, who might set a train back on the tracks or lift an elephant so that a lady could pick up her handkerchief), someone who gains personally from his powers (like Hugo Danner, the superpowered protagonist of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, who uses his super-strength to earn a living as a circus strongman), or a supervillain (if he pursued his interests at the legal, economic, or moral expense of others, like Dr. Hugo Strange, an early foe of Batman).

Powers

Superpowers are one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre. Hand identifies Superman and Wonder Man as having "miraculous strength and speed" and being "wholly impervious" to harm. He cites instances when they each crush guns in their hands, rip open steel doors, stop bullets, and leap around the buildings of modern cities. He notes that each is designated the "strongest man in the world." These abilities are the heroes' powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—and they are the first area of real difference between Superman and his pulp and science fiction predecessors. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner in *The Gladiator* was fairly bullet-proof and had super-strength and super-speed. In the first issue of *Action Comics*, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner does. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as SF supermen's powers had done.

Identity

The identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename. Hand notes that *Action Comics* and *Wonder Comics* portray characters with heroic identities—Superman and Wonder Man—who conceal "skintight acrobatic costume[s]" beneath "ordinary clothing." Hand here identifies the two elements that make up the identity convention of the superhero: the heroic codename and the costume. The identity convention most clearly marks the superhero as different from his predecessors. Characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro established both the heroic and the secret identities that were to become hallmarks of superheroes. However, the heroic identities of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography. The Scarlet Pimpernel does not resemble the little roadside flower whose name he takes, except perhaps in remaining unnoticed in his Percy Blakeney identity; Zorro does not resemble the fox whose Spanish name he has taken, except perhaps in his ability to escape his pursuers. These minimal connections between heroic codename and character are not foregrounded in the hero's adventures, but those adventures did serve as models for the creators of superheroes in their portrayals of their heroes' foppish alter egos.

The connection of name to inner character or biography came with pulp mystery men like the Shadow and Doc Savage. The Shadow is a shadowy presence behind events, not directly seen by his enemies or even his agents; thus his name expresses his character. Doc Savage's name combines the twin thrusts of childhood tutelage by scientists—the skill and rationality of a doctor and the strength and fighting ability of a wild savage, thus embodying his biography. The heroic identities of Superman and Batman operate in this fashion. Superman is a super man who represents the best humanity can hope to achieve; his codename expresses his inner character. The Batman identity was inspired by Bruce Wayne's encounter with a bat while he was seeking a disguise able to strike terror into the hearts of criminals; his codename embodies his biography.

Costume

The difference between Superman and earlier figures such as the Shadow or Doc Savage lies in the element of identity central to the superhero, the costume. Although Superman was not the first costumed hero, his costume marks a clear and striking departure from those of the pulp heroes. A pulp hero's costume does not emblematize the character's identity. The slouch hat, black cloak, and red scarf of the Shadow or the mask and fangs of the Spider disguise their faces but do not proclaim their identities. Superman's costume does, particularly through his "S" chevron.[10] Similarly, Batman's costume proclaims him a bat man, just as Spider-Man's webbed costume proclaims him a spider man. These costumes are iconic representations of the superhero identity.

The iconicity of the superhero costume follows Scott McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification" (30). In *Understanding Comics* (1993), McCloud argues that pictures vary in their levels of abstraction, from completely realistic photographs to nearly abstract cartoons. Moving from realism to abstraction in pictures is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (30). This stripping-down amplifies meaning by focusing attention on the idea represented by the picture. McCloud explains, "By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (41). The superhero costume removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume. The chevron especially emphasizes the character's codename and is itself a simplified statement of that identity. Pulp hero costumes do not similarly state the character's identity. The Shadow's face—the most common way the character is identified on pulp covers—while somewhat abstract because of the prominence of the hawk nose and burning red eyes, contains too many specific details to reach the level of the chevron's abstraction.

Superman #75, *Shadow* #3, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* #3 © 1993, 1974, 1986 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

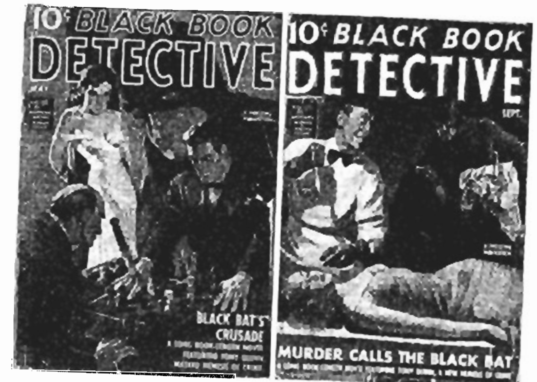
Color plays an important role in the iconicity of the superhero costume. In his chapter on color, McCloud shows the way the bright, primary colors of superhero comics are "less than expressionistic," but therefore more iconic, due to their simplicity. Specifically with reference to costumes, McCloud says, "Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to symbolize the characters in the mind of the reader" (188). To illustrate this point, he shows a boy reading a comic book with two thought balloons, each containing three horizontal blocks. In the first Batman is represented by blocks of blue, yellow, and gray; and the Hulk by blocks of purple and green.

Understanding Comics © 1993 Scott McCloud.

The flatness of the colors in traditional four-color comics also has a

"tendency to emphasize the shape of objects," thereby simplifying the objects (188). This simplification makes the superhero costume more abstract and iconic, a more direct statement of the identity of the character. The heroes of pulps, dime novels, and other forms of heroic fiction are not similarly represented as wearing such abstract, iconic costumes. The costume then, as an element of identity, marked the superhero off from previous hero types and helped to establish the genre.

