

Early comic book creators generally drew upon two broad streams of inspiration in the 1930s: Western mythology and the relatively new genre of science fiction. This paper will examine how and why myth both legitimized a literary/artistic innovation (the superhero) and ensured its survival as a component of American popular culture.

Generally, superheroes emerged from an era in which pre-Atomic Age science was viewed optimistically; utopian images of science's benefits to coming ages were a common ingredient in most popular culture of the 1930s and early 1940s. Comic book superheroes, an illustrated amalgam of pulp heroes, serial heroes, boy's-novel heroes, and traditional swashbucklers, tended to draw upon either the promise of science and the future, or the magic and myth of a mysteriously enlightened (and richly fantasized) past culture for their powers and identities.

Some superheroes, most notably Wonder Woman, were created as conscious exemplars of classical mythology. Others embedded a mythical heritage beneath a guise of science-fiction – a Campbellian formula later exploited by George Lucas.

By focusing on the development and diachronic history of the earliest and most foundational of superheroes – including Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, The Flash, Hawkman, Aquaman, Dr. Fate, Captain Marvel and Kid Eternity – this paper will demonstrate the integral importance of classical myth and how it transformed – and later, was transformed by – popular culture.

Superheroes are mass-market products. They existed at first to sell comic books: today, their publication in comic books is generally justified in order to support their far more lucrative value as copyrighted icons. As such, though certain elements in their description invariably change with the cultural demands of the time, they retain an underlying consistency of presentation, regardless of era. Batman must be recognizably Batman, whether in the 1930s or the 2000s. This paper will generally focus on the earliest presentations of long-lived characters, and examine how attitudes toward myth shaped their core characteristics.

Indeed, this paper will also show how the study of Classics and ancient history has more recently been explained and rationalized by a “super-heroization” of classical history, themes and figures, not only in the comic book but in all popular media.

This analysis will explore American attitudes toward both Classics and Classical educators, and will help us understand the field's relevance to contemporary society, as well as the enduring mythical legacy of the American superhero.