Heroes and superheroes: from myth to the American comic book

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This article demonstrates that the mythological hero who appears in myth, legend and folklore has resurfaced in the twentieth century as the American comic book superhero. First, the differences between the hero and the superhero are explained. Then the characteristics of the archaic hero are discussed to show its parallels with the modern superhero. The argument is based on Joseph Campbell’s formulation of the complex pattern in the stages of the adventure of the hero. An analysis of a superhero comic book, Daredevil: Born Again, serves to show how these different stages, as distinguished by Campbell, form the basis for both the archaic and the American comic book superhero.

Helde en superhelde: van mite tot die Amerikaanse strokiesprent
Hierdie artikel demonstreer dat die mitologiese held wat in mites, legendes en volksverhale verskyn, sy herverskyning maak in die twintigste eeu in die vorm van die Amerikaanse strokiesprent superheld. Die verskille tussen die held en die superheld word eerstens bespreek. Vervolgens word die eienskappe van die argaïese held bespreek om die ooreenkomste met die moderne superheld aan te toon. Die argument is gebaseer op Joseph Campbell se formulering van die komplekse patroon in die fases van die held se avontuur. ’n Analise van ’n superheld strokiesprent (Daredevil: Born Again) toon hoe hierdie verskillende fases, soos deur Campbell onderskei, die basis vir sowel die argaïese held as vir die Amerikaanse strokiesprent vorm.

The superhero has been a key character in the comic book, published largely in the United States of America, since 1938. Although it has undergone significant changes, this phenomenon is still very much alive today. I will attempt to demonstrate that the late twentieth-century comic book superhero represents an archetypal symbol virtually as old as humanity itself. This article stresses the presence of the past in unconscious layers of our being: even though a figure such as Superman appears to be quintessentially twentieth century, it generates responses based on identifications with a much more ancient archetype, that is, the hero. This article aims to demonstrate that the archaic hero, who has been preserved through legend, myth and folklore, can be seen as a potential guide to the various stages of life. The archaic hero encounters and overcomes problems in a fashion still relevant to contemporary everyday life. Joseph Campbell (1993:256) comments on what heroic ‘stories’ reveal in The hero with a thousand faces:

…it appears that through the wonder tales – which pretend to describe the lives of legendary heroes, …symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears, and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behaviour.

I shall argue that the modern comic book superhero, although seemingly stripped of all mythical attributes, is still the same archetypal figure or mythical hero of antiquity.

Man has demystified himself and his world, but has been unable to cast away his subconscious, which has resurfaced (among other things) as a modern mythology in the form of superhero comic books, also known as “heroic fantasy” (McCloud, 2001:111). Modern superheroes like Daredevil, Captain America and Batman could indicate a still present need for heroic role models and have therefore possibly been intuitively summoned from a collective unconscious.

Jenette Kahn (1995:12), president of DC Comics, describes why people identify with superheroes:

These characters are popular not only because they embody childhood dreams, but because they provide us a way of fulfilling fundamental human yearnings that we carry with us no matter what our age. The original Clark Kent is Everyman, mild-mannered and unprepossessing. But he is also Superman, a demi-god with ‘powers beyond those of mortal men.’ We all embrace the wish that no matter how ordinary we might seem, underneath we are each capable of the extraordinary.
One can, therefore, say that the superhero, as the modern counterpart of the hero, is a symbol of things aspired to, or a reminder of the glory of heroes gone before. Kahn suggests that a superhero is easily recognisable by the vast majority of people and can be perceived as a universally inspirational example.

At this point I would like briefly to point out the difference between a hero and a superhero. The nature of a hero is that of a person who sacrifices himself for something. This could be a person, a people or an idea (Campbell & Moyers, 1989:127). A hero is furthermore often characterised by the extraordinary feats that transpire during his service to mankind. The nature of the superhero is essentially the same as that of the hero, but the superhero is further characterised by the possession of a unique skill, or supernatural ability, not acquired by magic (as is customary in mythology), but by the wonders of modern science. In the world of the mythological hero, magic is continually present, in the hero’s strength, in the monsters that assail him and in the aid that he receives. Science serves as a modern answer to magic in superhero comics, as Reynolds (1992:16) explains:

Science is treated as a special form of magic, capable of both good and evil. Scientific concepts and terms are introduced freely into plots and used to create atmosphere and add background detail to artwork – but the science itself is at most only superficially plausible, often less so, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational.

