

Eugenics in Superhero Literature

Successful comic book superheroes from the Golden Age of the industry generally used their superior sense of morality to diffuse the evil intentions of criminals from different backgrounds. These criminals, with changing identities from issue to issue, demonstrate a pattern of similar social background in the stories of superhero conflicts during this era. As the reader develops disgust toward the character traits of such criminals, the association of cultural identity with these traits may distort their perception of existing social entities reflected in the literature. In perpetuating a particular social class in the criminal identities of an entire volume of superhero comics, publishers of these issues show evidence of deliberately nudging readers to perceive contemporary socio-cultural personas under a biased lens.

Through examination of social backgrounds of criminals in the original volumes of Superman and Batman, the writers of these comics portray such characters within the historical context of their generations. Specifically, the role of the Eugenics movement from the early 20th century served as a major influence and source of scrutiny against certain demographics in the characterization of the superhero genre as it began gaining traction in the comics industry.

The Eugenics movement originated as an application of Darwin's theory of natural selection within a social framework. Although it began as a concept far before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, it was not until the existence of evolution in nature was majorly accepted that Eugenics had become a part of public policy in multiple states of the U.S. (Searle 1976). In a simple explanation, Eugenics sought to improve the genetic make-up of the human race through suppression of certain social demographics seen as inferior to others (Cowan 1977). It was thought that suppression of these groups would slowly eradicate their genotypes from the

population altogether (Barnett 2004). Naturally, however, the association of Eugenics with the emergent fear of Nazism after World War II caused its presence in the history of American politics to fade from sight (Searle 1976). Aside from its harsh impact in the form of executions and sterilizations of thousands of American citizens in the early 20th century, this movement greatly impacted the works of many popular literary figures at the time.

Science fiction is an example of a literary genre that was affected by the presence of Eugenics in American politics from the 1920's and 30's. As a genre that represented the impression of science on popular culture, it is no surprise that the subject of Eugenics made its way into the publication of magazines and books that featured some degree of science fiction. The major fallacy in the argument of Eugenics is the idea that any species can be genetically enhanced or improved in the evolution of its lineage (Herrick 1946). Evolution, in fact, can only gradually alter the frequency of alleles in a population, and cannot project any group of organisms toward some divine perfection.

Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* exemplifies a work of science fiction from the 20th century - while Eugenics was being enacted as a social reform - that was influential in its reception by literary culture. Wylie depicts the protagonist of this story as a chemically enhanced human being who loses interest in the human race as he realizes his own superiority, suggesting that the possibility of genetic enhancement will destroy all of human life. His sympathies, however, are favored toward socially superior people: "Wylie believed that only those men who had special physical and mental attributes were legitimately entitled to run their own affairs" (Worcester 1994). The implication of an artificially engineering human being reinforces the concept of defective human traits that exist in the population. This ideology is what leads people into

targeting particular ethnic backgrounds that are characterized by genetic “defects”, suggesting that the extinction of certain races could exclude such genes from future generations.

The influence of Eugenics on the literary community sparked a trend in the published material generated from works of science fiction. The comic book industry saw its first overtly successful superhero comic published in June 1938 with the birth of Superman. This series depicted the adventures of a human-like alien with physical speed, strength, and fortitude greater than anyone on the planet. The creation of Superman by Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster was attributed to Wylie’s *Gladiator*, thus continuing the ideological components of Eugenics through literature (Worcester 1994). Superman’s battles throughout the first volume between 1938 and 1939 function as a means of reform among social classes. He attacks Capitalist villains who scheme to rob the rest of the country from economic stability. In some form or another, each series contains a plot in which a wealthy business owner or politician is taking advantage of the working class.

There is no reference in these comics to the targeting of any demographic group that would support the Eugenicist mentality of lesser human beings. Although the identities of criminals do not reflect the targeted demographic facets of Eugenics literature, Superman represents the ideal result of Eugenics as it was advertised before World War II. This facet of Eugenics in comic book literature emphasizes the fallacy of perfected evolution. Shuster and Siegel extract the protagonist of Wylie’s *Gladiator* and ignore the realistic consequences of a superior being’s implications. Without necessarily attempting to propagate the trope of the Eugenics movement, their advocacy of a greater physical existence subconsciously achieves this message.

The depiction of the targeted demographic population, such as the poor, mentally unstable, sexually delinquent, and ethnically dissimilar, is seen frequently in identities of criminals in the Batman comics that met the industry in 1939. In a comparison with the Superman Chronicles published in the same era, the criminal identities of Batman reveal the other side of Eugenics mentality of degenerate social scum who are responsible for the struggles of society altogether. Although there is a sharp contrast in the alternate identities of Batman and Superman, their functions in the perspective of Eugenics advocates are complimentary. While Superman represents the ideal goal of the Eugenics movement, Batman highlights the ugliness of underworld criminals who should be targeted by the government in an attempt to eradicate their hereditary junk from the population. William Uricchio notes in his essay that Batman often battles against small-time criminals who have no real impact on the greater scale of social welfare. “But this recursive fixation comes with a refusal to address or even suggest that the city itself is a generator of social inequities such as poverty, poor living conditions, inadequate education, corruption, and the absence of opportunity” (Uricchio 1991). This “refusal” is an artifact the Eugenics movement, showing that the pressure of the Great Depression on American society urged a need to blame a group of people for economic instability.

The emergence of Nazism as World War II was publicized quickly invalidated all arguments of Eugenics advocates across the nation. Without consideration of Nazi ideology as evil and inhumane, the existence of Eugenics in policies of the American legal system would have continued to be enacted. This movement was partially responsible for the characterization of major early comic superheroes, and has undoubtedly been indirectly or directly incorporated into following superhero literature that exists to this day.

Works Cited

- Barnett, Richard. "Eugenics". *The Lancet*. 363.9422 (2004): 1742.
- Cowan, Ruth. "The Eugenics Movement". *Science*. 198:4316 (1977). 498-499.
- Chambliss, Julian. "Superhero comics: Artifacts of the U.S. Experience". *Juanita Voices*. 12 (2012): 149-155.
- Cruz, Richard. *Truth, Justice, and the American Myth: The Manifestation of American Mythology in the Superhero Narrative*. ProQuest: UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Costello, M. and K. Worcester. "The Politics of the Superhero: Introduction". *PS, Political Science and Politics*. 47.1 (2014): 85.
- Gavaler, Chris. "The Well-Born Superhero". *Journal of American Culture*. 37.2 (2014): 182-196.
- Herrick, Judson. "Progressive Evolution". *Science*. 104.2707 (1946): 469.
- Uricchio, William. "The Batman's Gotham City: Story, Ideology, Performance". *Comics and the City*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010.
- Worcester, Kent. "Superman, Philip Wylie, and the New Deal". *Comics Forum* 1.6 (1994): 26-31.