Some pulp heroes stand as exceptions that test the rule that their costumes do not embody their identities, but they represent detours, and the connection of inner character, biography, and identity expressed in a costume did not become a convention for pulp mystery-men as it did for superheroes. Johnston McCulley's Crimson Clown (1926-31) wears a clown outfit as he robs criminals and wicked wealthy men of their ill-gotten booty; thus his costume does proclaim his identity. But wealthy socialite Delton Prouse, the Crimson Clown, did not grow up in a circus, nor did a clown jump through his window as he sought a disguise in which to practice wealth redistribution. He does not seem to have had a good reason for choosing the clown identity, but McCulley's characters rarely needed such reasons.



Black Book Detective 9:3, 11:1 © 1939, 1940 Better Publications.

Both the Bat and the Black Bat wore bat costumes. The Bat (*Popular Detective* 1934), who may have also been created by Johnston McCulley, was Dawson Clade, a private detective framed for murder who faked his death in the electric chair and took up the Bat identity to gain revenge on the crooks who framed him. He wore a bat costume and wielded the ever-popular sleep-gas gun, as did so many of McCulley's heroes. The Bat's identity came to him when he sought a way to transform himself into a terror to gangland and a bat flew in his room and was silhouetted by a lamp. He saw the bat and adopted it as his totem just as Bruce Wayne would a few years later.

The Black Bat (*Black Book Detective* #1, July 1939), who premiered a month after Batman's first appearance, wears a black body suit and a scallop-edged cape with a bat cowl. Blinded by acid-throwing crooks, district attorney Tony Quinn adopts the Black Bat identity after training himself to peak physical condition and regaining his sight in a secret operation. His identity emerges from his biography—the acid left him blind as a bat, and his bat cowl expresses that identity. His costume is essentially a superhero costume, but crucially it lacks a chevron. The convention of the mystery-man genre was not to connect inner character or biography with the costume. Although the Crimson Clown, the Bat, and the Black Bat demonstrate that the costume could express inner character, biography, or heroic identity before the debut of Superman, they stand as exceptions to the general rule of mystery-man costumes.[11]

In contrast to most pulp-hero costumes, Superman's outfit does proclaim his identity. This difference between superheroes and mystery-men is immediately apparent on the cover of *Action* #1 with Superman in primary colors holding a car over his head and smashing it into an embankment. The "ridiculousness" of the scene on the cover so concerned publisher Harry Donenfeld that he banned Superman from the cover of *Action*, restoring him after five issues because of an increase in sales due directly to Superman's presence in the comic book (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 17). The covers of *Action* #2-5 show scenes of intense action, but none match the striking quality of the first one. The characters featured on these covers all fit into existing adventure genres and none feature so striking and particular an outfit as Superman does. Science fiction and hero pulps frequently featured scenes of outlandish action, and early comics share in this tradition. So the ridiculousness of *Action* #1 that struck Donenfeld had to be located in something different from the fantastic scenes of earlier pulps and comics. Most likely, it was Superman's costume in conjunction with the display of superpowers within the contemporary setting. This setting did not distance the action as a more exotic setting, such as an African jungle or an alien world, would have done. The costume was a crucial, early marker of the

genre.

Action Comics #2, 3, 4, 5 © 1939 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

The importance of the costume convention in establishing the superhero genre can be seen in characters who debuted without costumes or with mystery-man costumes but went on to develop regular superhero costumes. In 1974 Martin Goodman, former publisher of Marvel Comics, and his son Charles started Seaboard Publications and inaugurated a short-lived line of comics under the Atlas banner. Atlas first attempted to break out of a sole focus on superhero comics, beginning its line with a variety of genres: superhero, war, horror, science fiction, barbarian, private detective, adventure, and teen humor. However, Atlas quickly moved toward the more commercially viable superhero genre. The Scorpion, created by Howard Chaykin, exemplifies this shift. The Scorpion's adventures were set just before WWII, and the character himself was a pulpy soldier of fortune with some science fiction elements. The Scorpion debuts without a costume, wearing a leather jacket, flight scarf, riding boots, and armed with pistols. A new creative team was brought on after the second issue, and the Scorpion was made over, appearing in the third and final issue in a blue-and-orange cowled affair sporting a large scorpion chevron.

The Scorpion #1,3 © 1974 Atlas Comics/Seaboard Publications.

Another Atlas title, *Targitt*, began as the formulaic story of a man seeking revenge against the Mob for killing his family. He dresses in ordinary clothing. With the second issue, he becomes "John Targitt, Man-Stalker," attired in a blue union suit with a full-face mask and a red, white, and blue target symbol as his chevron. The full-face mask changes into a cowl for the third and final issue. In its attempt to compete with Marvel, Atlas shifted toward the familiar superhero formula and did so specifically through the costume.[12]

The Sandman and the Crimson Avenger fit the second category—characters who begin with pulp-hero costumes and adopt superhero costumes. Both heroes first appeared between the debut of Superman and that of Batman, before the conventions of the superhero genre had been fully implemented and accepted by the creators.[13] The Crimson Avenger begins with a Shadow/Green Hornet-inspired costume of a slouch hat, a large domino mask, and a red cloak. In *Detective Comics* #44 (October 1940), his costume changes to red tights with yellow trunks and boots, a smaller domino mask, a hood with a ridge running from his forehead backward, and a chevron of an eclipsed sun. He is present at the formation of the Seven Soldiers of Victory in *Leading Comics* #1 (Winter 1942), a superhero team designed to capitalize on the success of the Justice Society of America (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 169). His ward and sidekick Wing acquires an identical costume with a reversed color scheme.