The popular culture comic book phenomenon that includes the superhero was never considered worthy of academic study or serious consideration as an art form. Recently, however, with the advent of postmodernism, the distinctions between high culture and popular culture have been eroded, in the fields of both theory and artistic practice. Popular culture, including comics, has now become an accepted field of scholarly study. In the words of M.T. Inge (2001:217):

The daily and Sunday comic strips are part of the reading habits of more than one hundred million people at all educational and social levels in the United States. Any mass medium that plays so heavily on the sensibilities of the populace deserves study purely for sociological reasons, but comic art is important for other reasons as well. While the roots of comic art may be heavily European, the comics as we know them today are arguably a distinctively American art form that has contributed significantly to the culture of the world, from Picasso to the pop art movement. They derive from popular patterns, themes and concepts of world culture – just as Dick Tracy was inspired by Sherlock Holmes…. Flash Gordon and Superman draw on the heroic tradition to which Samson, Beowulf, Davy Crockett, and Paul Bunyan belong. The comics also serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores, and they speak directly to human desires, needs, and emotions.

American superhero comics, especially those that were published during the period between 1960 and 1980, were greatly influenced by the Comics Code Authority in terms of censorship. In brief, the Comics Code Authority was a body that forced comic publishers to remove certain themes from their publications as a result of an investigation by a subcommittee on juvenile delinquency in the United States. These themes included crime, horror and sexual perversion (Horn, 1976:749-750). The Comics Code Authority thus only allowed for heroes who supported conventional values. No subversive heroes such as, for instance, the Simpsons were allowed. The animated cartoon series The Simpsons was created by Matt Groening and was first screened only in 1987 on The Tracey Ullman Show (Matt Groening creator and executive producer, S.a.). During the 1980s, although still permeated by the archaic hero myth, a very different superhero narrative developed, in which the superheroes could be described as “much more mortal and more complex, especially in their psychological constitution” (Bongco, 2000:100). Frank Miller’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986), containing explicit violence, among other controversial themes, is an example of this new trend. Another publication from this period, called Daredevil: Born Again (1987), will be the focus of this article.
In attempting to prove both the similarity between the archaic hero and the superhero, and the substitution of the archaic hero by the superhero, I found the writings of Joseph Campbell of great value for this analysis. Other theorists have also contributed significantly to the analysis of myth, for instance Marcia Eliade, who in his book *Myth and reality* (1963) chooses to look at those societies where myth is, or was until very recently, ‘living’, in order to study the meaning of myth. In these societies myth supports models for human behaviour and gives meaning and value to life (Eliade, 1963:2). More recently, Burton L. Mack, in his book *A myth of innocence* (1988), investigates Christian origins (which could also be interpreted as ‘Christian myth’ in the case of this book), focusing on the earliest of the gospels, namely the gospel of Mark.

The reader of superhero comics can be said to respond to the superhero comic book narrative through a subconscious identification with and need for the hero. Therefore even contemporary popular cultural forms, like superhero comics, where the superhero may be interpreted as possessing merely the simplistic attributes of a stereotype, still rely on mythological archetypes. Where the world of mythology intersects with comic books, one will find the manifestation of the superhero.

Myths have survived through the ages as stories transferred from generation to generation, and often a hero of sorts featured very prominently in these tales. Furthermore, the hero was not merely a character, but a specific character type, and was always associated with a series of events, namely the adventure. In *The hero with a thousand faces*, Joseph Campbell (1993:36) explains the different stages of the adventure of the hero. Using this as a guideline, one can superimpose it onto all heroic adventures to reveal a common thread that is inherent in all heroic tales through the ages. These stages can also be used as an indicator to detect the existence of mythological attributes in narratives concerning a hero. The different stages of the adventure of the hero are comprised of three parts: firstly, the Departure, secondly, the Initiation, and, lastly, the Return.

It is important to note that many tales may isolate or greatly enlarge upon one or other of the typical elements of the full cycle, and that few heroic adventures will include all stages. Independent cycles can be added into a single series (as in the Odyssey). Different episodes or characters can also become fused in the innumerable retellings of a traditional story, and accidental or intentional emphases, omissions or additions are inevitable (Campbell, 1993:246). Yet it is possible to conclude that heroic adventures follow certain definable stages and patterns, even if each stage is not always complete, or they do not follow in a consecutive order. If one were to superimpose the lives of the Greek hero Hercules, the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, or the Celtic hero Cúchulainn onto Campbell’s framework, none of them would fit the stages perfectly. In many cases some of the stages are skipped entirely. To illustrate his framework adequately, Campbell thus needed a host of heroes to serve as examples. Campbell (1993:246) himself mentions the constant presence of these inconsistencies. Therefore, explaining the entire hero quest using a single mythological hero as an example is practically impossible, but as far as the superhero is concerned it is far more achievable.

