

Re-sketching the American Dream in the Super-Hero Comics

By

Neville Thomas

Research Scholar

Faculty of English and Foreign Languages

Gandhigram Rural Institute - Deemed University

Dindigul

Abstract

It is high time that comics are considered to be serious medium for propagation of messages. The juxtaposition of images and words create wonders and frenzy among the readers that they tend to admire the characters. The depictions are far from being just a representation and instead an identity is created. Comic books basically open us to a whole new world or an array of philosophy. Graphic novels may not be part of the formal corpus of literature but indeed demand and indulge in serious discourses. We see that such comics are culturally placed in 'popular' and later became the propaganda at some point of time. Most of the comics depict America geographically, linguistically, psychologically and culturally. This paper is all about how American Dream and a subsequent American super hero finds manifestation in the popular medium such as cartoons.

Keywords: American Dream, American Hero, Comics

“The medium is the message”

- Marshall McLuhan

As the statement conveys, McLuhan proposes that a medium itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He is of the view that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. It widely means that people tend to focus more on the obvious, which is the content, to provide us valuable information, but in the process we largely miss the structural changes in our affairs that are introduced subtly, or over long periods of time. As society's values, norms and ways of doing things change because of the technology, it is then we realize the social implications of the medium. These range from

cultural or religious issues and historical precedents, through interplay with existing conditions.

This is where we are going to speak about a different medium through which messages are carried over. Graphic novels may not be part of the formal corpus of literature but indeed demand and indulge in serious discourses which include a sense of nationalism too. It is a hyphenated term for comic books and specifically it takes up themes which are serious than the prior. Comic books have grown up from the status of a ridicule, laughter and sarcasm and indeed it is a late realization. There are unique opportunities for seeing the 'social', by which we mean that comic books figure a central character in proximate relations with the depictions of the community.

Before dwelling deep into something romantic, abstruse or grandiose, a look into the superhero movies would be appropriate. When we refer about such a genre of movies, we find that many of these movies take graphic novels as their templates. Sometimes we are disappointed to find certain scenes in the films are more poignant and taken directly from the comic books. Now the question may arise that why so many films are based on comics. The answer is simple that (a) comics provide incredible opportunities for identification and (b) Problems in telling a story pictorially has been solved in a movie. Scott McCloud speaks of "iconic abstraction" through which the process of identification happens. This is how comics make meanings. He continues to say that listed depiction (dialogues in bubble) actually detract from our ability to take meanings from comics. Instead the cartoons wouldnot be convincing an 'avatar,' if he drew caricatures more realistically, so that we tend to give it authority to bring in a change.

The above well placed reason gives us a cue to the transformation of most of the comics to films, that is, realistic depiction. More near to the real, the better psychological penetration into the minds of the spectator. Still we are aware about the fact that while watching a film, the spectator tends to be passive, meanwhile reading the comic we tend to actively create characters in our mind and indulge into the realm of making the two dimensional move. Now coming back to the superhero comics or movie, we see that it is culturally placed in 'popular' and later became the propaganda at some point of time. The two most famous comics publishing houses in America are Marvel Comics and DC Comics whose internal rivalry has created the best of the heroes, the world was looking up to, each magnifying the unnatural power they possess.

This plethora of heroes invite our attention to their ‘nationality’, if ever there is something like that which can be attributed to a superhero. But most of the comics depict America geographically, linguistically, psychologically and culturally. The Superman which started its publication back in 1938 stood for truth, justice, and American Vein which is a clear example. This Pan-American hero somehow finds a dent, which is filled by himself in the much emphasized, American Dream. The American dream is a dream of the everyman of a land of opportunity, the opportunity to climb one’s way to middle-class comfort. The term ‘American dream’ was coined by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931). Adams, writing of Americanism as embodied in the founders, stated that

“it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404).

This definition implies that attainment of material goods (motor cars and high wages) forms at least part of the dream. It further implies that historically men and women had been limited in opportunity based on their social class. Finally, it implies that each person should succeed or fail based on his inborn abilities or lack thereof. The significance of this definition is that an individual has the power over his own material destiny in spite of prior social position or the workings of the economic and cultural structures.

Academicians are of the view that this definition does not remain static but slight changes incur in the concept as time passes, keeping in line the base argument of material prosperity. America in a short span has achieved its material destiny and now they only seek to maintain that position or a ‘social order’ as Adams refers. This material prosperity always makes them want a hero to save the world from the apocalypse which we know will happen with leading such a messy and impudent life. Such affluence generates a hero who can save the whole nation. This in turn sees its manifestations in the popular cultural medium such as cartoons. This generation needs a hero to whom they can look up to, which is implanted in children and adults simultaneously while reading comics or watching movies based on them. Hence the undaunted messiah, an American hero is born.