Detective Comics #32,*Leading Comics* #1 © 1939, 1942 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Sandman debuted in a double-breasted green suit, a purple cape, an orange fedora, and a blue-and-yellow gas mask.[14]

Adventure Comics #44, 77 © 1939, 1942 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

When Jack Kirby and Joe Simon took over the character in *Adventure Comics* #69 (December 1941), his outfit was changed into a standard yellow and purple superhero suit. That both these characters debuted before the superhero genre had fully been established, that both were tied more to the style of the pulp mystery men (Benton, *Golden* 1992, 23, 27; Goulart, *Encyclopedia* 1990, 13, 318), and that both moved into standard-issue superhero garb indicates that DC Comics felt that they needed to be in step with their counterparts and that costumes such as these signified superhero status.

Generic Distinction

These three elements—mission, powers, and identity, or MPI—establish the core of the genre. But, as with other genres, specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and heroes from other genres may exist who display all three elements to some degree but should not be regarded as superheroes. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. In his attempt to define the genre of romantic comedy, Brian Henderson quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of games to show that universal similarity is not necessary to define a genre. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote:

> For if you look at [games] you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that [...] we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail [...]. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances" (ellipses in Henderson 1986, 314).

The similarities between specific instances of a genre are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.

For example, the Hulk can be said to be a superhero without a mission. At times he seems absolutely anti-social, and he frequently finds himself in conflict with the U.S. Army, which in the Silver Age was not presented as corrupt or malign but with the welfare of citizens as its motivating force. Stan Lee claims the Frankenstein monster as an inspiration for the Hulk, "He never wanted to hurt anyone; he merely groped his tortuous way though a second life trying to defend himself, trying to come to terms with those who sought to destroy him" (*Origins* 1974, 75). The Hulk was Lee and Kirby's attempt to make a "hero out of a monster" (75). The green-skinned goliath's adventures do not arise from his attempts to fight crime or to improve the world. In early adventures, Bruce Banner moves to stop the Metal Master and the invasion of the Toad Men, but as the Hulk, he offers to join forces with the Metal Master and once in control of the Toad Men's spaceship thinks, "With this flying dreadnought under me I can wipe out all mankind" (Lee, *Hulk* 1978,

42). The Hulk eventually loses his calculating intelligence and wanders the planet primarily seeking solitude while being drawn, or stumbling, into the plans of supervillains. The Hulk fights primarily for self-preservation but inadvertently does good. He acts effectively as a superhero but does not have the mission or motivation to do so. His tales, though, are suffused with the conventions of the superhero genre: supervillains—the Leader, the Abomination; superhero physics—the transformative power of gamma rays; the limited authorities—General Thunderbolt Ross; a pal—Rick Jones; superteams—the Avengers and the Defenders; and so forth. These conventions keep the Hulk within the superhero genre.[15]

Regarding the powers convention, Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers (Kane, *Batman and Me* 1989, 99). His mission of vengeance against criminals is clear, and his identity—represented by his codename and iconic costume—marks him as a superhero. While he has no distinctly "super" powers, his physical strength and mental abilities allow him to fight crime alongside his more powerful brethren. As with the Hulk, Batman operates in a world brimming with the conventions of the superhero genre: supervillains—the Joker, the Penguin; the helpful authority figure—Police Commissioner Gordon; the sidekick—Robin; superteams—the Justice League and the Outsiders; and so forth.

The Fantastic Four illustrate how elements of the identity convention can be absent or weak and yet the characters remain superheroes. In the first issue of *The Fantastic Four*, the powers and mission conventions are clear. After their space ship is exposed to cosmic rays, each manifests a superpower. The ship's pilot, Ben Grimm, declares their mission: "We've gotta use [these powers] to help mankind, right?" (Lee, *Origins* 1974, 32). The heroes then place their hands together and proclaim their superidentities: Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and the Thing. These codenames fit with the powers they have received and are expressions of the characters' personalities.[16]

The secret identity and costume elements of the identity convention are absent from the debut of the Fantastic Four. Stan Lee claims that he wanted to do away with these aspects of superheroes:[17]

> I was utterly determined to have a superhero series without any secret

> identities. I knew for a fact that if I myself possessed a super power I'd never keep it a secret. I'm too much of a show-off. So why should our fictional friends be any different? Accepting this premise, it was also natural to decide to forgo the use of costumes. If our heroes were to live in the real world, then let them dress like real people. (17)

The secret identity is a typical, but not necessary, convention for the genre. It clearly has great importance to the genre as its stable presence in superhero stories shows. Lee and Kirby were trying to be inventive and so chose to disregard aspects of the genre that they felt held them back. But the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* is clearly a superhero comic book, as is evident from the characters' powers and mission, the superhero physics, and the supervillain Mole Man with his plot to "destroy everything that lives above the surface" (42). And it is so without costumes. Significantly, although the Fantastic Four initially wore ordinary clothes, they quickly acquired costumes.

Fantastic Four #3 © 1962 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

The cover of issue #3 announces, "In this great collectors'-item [sic] issue, you will see, for the first time: The amazing Fantasti-Car, the colorful, new Fantastic Four costumes, and other startling surprises!" According to Stan Lee:

> We received a lot of fan mail. The kids said they loved [the Fantastic Four]. We knew we had a winner, and we were on our way now. But, virtually every letter said, "We think it's the greatest comic book, we'll buy it forever. Turn out

> more, but if you don't give them colorful costumes, we won't buy the next issue. (qtd. in Gross 2000)[18]

As the Scorpion and the Crimson Avenger also demonstrate, characters are often given costumes to assert their superhero genre identification.