It often seems less problematic to fit the superhero into Campbell’s theoretical hero framework (as will be evident in the following analysis of the Daredevil graphic novel *Born Again*), than it is to do so with the mythological hero. The origin of the superhero is in most cases the perfect analogy for Departure, Separation and Return. Moreover, I believe that the superhero is an intuitive assimilation of all the myths through the ages, and the surfacing of the general hero archetype. This assimilation of heroes into one form, the superhero, should therefore fit more easily into Campbell’s framework, which is a summary of many heroes. It is crucial to note that Campbell’s stages of the mythological adventure serve only as a
framework for a better understanding of the path of the hero, and not as a blueprint for that path.

The usual heroic adventure starts with a person from whom something has been taken, or who feels that there is something being kept away from the members of his society which hinders them from functioning normally. The hero then sets off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir to administer to his community. The representational formula for the rites of passage, separation-initiation-return, is in its magnified form also the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 1993:30).

The adventure is usually a cycle, a going and a returning (Campbell & Moyers, 1989:123). The hero, separated, and seemingly dead to the world, is then able to carry out the really creative act, which transforms his world on his return (Campbell, 1993:35). On his return from an interval of seeming non-existence, he comes as one reborn, and, filled with creative power, he returns to the human world (Campbell, 1993:36). An example of this adventure can be seen in the puberty or initiation rituals of early tribal societies. Through these rituals a child is compelled to give up his childhood and become an adult. The child has to die to his infantile personality and return as a responsible adult. This explains the basic motif of the universal hero’s journey, which is to leave one condition and to find the source of life, with which one progresses to a richer or more mature condition.

There is a certain typical heroic sequence of actions present in stories from many periods of history and from all over the world. According to Campbell and Moyers (1989:136), it might even be said that there is but one archetypal mythical hero, whose life has been replicated in many different lands by many divergent peoples. The superhero of popular culture can therefore be perceived as another replication of this one archetypal mythical hero, as his actions follow a typical heroic sequence.

The graphic novel entitled Daredevil: Born Again will be analysed using Campbell’s framework. What makes this graphic novel so appropriate for analysis of both its narrative and its visual manifestation is the fact that it showcases much of the Golden and Silver Age comic book tradition of heroism, as well as the new trend aimed at a mature readership. Unlike many comic books in this genre, where the storyline could continue for extended periods, Daredevil: Born Again is relatively short (at seven issues), with a visible ending, making it more suitable for analysis. The character of Daredevil is, moreover, a perfect example of the flawed superheroes created during the Silver Age.

Daredevil: Born Again was published in 1987 in the form of a graphic novel, reprinting the seven consecutive comic books in which the story was first published. Although the story was originally published within the continuity of the monthly comic book Daredevil, and is rooted in the Marvel Universe superhero tradition, Daredevil: Born Again is an independent story, and can be read without any previous knowledge of the leading character. Daredevil: Born Again was created by Frank Miller (writer) and David Mazzuccelli (artist) and published by the Marvel Comics Group. Both Miller and Mazzuccelli are well known in and beyond the superhero comic book world for their work on Batman (DC Comics) and Daredevil (Marvel Comics Group), as well as for various independent comic book projects. Miller wrote the story and Mazzuccelli was responsible for all of the art (except for most of the colouring), but there was much collaboration between the two: “Although Miller has the reputation as a comic book auteur, he is quick to note that: ‘in every case it’s been collaborative’” (Daniels, 1993:188-189).
The featured story’s protagonist, Daredevil, serves as the crime-fighting secret alter-ego of blind attorney Matthew Murdock, who practices law in partnership with his best friend, Foggy Nelson. As is customary in superhero comics, the hero possesses a superpower that sets him apart from normal human beings. The first Daredevil comic book (Lee & Everett, 1964) reveals the hero’s origin. As a child Matt Murdock saves an old man crossing the street from a runaway delivery truck transporting radioactive chemicals. In the process of saving the man, he is permanently blinded by a radioactive isotope falling from the truck, which strikes him in the face. He wakes up in hospital in total confusion and fear, for the chemicals have had a profound effect on his four remaining senses. They are heightened to supernormal acuteness, and (although blinded) he can literally see due to his newly-acquired augmented sensory powers. He is traumatised further by the death of his father (an ageing boxer killed by a gangster syndicate). At first, he swears revenge and claims the title of defender of the city of New York, the Hell’s Kitchen area in particular. He then employs his newfound powers to help his fellow man by fighting crime, and adopts the name of Daredevil: the man without fear. Notice how science takes the place of magic in the transformation of the youth into the hero. Daredevil moves about the city with the aid of his supernormal senses, or radar, and two billy clubs employed as grappling hooks. His red costume, complete with horns on the forehead, makes him an ironic avenging angel in a devil’s guise, and the daring gymnastic stunts he performs on the rooftops of Hell’s Kitchen support his superhero title: Daredevil.