The statement remarked by Santiago, “Man can be destroyed but not defeated” from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* encapsulates the idea of an American Hero.

Though novels of this sort need to stick to the realistic conventions and only create real human heroes, whereas cartoons/comics can explore the possibility of creating real time heroes with unique and inimitable powers. For the present analysis we narrow down to the second category of superhero characters found in the comics/movies. The first category speaks of heroes which come from different planet/universe heralding the impending danger upon the earth and how with their unnatural power and prowess save the world (ironically it is America). But the second categories of heroes are something which we can relate to and a gist of American Dream present in it. They are more realistic and happen to be heroes by chance and a sudden sense of responsibility dawns in them. Some even choose their destiny, like that of 'Iron man', where advanced technology comes to aid him.

The technological advancements are part and parcel of the American Dream (material prosperity). We look up to America in particular to see the rolling out of newer horizons of technology which never ever crept into our wildest dreams. This prowess coupled with the want for a super soldier (which is one of their defence project, which has already seen its realization but due to the exorbitant cost of manufacturing, it is not implemented into their army) or a saviour has resulted in comic characters such as Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America and the list goes on. The technology driven America's culture has representation in such comics. The cartoons or comics are a means to instil that superhero consciousness into children at the very young age and of saving the nation in any possible means. This in turn reflects the national consciousness embedded into them through this very exciting and all indulging two-dimensional cartoon scape.

Science and its enjoining discourses have developed a rational mind in America. That doesnot mean the possibility of religion and God is completely ruled out. But at least for some, they would like to transpose the concept of God with a realistic demi-god, someone human. This opens the possibility of technologically well-equipped super heroes or heroes from other planets. These demi-gods are the modern day myths. These comic characters too face a tragedy and the story is all about how they succeed over that. The hurdle referred here is also a national or a universal problem where the security is at stake and the hero comes into action. This is the part where we dispense off our disbelief of reading 'just' a comic and the reader tries to engage in that fantasy. Here we see T.S Eliot's "willing suspension of disbelief" in action. Psychological analysis of these heroes, leads us to the finding that there is always a hero in us, which is passive and never encounters such jingoistic ordeals as in the

www.ijellh.com

case of super heroes. And that might be the sole reason that makes us awestruck and admire these heroes and their heroic deeds. Some heroic actions/impulse turn out to be the same, provided we were given the vest of a superhero.

The want of 'messiah' is dominant in the modern day American dream. This trait is inherent in our vein from the very beginning/origin of the earth (According to the Genesis, the first book of the Holy Bible, we see how Eve was entrapped by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit). The forbidden fruit was offered under the guise of being as perfect as God. These comic characters too run towards being the 'God' saving the mankind from all the terrible misfortunes, indeed accepting the unfortunate fact that they cannot bless these people. A deeper analysis brings forth yet another specificity that some of these characters are manifestations of the age old myths and we learn that Greek myths can be transformed and powers amalgamated to form a wonder character. For instance the character, Wonder Woman is being referred to as the indigenous version Zeus (the most powerful and the thunder God) and the half-sister of Artemis (huntress), Athena (Goddess of Beauty) and Hermes (the messenger). Hence we can conclude that modern day myths borrow a lot from the ancient religion.

The prominence of mask is yet another characteristic in a graphic novel or a comic series. It becomes a recurring image and the semiotics behind using a mask is very evident. The identity of the comic character is masked here because the cartoonist wants his/her readers to reiterate the fact that the real human behind the hero is not important. It is all about the super hero and his deeds and the magnitude with which we can relate unto him/her. Semiotically this also means that the signifier is present and the signified is not fixed. This deconstructive identity of a superhero has a politics within which alludes to the significant fact that it can be anyone; me or you. American hero of the American Dream takes up this general identity.

Comics consist of two simple systems which juxtapose each other, that is, uniqueness and inimitability. In the world of comics, we need to see ourselves since the whole truth is always a complex interrelation of words and images. To see the individuality despite seriality and indistinguishability is one aspect of comic. We are not supposed to see the depiction as just a representation but the individuality is confirmed. It is at this point that infinite number of realities and possibilities can be created. Comic books basically open us to a whole new world or an array of philosophy.

Volume IV
Issue IX
September

IJELLH

International Journal of English
Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Works Cited:

- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America* (1931). New York: Simon, 2001. Pdf
- Dermo, Cindy. "The American Dream: A Theoretical Approach to Understanding Consumer Capitalism." *Sociological Imagination* 3.1 (2014): n. pag. Web. 2 Sept. 2016.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks. 1993. Print
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge. 1964. Print