The codename, the other aspect of the identity convention, is nearly omnipresent among superheroes. One example that comes quickly to mind of a superhero without a codename is Arn "Iron" Monroe, Roy Thomas' substitute for Superman in the *Young All Stars*, which came out in the post-Crisis period when Thomas was not allowed to use Superman in the WWII era. Even Arn gets a superhero moniker of sorts, being referred to as "Iron" and "Ironman," a nod to Marvel's armored hero. The lack of a separate heroic name is a bit more common among sidekicks. Some sidekicks retain their ordinary names, a tradition that probably derives from Tonto and Kato, sidekicks of the Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet respectively. Captain America's partner Bucky, the Crimson Avenger's houseboy Wing, the Human Torch's companion Toro, the Star-Spangled Kid's chauffeur Stripsey, and Magno the Magnetic Man's boy partner Davey all fit this pattern. Ever since the Shadow re-established the single-hero magazine in 1931, mystery-men and superheroes have needed codenames for marketing reasons. Sidekicks can keep the same name for both their super and ordinary roles because they are secondary heroes and rarely achieve their own magazines.

Luke Cage, A Case Study

Other definitions of the superhero overlook the idea of generic distinction, that is the concatenation of other conventions that Henderson calls family resemblance.[19] Generic distinction can be used to divide superheroes from non-superheroes. Basically, if a character fits the MPI conventions, even with some significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre, the character is a superhero. On the reverse side, if a character largely fits the MPI qualifications of the definition, but can be firmly and sensibly placed within another genre, then the character is not a superhero. Typically, the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to rule characters in or out.

Luke Cage serves as an excellent example of the importance of generic distinction in defining a character as a superhero and placing him within the genre.[20] Luke Cage clearly has superpowers. He is invulnerable and super strong. But such a character could operate a detective/security agency within a science fiction or horror/SF milieu and not be considered a superhero.[21] The editors and writers at Marvel Comics took great care to place Luke Cage within the superhero genre by surrounding the character with superhero conventions and foregrounding these conventions. These conventions mark Luke Cage as a superhero and not as a detective or adventure hero who has superpowers. The cover of the first issue proclaims it a "Sensational origin issue!"

Hero For Hire #1 © 1972 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Superheroes have origins, whereas characters in other genres may go through similar transformations but these are not referred to as origins. Lucas is a wrongly convicted prisoner at Seagate Maximum Security Prison, who volunteers for a medical experiment that, in formulaic fashion, goes awry and empowers him. After Lucas uses these powers to escape from prison, he works his way back to New York City and reflexively stops a criminal's getaway after the man robs a diner. The diner's owner proclaims "You dodged that shot an' nailed him like a real super-hero!" (Thomas, "Out of Hell" 1972, 21). This comment gives him an idea for a career, and he goes to a costume shop and rejects both a Captain America and a Captain Marvel outfit as too expensive, settling instead for an open yellow shirt, blue pants, blue and yellow boots, a steel headband and bracers, and a chain belt. This costume does not proclaim his identity as the costumes of Spider-Man or Batman do, but it is intended to be

seen as a costume and the chain embodies his biography by serving as a reminder of his prison days (Goodwin August 1972, 7). After changing into his new outfit, Cage muses, "Yeah! Outfit's kinda hokey...but so what? All part of the super-hero scene. An' this way when I use my powers, it's gonna seem natural" (Thomas, "Out of Hell" 1972, 22). As with the cover and the explanation of his actions, the idea of the costume as a convention of the superhero genre is here foregrounded by being identified as such in the text itself.

Cage's superpowers enabled him to escape from prison where he had been incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. His former best friend, Willis Stryker, framed him for the murder of a woman who was killed by a rival gang in an attempt to assassinate Stryker. To revenge himself upon Stryker, Cage sets himself up as a hero for hire and begins to harass Stryker's underlings, a revenge-fantasy motif common to the overall action-adventure meta-genre. But Stryker is given the accouterments of a supervillain instead of those of an ordinary crime boss, again foregrounding the placement of this story within the superhero genre. Stryker is consistently depicted in a green snake-skin suit with a yellow shirt, and he goes by the name "Diamondback."

Hero For Hire #3 © 1972 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

He has no explicit superpowers, but has trained himself in knife-throwing and possesses specially-designed knives, which can deploy gas, give off damaging sonic waves, or explode. While Cage initially faces blaxploitation criminal types, he soon finds himself running up against opponents with powers, codenames, and costumes, such as Mr. Luck, Lion-Fang, and Stiletto. Costumes are again foregrounded as an element of the genre when two of Cage's prison buddies, "Comanche" and "Shades," escape in order to revenge themselves upon Rackham, a prison guard who has been fired for his brutality. In order not to be recognized while attacking Rackham, the escaped convicts steal costumes.

Hero For Hire #16 © 1973 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Comanche dresses in a masked outfit with a black muscle shirt and a yellow 'C' chevron, buckskin pants, and a candy-striped headband similar to the one he wore in prison; this costume is accented by two large knives, a bow, and a quiver full of arrows. Shades sports a big-collared white muscle-shirt white boots, blue pants, oversized sunglasses, and carries two pistols in large red holsters. Ironically, although they adopt these costumes to disguise their identities, a stool-pigeon named Flea, who has read brief mentions of them in the journal kept by the scientist who transformed Cage, recognizes them easily, "Considering one wore dark goggles and the other had a big yellow 'C' on his chest" (Isabella December 1973, 3). In no other genre would wearing such costumes be presented as reasonable for escaped convicts seeking to hide their identities.