The story is deeply rooted in a noir, or crime, tradition well known in earlier comics, and features the traditional costumed superhero operating under the guise of a secret identity. However, the inclusion of themes that would have been rejected by the Comics Code Authority if published ten years earlier (such as drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, religion and even death), gives the story a credible, more relevant edge. The hero spends most of the story out of costume, accentuating his humanity and vulnerability.

Figure 1
The Call to Adventure: Matt Murdoch at the scene of the destruction of his home
(Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:27)
At this point a brief synopsis of the story of *Daredevil: Born Again* will serve to set the stage for the analysis of the superhero as a contemporary manifestation of the mythological hero. The story begins when Daredevil’s secret identity is discovered by his archenemy, the Kingpin. The Kingpin, the crime lord of New York, uses his influence and power to systematically destroy Daredevil’s life. Matt Murdock loses his right to practice law, his friends and his home, and comes within a hair’s breadth of losing his sanity. The Kingpin almost succeeds in taking Murdock’s life. Daredevil is pitted against the Kingpin, his worst enemy, not only physically, but also psychologically. Several sub-plots are woven through the story, but I shall focus on the primary themes, which I have found to be the ones pertaining to the hero quest.

The first stage of the heroic adventure is the Departure, and the first phase of the Departure is the Call to Adventure, which consists of the hero’s being drawn or lured into the adventure. The hero’s introduction into the adventure can be triggered by a specific event, or in some cases the hero will start out on the adventure of his own accord (Campbell, 1993:58). In *Born Again*, a chain of unfortunate events, ending with an explosion (see Figure 1) that devastates the entire apartment block where he resides, is responsible for Daredevil’s being drawn into the adventure.

Returning to find his Daredevil costume amongst the rubble, he realises that the Kingpin is the person responsible for his downfall (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:28).

Phase two is the Refusal of the Call: the call to adventure can be refused, and this refusal can be caused by the hero’s reluctance to give up his own interests or because the hero is waiting for some transformation to occur which will draw him into the adventure (Campbell, 1993:60-65). On the title pages of Chapters One to Three, Matt Murdock is repeatedly shown sleeping (see Figure 2), and these images show him as the hero progressively returning to a foetal position, signifying a need for a rebirth.

He later confronts the Kingpin and a physical struggle ensues in which the crime lord beats the bewildered Murdock until he is unconscious. Murdock is placed in a stolen taxi with a bottle of whiskey in his lap, and pushed into the East River (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:49).

Phase three is Supernatural Aid: during this phase a guide or protective figure (often an old man or crone) supplies the adventurer with amulets against the dangers that await him.

![Figure 2](attachment:image.png)

**Figure 2**
**Title pages to Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of *Daredevil: Born Again* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:8,31,58)**
This is represented in a scene from Daredevil’s distant past. When the blinded youth is in hospital after his accident, a stranger comes to visit him (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**
The hero meets his supernatural guide, or the protective figure, and touches the redeeming amulet for the first time (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:56)

She comforts him and makes him promise that he will tell no one of his heightened senses. He reaches out to her and touches a cross she wears around her neck (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:56). The woman’s insight into the boy’s condition, and the actual cross that he touches physically, can both be interpreted as guidance and the provision of amulets.

Phase four, the Crossing of the First Threshold, marks the first obstacle in the hero’s path. Often, in the case of a child this obstacle is that of eluding the parental watch, and in the case of the explorer it is facing waters not yet sailed. The crossing of this magical threshold is a transit into the sphere of rebirth (Campbell, 1993:77-78). In *Born Again* the threshold is the fight with the Kingpin (see Figure 4) discussed above (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:46-48). Daredevil has answered the call to adventure, but the powers that he is up against are totally overwhelming.

During phase five, the Belly of the Whale, the hero is swallowed into the unknown, and appears to be either lost or dead. Instead of passing outward, beyond the visible world, the hero must go inward, to be ultimately born again (Campbell, 1993:91). By being pushed into
the river, Murdoch is physically immersed in the unknown or delivered, like Jonah of the Old Testament, into the Belly of the Whale (see Figure 5).