Continuity, another convention of the genre, is brought into play by showing Cage interacting with the rest of the Marvel Universe. Existing Marvel supervillains like the Owl and the Ringmaster's Circus of Crime face off against Cage. Other Marvel superheroes cross over into his adventures, such as Iron Man, Black Goliath, and the X-Men. Beginning with issue #17, Luke Cage takes on the cognomen "Power Man" because of a lack of coverage of his feats by the *Daily Bugle*, which covers the heroics of Spider-Man and Captain America. He wonders, "Why, blast it? What've they got that I don't? Super-powers? Nope—I got me those. A flashy costume? These threads'll do fine. A fancy name? A fancy...name? Yeah—maybe that's it. Maybe 'Hero for Hire' just don't cut it" (Wein, "Rich

Man" February 1974, 1). He comes up with his codename while facing off a villain who declares, after seeing him break into the advanced armored airship he is stealing, "This ship's construction makes what you've done impossible!" Cage responds, "Just chalk it up to black power, man."

Power Man #17 © 1974 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

He realizes that "Power Man" sounds good and settles on it for his new identity. Therefore, his codename arises out of an incident in his life, expresses his powers, and includes a racial subtext that has been present in the series since its inception. In fact, the cover of issue #17 (February 1974) proclaims him "The first and still the greatest black superhero of them all!" even though the Black Panther obviously preceded him at Marvel, which may be why the cover of issue #19 (June 1974) describes him as "America's first and most startling black super-hero!"[22] As with these other aspects, Marvel foregrounded the conventions of the genre so as to declare *Hero for Hire* a superhero comic book, distinct from other genres.

Ruling In and Ruling Out

While generic distinction can be used to define some characters as superheroes, it can just as easily be used to establish that some characters are not. If a character to some degree fits the mission-powers-identity qualifications of the definition but can be firmly and sensibly placed within another genre, then the character is not a superhero. Typically the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to rule characters in or out of the genre. While ruling characters in or out of the superhero genre is a bit of a parlor game, it has value in highlighting the superhero genre as a distinct genre of its own and not an offshoot of science fiction or fantasy.

A leading candidate for this sort of exclusion by genre distinction is Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Superficially, Buffy could be seen as qualifying as a superhero. She has a mission: to fight and slay vampires and other demons who threaten humanity. She has superpowers; her training raises her to the level of Batman in fighting ability and her strength is greater than the chemically enhanced strength of Riley Finn, an agent of the U.S. military's demon-hunting Initiative, or the supernaturally enhanced strength of Angel, a vampire. Buffy has an identity as the Slayer. But this identity is not a superhero identity like Superman or Batman. This identity is not separate from her ordinary Buffy identity the way Superman is from Clark Kent, whose mild-mannered personality differs greatly from Superman's heroic character. The Slayer is not a public identity in the ordinary superhero sense; even the well-financed and government-sponsored Initiative views the Slayer as a myth, a boogeyman for demons. Buffy does not wear a costume; and while such a costume is not necessary, it is typical.

Finally, and more importantly for the purpose of demonstrating that generic distinction is a crucial element of the superhero, the Slayer is a hero-type that predates the superhero, fitting firmly within the larger horror genre and specifically within the vampire sub-genre. Literarily, the vampire hunter descends from Dr. Van Helsing in *Dracula*. Historically, the hero-type descends from actual vampire hunters, including the *dhampir*, the supposed male progeny of a vampire who is particularly able to detect and destroy vampires.[23] Thus, though the writers of *Buffy* draw on superhero conventions, the stories are generically distinct from the superhero genre.

Genre distinction can also be seen as playing a role in self-definition. The producers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* do not seem to regard it as a superhero show. They clearly draw on elements of the superhero genre and make references to it. They also make references to *Scooby Doo* and the show fits within the Scooby Doo formula.[24] Perhaps more telling is that Buffy has an origin much in line with the superhero origin, but it is not identified as such as is usually the case in superhero comics. This lack of self-identification with the genre helps to establish that Buffy is not a superhero.[25]

But Buffy is a super hero, as are heroic characters from other genres that have extraordinary abilities such as The Shadow, the Phantom, Beowulf, or Luke Skywalker. They are superior to ordinary human beings and ordinary protagonists of more realistic fiction in significant ways. When they are called super heroes, super is used as an adjective that modifies hero; but they are not superheroes, that is they are not the protagonists of superhero-genre narratives.

An excellent way to understand this distinction is through Northrop Frye's theory of modes. Frye sets up a system of classification of fiction "by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (1957, 33). According to his scheme, in myth the hero is "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment" and is a divine being. In romance, the hero is "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment" but is identified as a human being, and "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (33). The other categories are high mimetic—the hero, a leader, is "superior in degree to other men but not his natural environment"; the low mimetic—the hero is "one of us" and "superior to neither men nor to his environment"; and the ironic mode—the hero is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves" (33, 34). Thought of in this way, heroes who are super—all those characters who are referred to as super heroes but do not fit the generic definition of the superhero presented herein—are romance heroes. Referring to these characters as romance heroes, though, given the contemporary use of *romance*—stories of couples whose love relationship develops to overcome all obstacles—would be confusing; instead it makes sense to refer to them as super heroes.

A useful analogy is that *hero* is to *super hero* as *model* is to *super model*.[26] A super hero is a hero who is super or superior to other kinds of heroes (typically by virtue of physical abilities), just as a super model is superior to other types of models (typically by virtue of superior attractiveness and charisma). The distinction between super hero and superhero is analogous to the distinction between every day (i.e. every single day) and everyday (i.e. ordinary). One might wear everyday clothing every day, so the two terms are related but they have distinct meanings.

This distinction gets muddied by characters from other genres who operate in a superhero universe, such as spy chief Nick Fury who occasionally teams up with established and clearly defined superheroes like Captain America, Spider-Man, or the Thing to battle some menace.

Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD #4 © 1968 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

His mission is obvious from the name of the counter-intelligence spy agency he heads, S.H.I.E.L.D.: Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division. He has no superpowers, although another character with access to his stock of weaponry and equipment could operate as a superhero. He has no secret identity and no separate heroic identity, nor any costume that announces such an identity. Although he occasionally opposes the schemes of Marvel Universe supervillains, his enemies typically take the form of traditional spy villains, primarily similarly-equipped organizations like Hydra or Advanced Idea Mechanics, who wear outfits more in line with those of Klan-influenced pulp villains than with inverted-superhero supervillain costumes.[27] Nick Fury fits neatly within the spy/secret agent genre, which has deep roots going back to the early twentieth century in characters like Operator #5 and the Diplomatic Free Lances.

A third example is DC Comics' spaceman Adam Strange, who might seem to fit into the superhero genre as a sometimes ally, but not a member, of the Justice League of America. In this allegiance, he is somewhat akin to "pal" characters, like Jimmy Olsen or Snapper Carr, who accompany superheroes and even help them to fight villains but are not superheroes themselves. Adam Strange's mission is to protect his adopted world, Rann, from alien invaders and other threats.

Mystery In Space #90 © 1967 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

His jetpack and ray guns give him quite an offensive capacity. But he has no identity other than the one with which he was born. His red and white space suit does not announce his identity and it does not stand out from the futuristic clothing worn by everyone on Rann. More importantly, Adam Strange clearly falls within the science-fiction genre and was created in the mold of John Carter, Buck Rogers, and Flash Gordon. Like these three heroes, Strange finds himself transported to a strange and distant world where he fights unearthly monsters, madmen, and despots, and finds love with a beautiful maiden.

John Constantine, Hellblazer, is a straightforward trench-coat-wearing horror investigator, like DC's earlier hero Doctor Occult, characters out of H.P. Lovecraft's tales, or a non-governmental X-Files operative, and he exists within the DC Universe and therefore occasionally interacts with its superheroes.

Trenchcoat Brigade #1 © 1999 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

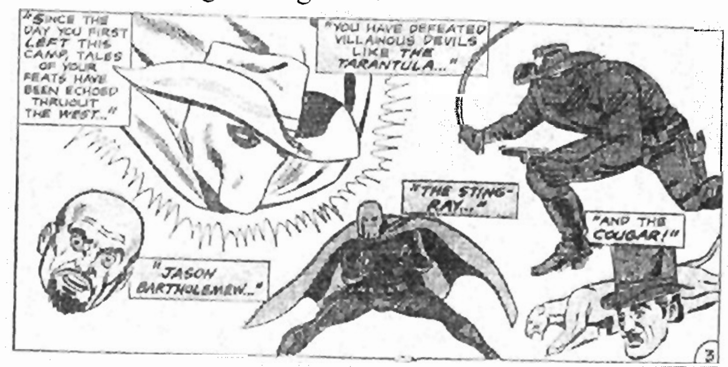
Like Nick Fury and Adam Strange, John Constantine's placement in a superhero universe might mistakenly be seen as marking him as a superhero. But to do so would be to overvalue the continuity convention and to undervalue the mission, powers, and identity conventions and also to ignore the importance of genre distinction.

Overlooked here is the existence of a liminal genre status, which includes characters that cross genres or fall at the borderline of the superhero genre and another one. It could be argued that Buffy, Adam Strange, and John Constantine should be considered cross-genre or genre-borderline superheroes because of the way Buffy's adventures contain significant elements of the superhero genre or the way Strange and Constantine operate in the DC Universe. But their strong ties with other genres, it can be argued, should exclude them from this cross-genre or borderline-genre status. As I have argued, the identity convention often works to signify whether a story with some superhero elements falls within the superhero genre or within another genre, and these heroes lack the identity convention. Strong identity markers are the clearest way to place a story within the superhero genre, although such markers need to be backed up by the presence of other equally clear conventions.

The most successful cross-genre superhero comic book series is the Legion of Super-Heroes. This feature blends the superhero and the science-fiction genres. It is set in the thirtieth century and features futuristic technology, space travel, alien races, other worlds, and a variety of other SF elements, the strength of which allow it to be considered SF. But it is clearly a superhero comic book as the title indicates. The characters all have superpowers, wear costumes, have codenames, and the group's founders sought to emulate the legendary twentieth-century heroes Superboy and Supergirl.

Ghost Rider #4

The Phantom Rider (originally the Ghost Rider, a 1967 revival of Marvel Enterprise's Ghost Rider of the 1950s) straddles the borderline between the superhero and Western genres. He has no powers, but like the Lone Ranger fights frontier crime and, unlike the Lone Ranger, wears a fairly unequivocal superhero costume. Without the costume—an all-white luminescent outfit with a full-face mask—he would clearly be considered a typical Western hero like the Ringo Kid or Kid Colt. But his villains occasionally have supervillain codenames and costumes,[28] and therefore serve as inverted-superhero supervillains, one of most significant markers of the superhero genre. Additionally, the Phantom Rider's adventures have been retroactively included in the Marvel Universe, i.e. a publisher-certified genre signifier.