**Figure 4**
The Crossing of the First Threshold: The hero overcome by the villain (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:48)

**Figure 5**
The Belly of the Whale: Matt Murdock incarcerated at the bottom of the East River (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:49)
The second stage of the heroic adventure is called Initiation. In phase one, the Road to Trials, consisting of trials, tests and ordeals, the hero is aided by the protective figure or supernatural helper whom he has met during the previous stage (Campbell, 1993:97). Murdock frees himself from the vehicle in which he is submerged in the river, and manages to reach the surface alive. This can be compared with Hercules’s cutting his way out of the monster’s belly (Campbell, 1993:91) or Jonah’s being spat out by the whale. In his weakened state, Murdock tries to thwart a mugging and is stabbed by a street thug (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:66). He is eventually found by his supernatural helper (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:72). This phase thus begins as a test of the hero’s strength and courage (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
The Road to Trials: A test of the hero’s strength and courage (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:66)
Phase two, the Meeting with the Goddess, occurs when all barriers and dragons have been overcome, and a mystical marriage of the hero and the Queen Goddess of the world usually follows. This represents the hero’s total mastery of life (Campbell, 1993:120). Campbell (1993:36) also refers to this stage as: “the bliss of infancy regained”. Daredevil gets his girl a little later in the story, but calling this stage the bliss of infancy regained could not be more appropriate, because Daredevil is literally reunited with his mother (see Figure 7), who gives him a home again, if only for a while.

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7**

The Bliss of Infancy Regained: Matt Murdock is reunited with his mother (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:97)

Phase three, the Woman as Temptress, marks the hero’s ability to endure the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his bride. The flesh, symbolised by a temptress, must be overcome, and the hero must reach for a higher plane of being (Campbell, 1993:120-123). Daredevil’s former lover, Karen Page, who initially sold his identity for her own selfish needs, can be interpreted as the temptress. Although the woman in the story does not tempt the hero himself, her nature is revealed. Karen Page is both temptress and lover, as she initially betrays the hero but finally truly loves and honours him (see Figure 8).
Phase four, Atonement with the Father, symbolises the hero in conflict with the ogre (or devouring monster) aspect of the father (Campbell, 1993:126), which involves a reflex of the victim’s own ego (Campbell, 1993:129). This requires the difficult task of abandonment of the ego itself (Campbell, 1993:130). Daredevil enters his father’s old gymnasium (see Figure 9).
He still carries unresolved anger towards his father, who made him promise never to fight. Daredevil is incapable of making peace with his father’s memory at this stage but he does succeed in doing so later in the story (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:80). Here he succumbs to his injuries and loses consciousness. He is found by a nun called Maggie, the supernatural helper, and brought to a missionary hospital in a church basement (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:83). The church can be interpreted, in this case, as the dwelling of the supernatural. Just as Hercules descends into the underworld, Daredevil is brought into the basement of a church to undergo the necessary initiatory trials. This can also be compared with Christ’s descent into Hades, as described in 1 Peter 3 verses 18 to 20 (Amplified Bible, 1989:1454):

…In His human body He was put to death, but He was made alive in the spirit,
19 In which He went and preached to the spirits in prison,
20 [The souls of those] who long before in the days of Noah had been disobedient,…

Phase five, called the Apotheosis (or deification), announces the divine state that the human ego acquires in one who has gone beyond the last limitations of ignorance. One could argue that an apotheosis could be either secular (or political) or religious, thus representing different value systems. Julius Caesar, for instance, was declared a god in 42 BC, two years after his assassination, in the Roman pagan process of apotheosis, where an emperor, empress, hero or leader was deified by decree of the Senate or popular consent (Apotheosis, 2006). Christ’s ascent into heaven, as recorded in Mark 16 verse 19 and Luke 24 verse 51, in contrast, can be seen as a religious apotheosis, reflecting the supreme glorification of the hero. In the case of Daredevil, the apotheosis phase reflects a more religious slant in the form of a spiritual state of selflessness.

During this phase, the hero functions devoid of any egocentric strategy or human applause, and he is content. This potential lies within all human beings, and thus it can be attained by anyone, through heroism (Campbell, 1993:151).

Miller & Mazzucchelli’s (1987:73) image of the kneeling nun with the unconscious Murdock lying in front of her, in an illustration that is reminiscent of a pietà, is an example of this deification phase. Figure 10a shows Miller and Mazzucchelli’s pietà, which bears an obvious reference to Renaissance paintings depicting this theme, as illustrated in Figure 10b.