Ghost Rider #4

Ka-Zar is a bit more problematic than Adam Strange or Nick Fury. Although he clearly is a jungle hero, he interacts with superheroes and villains in a manner similar to Strange or Fury, but more directly. He is essentially a non-superhero adventure-hero who crosses genres. He was created as a pulp knock-off of Tarzan in 1936, but because Marvel had retained the rights to the character from their earlier incarnation as Timely, Ka-Zar could be introduced into the Marvel Universe (*X-Men* #10, March 1965). Like the Sub-Mariner and Atlantis, Ka-Zar fights to keep the Savage Land free of incursions from the outside world, and he fights to oppose the schemes of inverted-superhero supervillains like Magneto. His physical abilities allow him to interact as an equal with characters like the X-Men, Spider-Man, and Daredevil. Ka-Zar crosses genres, but also operates at the borderline of both the jungle and superhero genres.

X-Men #10

The Punisher began as a vigilante, killing criminals, but gradually was transformed into a superhero as he became popular with readers. He fits directly into "aggressor" formula (Kettredge 1978, xxix).[29] Unlike many of his brethren, he does not work for any government agency. This independent operating pushes him toward the superhero camp. He has no superpowers, but his level of weaponry and physical skills let him operate among superheroes like Spider-Man. Like Batman, his family was killed by criminals, which similarly supplies him with a mission.

Amazing Spider-Man #129

He has both the costume and codename aspects of the identity convention. Within the Marvel Universe, he is fairly clearly a superhero, but his allegiance with the aggressor hero-type pushes him out of the center of the superhero formula. As he became popular in the 1980s and was featured in multiple series, the Punisher switched back and forth between the aggressor formula and the superhero genres depending on whether he appeared in his own comics or made guest appearances in superhero stories, that is his definition as

a superhero varied depending upon the concatenation of conventions in any particular story.

This ability to switch back and forth marks the current incarnation of Shang-Chi. As originally developed in *Master of Kung-Fu*, Shang-Chi was a martial arts hero operating in an older pulp-style universe as the son and enemy of Dr. Fu Manchu. But when he was revived for the Marvel Knights superhero team, he became a superhero, though a formula shift could throw him back into his original adventure genre. Shang-Chi can be thought of metaphorically as a planet orbiting a genre sun. In *Master of Kung-Fu* he was a pulp-hero, but the gravity of the Marvel Knights series pulled him toward the sun of the superhero genre.

Master of Kung Fu #51, *Marvel Knights* #1

A solar system can serve as a useful metaphor in thinking about genre-switching characters like the Punisher and Shang-Chi. At the center of the genre system, the formula burns hottest and the gravity is strongest, keeping conventions and formulas rigid. At a comfortable distance—like Earth and Mars—the light and heat of the sun provide an environment conducive to life and evolution. As one moves out to the gas giants, the genre shifts and the formula carries less influence (just as Jupiter sheds more light on its moons than the sun does), but the stories are still recognized as being within the genre. Some planetoids, such as Shang-Chi, are in empty space between solar systems or are part of another system, but get pulled by the gravity of writers and publishers into the superhero genre solar system and out of their own genre systems.[30]

Man-Thing and Swamp Thing offer their own definitional challenges. Because of his mindlessness, Man-Thing is pretty clearly a monster character, unwittingly doing good. He interacts with superheroes, but cannot be said to be operating with much volition, thereby negating the mission convention. He does have superpowers, but no separate identity—his human self having been destroyed in the creation of the Man-Thing form, and his change from Ted Sallis to the Man-Thing fits more with the horror genre than with the transcendent transformation of a superhero origin. Primarily his lack of volition, which is similar to the Hulk's lack of mission, place him outside the superhero genre, but his presence in the Marvel Universe could arguably place him at the borderline.

Man-Thing #1 © 1974 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.
Swamp Thing #7 © 1974 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Swamp Thing has powers and identity elements similar to those of Man-Thing, although his powers expanded when Alan Moore shifted the character away from being a human being whose body had taken on properties of the swamp to a plant that had taken on a dead human being's personality. His self-consciousness is unambiguous, so he has the potential for a mission. Depending on the interests of the writer, Swamp Thing falls more or less within the SF/horror genre or the superhero genre. Initially he pretty clearly fell into Cawelti's altered states meta-genre, which includes horror (*Adventure* 1976, 47-49), albeit with some generous helpings of the adventure meta-genre, such as the revenge fantasy and the supervillain. Over time, Swamp Thing became more embroiled within the DC Universe and faced costumed opponents and interacted with DC's superheroes. Alan Moore took a more primal horror approach, retaining superhero elements because of his fascination with the artistic and storytelling possibilities of the DC Universe.[31]

Another way to clarify the issue of cross-genre or genre borderline category is to look at characters clearly identified with other genres

or who are otherwise excluded from being superheroes, but who operate in a superhero universe. Detective Harvey Bullock, Gotham PD, is a police officer. He is a normal human being and falls into the "loose cannon" cop stereotype. If he accompanies Batman on a raid or even tracks down a supervillain like the Penguin on his own, does he suddenly become a superhero?

Batman Adventures #1 © 1992 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

When Ben Urich, reporter for the *Daily Bugle*, shares information with Daredevil that helps the hero bring down the Kingpin, does that interaction transform him into a superhero? Does the ear-wiggling ability of Willie Lumpkin, the postal carrier whose route includes the Baxter Building, count as a superpower because he is a friend of the Fantastic Four and occasionally sees supervillains while delivering mail?