Figure 10a (left)
The Pietà: the hero in the lap of his supernatural guide (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:73)

Figure 10b (right)
A Renaissance depiction of the Lamentation of Christ, from the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (Kemperdick, 1999:23)
The author, Frank Miller, makes use of many religious symbols. Another example is where the hero and his surroundings clearly represent a crucifixion. Note the similarities between Miller and Mazzucchelli’s crucifixion (Figure 11a) and the medieval icon (Figure 11b). This crucifixion scene shows Murdock having survived the trial and signifies a type of resurrection (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:77).

In phase six, The Ultimate Boon, the reward that was sought is found, and it is uninterrupted residence in the Paradise of the Milk that Never Fails, or the life-sustaining elixir. The hero is rewarded for his trials by receiving the ultimate trophy, the power of the sustaining substance of the gods (Campbell, 1993:176-188). In Born Again, this trophy can be seen as Daredevil’s life, which is transformed, and as the fact that he is aided by the supernatural helper to continue providing justice for the individual in an unjust world. The punching bag lying on the floor between the legs of the hero serves as a powerful phallic symbol (see Figure 12) suggesting the hero’s new potency. Cirlot (2001:253), in A dictionary of symbols, has the following entry for phallus: “A symbol for the perpetuation of life, of active power and of the propagation of cosmic forces.” This definition also serves as a description of Murdock’s journey and current position in the story.

The third stage of the heroic adventure is called the Return, and in phase one, the Refusal of the Return, the hero must now return from his heroic quest with his life-transforming trophy and begin the task of investing his wisdom in humanity to renew the community, nation, planet etc. The hero can occasionally refuse this return, either because he might doubt that his message can be communicated at all, or because he chooses to stay in the realm of
supernal\textsuperscript{16} ecstasy (Campbell, 1993:193). Daredevil recovers while labouring among the poor in Hell’s Kitchen, but he is reluctant to wear the Daredevil costume (see Figure 13) (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:139).

Phase two, the Magic Flight, is where the hero either returns to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, relying on the support of his supernatural patron, or returns without this support, if the trophy has been attained against the will of the gods (Campbell, 1993:196). During the Magic Flight, it is often necessary for the hero to escape the wrath of the gods. The government-sanctioned super-soldier, Nuke, called in by the Kingpin, represents the wrath of these gods and the final pursuit follows (see Figure 14). Daredevil is hunted by Nuke and he flees in a hail of bullets (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:147). Finally, he escapes and the Kingpin orders Nuke killed. Daredevil tries to save Nuke’s life but Nuke ultimately succumbs to his wounds, and dies.

Phase three is the Rescue from Without, where, in some cases, the hero must be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. Society, or the world, may have to fetch him, for sometimes the hero does not easily abandon the bliss of the deep abode (Campbell, 1993:207). In \textit{Born Again} Matt Murdock is forced to return as Daredevil in order to save helpless citizens from the rampage of the super-soldier, Nuke. With this appearance of the reborn Daredevil in full costume (see Figure 15), the hero has returned to serve his community (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:144).
Figure 13
The hero recovers but is reluctant to return to the world (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:139)

Figure 14
Phase four, the Crossing of the Return Threshold, is the final crisis of returning from the mystic realm to the land of common day. The hero has to re-enter a world where men think they are superior (although they are not) and labour among people who might resent him or perhaps fail to understand him (Campbell, 1993:216). This stage is represented by Daredevil’s laying down of the murdered Nuke on the desk of a newspaper reporter (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:173). Daredevil makes sure that Nuke’s murder does not go unnoticed. The hero has returned to the world (see Figure 16). Although shocked by the circumstances of his return, the world welcomes him back as a messenger of justice.
In phase five, Master of Two Worlds, the hero as master is now in the world and ready to labour among the people. But he is master of two worlds (the supernatural realm and the world of common man) and can move between them with ease (Campbell, 1993:229-230).

Matt Murdock exercises his choice to wear the costume that makes him the Daredevil (see Figure 17), and this decision also marks his choice to uphold the law and fight for justice (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:142).