Fantastic Four #11 © 1963 Marvel Comics. All rights reserved.

Are these interactions as transformative as radioactive spider bites? All these questions can be answered easily with a firm "No." The same is true for characters from the other genres that fit into the larger adventure meta-genre established by John Cawelti (*Adventure* 1976, 39)[32] and are sometimes found in superhero comics, such as spies, cowboys, knights, and ninja.[33] Generic distinction marks these characters as non-superheroes even though they may have the missions and powers requisite to be superheroes, and might even possess elements of the identity convention.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued for a definition of the superhero comprising mission, powers, identity, and generic distinction. Clearly the superhero has been studied previously without this definition in place, so the question arises, why do we need it? The answer to this question is that we already have it and it is already in use. My definition brings forth the unstated assumptions that generally guide the study of the superhero and the production of superhero comics. As the ruling of Judge Learned Hand shows, recognition of the mission-powers-identity triumvirate as the necessary elements of a definition of the superhero existed very early in the superhero's history. Generic distinction merely accounts for the "family resemblances" of the other conventions that mark the superhero genre off from the rest of the adventure meta-genre. As Abner Sundell's use of *superhero* demonstrates—and as the examination of other definitions in Chapter Four will show—the definition argued for in this article lies behind most other discussions of the superhero and the examples used in those discussions fit the definition proposed here.

Another proof for the definition offered here is the way that the ages of superhero comics neatly parallel the stages of genre evolution set out by Thomas Schatz—discussed in depth in Chapter Eight. In *Hollywood Genres*, Schatz puts forward a four-stage evolutionary cycle for any genre:

> A form passes through an experimental stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a classic stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of refinement, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a baroque (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work (Schatz 1981, 37-38).

These stages match the progression of ages: Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. This progression of stages and ages does not encompass the mystery-men pulps—which followed their own genre progression—science fiction, legends, epics, or any of the other source genres whose characters are proposed as superheroes but who fall outside the genre definition presented in this chapter. The neat fit between Schatz's theory of genre evolution and the ages of superhero comics bolsters the claim that superheroes debuted in 1938 with Superman at the start of the Golden Age and evolved in superhero comics, therefore reinforcing the mission-powers-identity-generic distinction definition.

This lengthy and detailed discussion is also necessary because of the nature of genre study. Genre tales are some of the most important of cultural products because of the way they embody and promulgate cultural mythology (Cawelti, *Adventure* 1976, 35-36). All genres have boundaries. Some are narrow, like the superhero, and others are broader, like science fiction or horror. A well-defined genre can be studied for the way the culture industry interacts with popular taste. It can be seen as a way of examining the resolution of cultural conflicts and tensions that audiences regard as legitimate. A poorly defined genre that includes characters from other genres as superheroes or fails to distinguish between the genre definition and the metaphoric use of *superhero* renders the term becomes meaningless as tool for genre criticism and analysis.[34]

A parallel can be made with the Western. If the definition of the Western is limited to Cawelti's man-in-the-middle convention (*Six-Guns* 1984, 74), then *Casablanca* and *Slingblade* are Westerns as they both feature men standing between savagery and civilization who protect and advance the values of civilization through savage violence. If the definition is limited to the Western setting, then both *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Frasier* are Westerns; additionally both feature characters from the East moving westward on voyages of personal discovery and renewal, a common convention of Westerns. If these examples were counted as Westerns, the whole project of Western scholarship would collapse because the broad range of examples would defy analysis of common elements.

A sloppy definition of the superhero makes it more difficult to examine the way the superhero genre embodies cultural mythology and narratively animates and resolves cultural conflicts and tensions. A tight definition enables scholars to focus specifically on the genre itself, separate it from related genres, and compare it with other genres. This chapter—and the whole book—should provide a basis for the study of superheroes and help to make more studies possible in the future.

With the definition of the superhero genre established, the question arises, what about the supervillain? What is the definition of the supervillain? Are they unique to the superhero genre? What drives and motivates them?

Chapter 4
The Supervillain

The supervillain is one of the significant markers of the superhero genre, but as with the secret identity, it is not unique to the genre. When it is used as a defining element of the superhero, it artificially expands the genre to include character types who fight supervillains but are super heroes (heroes who are super) instead of superheroes (protagonists of the superhero genre). The discussion that follows explores the broad spectrum of genres that employ the supervillain trope, particularly in the discussion of supervillains from the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming. Fleming might be called the poet laureate of supervillainy because many of his novels feature the villains discoursing on their criminal careers, so his works are very useful in developing theories about and explanations of supervillains.

The Five Types

Supervillains come in five types: the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted-superhero supervillain. These types are non-exclusive, that is, a supervillain like Spider-Man's foe the Lizard is both a monster and a mad scientist. Dr. Doom, ruler of Latveria and scientific genius, is an enemy commander and a mad scientist. But most supervillains fit pretty firmly into one of these categories. All these types—except the inverted-superhero supervillain—predate the superhero. Just as a hero represents the virtues and values of a society or culture, a villain represents an inversion of those values. But more than that a supervillain has the ability to enact that inversion, to bring the normal activities of a society to a halt and force a hero to arise to defend those virtues.

The Monster

The oldest type of supervillain is the monster. The monster is monstrous because it figures as the inverse of humanity and typically appears in some sort of beast form—thus a werewolf or giant reptile

SUPERHERO

THE SECRET ORIGIN OF A GENRE

by PETER COOGAN

INTRODUCTION BY DENNY O'NEIL

2006