Figure 17
Daredevil exercises his choice to wear the costume that makes him an upholder of law
(Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:56)

Phase six, Freedom to Live, is the final stage, the result of the miraculous passage and return. Here the goal of myth is to effect a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will (Campbell, 1993:238). Daredevil continues his work among humanity, stripped of the selfishness of the ego. He has made peace with the memory of his father and mother and has won the love of the goddess. The very last panel of Born Again shows not the hero, but the man, walking down a city street hand in hand with Karen Page, his lover (see Figure 18) (Miller & Mazzuccelli, 1987:175). In this case the hero confirms the dominant Western values of monogamous heterosexual relationships and he certainly does not challenge conventional values. Born Again was created at a time when the Comics Code Authority still had a reasonably significant impact on the comic book publisher, and thus there was still some adherence to its original creed.
Master of Two Worlds: Matt Murdock is free to bestow his protective boon on his fellow man (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987:175)

The responsibility of the hero in the world is ever-present, but he is at peace. He is purged and renewed. His trials have brought him victory but his victory has meaning only in as much as it can serve as a guide or example to humanity, at least in the Western context. One could also argue that heroes differ in type and that the example set by the epic hero is different from that of the tragic hero. The epic hero is usually a superhuman, semi-divine figure often engaged in some sort of quest. The fate of a tribe, nation or even the entire human race rests on his actions. Achilles and Odysseus are good examples of this type of hero (Abrahams, 1971:49).

The victories and trials serve to guide by example, as in the case of Daredevil. The tragic hero is a man of high moral worth who experiences a change in fortune from happiness to disaster because his tragic flaw (such as pride, for example) leads him to perform an unfortunate misguided act. His example triggers pity but also warns against a possible error in the life of the more fallible observer (Abrahams, 1971:174,175). Shakespeare’s Othello is a prominent example of this type of hero.

Thus, both the narrative and the visual strategies of Daredevil: Born Again can be seen to follow Joseph Campbell’s stages of the hero adventure, and point to the archetypal characteristics inherent in the hero as formulated by Carl Jung. It can thus be concluded that the hero, as one of the strongest archetypes embedded in the human mind, according to Jung, will eventually surface in various cultures. Different heroes might arise depending on the cultures involved.
The superhero, as a phenomenon of American popular culture, can thus be seen as this reinvention of the major hero myths, and as a re-surfacing of the mythological hero. A publication perhaps worth mentioning as a critique of the popularity of the superhero is *The myth of the American superhero* (2002), by J.S. Lawrence and R. Jewett. This book can be seen as a moral criticism of the American superhero. The authors criticize American superheroes as figures who act outside or above the law and who redeem by violence.

The superhero comic book is a thriving business in America. What seems to have encouraged the interest of this market are the stories, and these stories involve heroes, as this article demonstrates. Superhero comics have been in existence for close to sixty-five years, and people are still actively buying and reading them. In fact, the market has grown to include independent superhero publishers, graphic novels, gaming, toys, collections, comic conventions and feature films. There is thus a bigger demand for these stories and heroes than ever before.

The ultimate purpose of the hero myth is the re-telling of stories that explore and explain the different stages of life on earth. The myth is not simply a story from the pages of old civilisations; it can be perceived as an instruction manual for the rites and meaning of life. It seems that, ever since early civilisations, the hero has been vital to man’s existence. This is evident in the great religions throughout the world, in fairy tales, and in the documentation of the vast cultural histories of divergent societies, as well, I would argue, as in the popular contemporary superhero.

**Notes**

1. In most quotations to follow in this article, the word ‘superhero’ is spelled ‘super hero’, but I shall use the first spelling, ‘superhero’, following *The concise Oxford dictionary* (Pearsall, 2001:1438).

2. *The concise Oxford dictionary* (Pearsall, 2001:69) defines archetype as follows: “archetype: 2 an original model. 3 *Psychoanalysis* (in Jungian theory) a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest human ancestors and supposed to be present in the collective unconscious”. The concept of the archetype as defined by Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung (1875 – 1961) therefore suggests that the archetype of the hero has persisted in the human mind since humankind’s origin.

3. Superheroes can be male or female or both. Because most archaic heroes were male, because male superheroes play a more significant part in the history of superheroes, and because readers of these comic books were initially mostly male, I shall use the masculine pronoun throughout this article.

4. The collective unconscious is understood as a deeper layer beneath the personal unconscious, and the eternal, recurrent themes of mythology, folklore and art indifferent to the individual’s personal history are embedded in it (Magill, 1996:194): “Jung believed that the cross-cultural similarities in myth and symbol between cultures that developed independently was strong evidence for this underlying substratum of the psyche called the collective or transpersonal unconscious.”

5. DC Comics, originally an abbreviation for Detective Comics, introduced the comic book superhero with the appearance of Superman in 1938, and remains one of the leading publishers of superhero comics today.

6. When citing the titles of graphic novel and superhero film sources in the text and bibliography, I shall use the form in which they were published; that is, I shall use capital letters as they are used in the original sources. The film *Fantastic Four*, for example, will be cited as *Fantastic Four* and not as *Fantastic four*, following the new Harvard method. I choose to do so for the sake of consistency in the text and for the sake of the reader already familiar with the sources I refer to.

7. *The concise Oxford dictionary* (Pearsall, 2001:1408) defines stereotypes as follows: “stereotype: an image or idea of a particular type of person or thing that has become fixed through being widely held”.

8. When discussing the stages of the adventure of the hero during this article I shall refer to Initiation, Separation and Return as ‘stages’ and to the subsections of these ‘stages’ as ‘phases’.

9. Les Daniels (1973: ix-x) describes the Golden Age as follows: “[T]he ‘Golden Age’ of comic books, a term used to designate the period between 1938 (the year in which the germinal Superman feature first appeared) and 1945. This was, admittedly, the era in which many of the
most famous characters and creators got their start; it was the time when comic books came into their own.” Daniels (1995:130) describes the Silver Age as the time between the late 1950s and early 1960s when an outpouring of talent comparable to that of the Golden Age took place. He mentions the following: “The Silver Age was largely an era of super heroes, and its success defined American comic books in terms of such characters.”


11. The Marvel Universe is a composite term that describes all the characters and worlds created during the course of the company’s history.

12. The Marvel Comics Group is the company that dominated the superhero comic book scene during the 1960s and early 1970s (Reynolds, 1992:9), and is known for introducing the ‘flawed’ superhero (characters with superpowers plagued by everyday problems). This superhero can be compared with fallible heroes with flaws, such as Hercules with his temper and Achilles with his heel.

13. Although noir is a term ascribed to a film genre, it is also used to describe a certain type of comic book. James Monaco (1981:432) describes film noir as follows: “Originally a French term, now in common usage, to indicate a film with a gritty, urban setting that deals mainly with dark or violent passions in a downbeat way.

14. As I periodically refer to events from the life of Christ in this article (e.g. descent into Hades, ascent into heaven, crucifixion), I would briefly like to attempt to clarify their relation to myth. Certain characteristics of heroic archetypes can be ascribed to religious figures like Jesus Christ, Buddha or Mohammed; these historical figures are actual people, but they are also representations of mythical dimensions in our humanity. For the purposes of this article, the heroic dimensions of Jesus Christ will be mentioned where appropriate.

15. The concise Oxford dictionary (Pearsall, 2001:62) defines apotheosis as follows: “apotheosis: 1 the highest point in the development of something. 2 elevation to divine status.”

16. The concise Oxford dictionary (Pearsall, 2001:1439) defines supernal as follows: “supernal: 1 of or relating to the sky or the heavens. 2 supremely excellent.”

17. Many feature films starring comic book superheroes have been produced, and with the phenomenal technological advances in the field of computer generated imagery, even the most implausible superhero titles can now be added to the list. The first big-budget superhero film was Superman, starring Christopher Reeve and released in 1978. Three more Superman films were eventually produced. Other popular films based on superhero comic books are: Conan the Barbarian, released in 1982 (Marvel Comics); Conan the Destroyer, released in 1984 (Marvel Comics); Supergirl, released in 1984 (DC Comics); Red Sonja, released in 1985 (Marvel Comics); Batman, released in 1989 (DC Comics); Batman returns, released in 1992 (DC Comics); Batman Forever, released in 1995 (DC Comics); Judge Dredd, released in 1995 (2000 AD); Tank Girl, released in 1995 (2000 AD); Barb Wire, released in 1996 (Dark Horse Comics); Batman & Robin, released in 1997 (DC Comics); Spawn, released in 1997 (DC Comics); Blade, released in 1998 (Marvel Comics); Blade II, released in 2002 (Marvel Comics); and so forth (Internet movie database Inc, 2003).

The popularity of these films has increased through the years, and with the release of X-Men in 2000 and Spider-Man in 2002, a popular new wave of superhero films has emerged, including X-Men II: X-Men United, Daredevil and The Hulk, released in 2003, The Punisher, Spider-Man II, Catwoman and Blade: Trinity, released in 2004, Elektra, Fantastic Four and Batman Begins, released in 2005, and X-Men III and Superman Returns, released in 2006. Spider-Man III and Ghost Rider are among the many more superhero films from the Marvel Comics stable planned for 2007 and after (Marvel Studios’ Avi Arad on Upcoming Projects, 2005). There is thus no decline in the popularity of the superhero.

Sources cited


http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apotheosis


