

Creating and Becoming the Modern Superhero in Contemporary American Fiction

Proposal for an M.A. Thesis in English Literature

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Introduction

“The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler sat in the palm of a perfection he’d created himself.” (Palahniuk 33)

“A dozen stubbed-out ends of Old Golds squirmed around the base of the withered plant... ‘Come’, [Josef] said...and, in the precious flare of the match...[Sammy] saw that Josef had prestidigitated a perfect cylinder.” (Chabon 12)

What makes someone a superhero? Is it the costume? The dual identity? The physique? The willingness to be a vigilante on the good side of the law? All of these things certainly defined a superhero at one point in time, when Superman and other superheroes were born in the late 1930s, the genre’s “Golden Age.” But over the years and as America, the birthplace of the superhero, has experienced more trauma, the definition of the superhero has grown more expansive and has opened up to new interpretations. Reflecting the new darkness of the late 20th century, the traditional superhero has become more morally ambiguous, with a dark side, flaws, and a superhero identity that was less and less under control. My thesis will analyze this new complexity in the superhero genre by examining the superhero novel, in which the flawed or limited nature of the contemporary superhero can leave him unable to stand up to the challenges of modernity. However, as I will show, the novels I examine suggest that even this failing can be redeemed. My thesis will explore this theme in two contemporary novels: Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996).

Aims and General Description

The aim of this M.A. thesis is to discuss how the theme of the creation of a superhero, relates to modernity in the two novels I have chosen, Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of*

Kavalier and Clay and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Drawing on the scholarly criticism on the changing nature of the superhero as well as on other seminal superhero source texts, I will focus my analysis on the different ways in which these two novels approach the challenges of the 20th century and examine how that influences their depictions of the superhero. I will also examine how the creation of the superhero affects the protagonists themselves in each of these texts and how the distinction between protagonist and superhero becomes blurred--an aspect I will explore by juxtaposing The Narrator/Tyler Durden relationship in *Fight Club* with that of Joe Kavalier/The Escapist in *Kavalier and Clay*. I will reflect on how the creative tension between narrator and superhero potentiates the transformational aspects of modern agency.

My thesis will include an introductory chapter giving the relevant background on the evolution of the modern superhero and the superhero novel in its current iteration. This will be followed by two chapters giving a close reading of each novel using relevant examples from the superhero genre to illustrate key points. By showing the similarities between these disparate texts, I hope to understand the flexibility and nuance within superhero novels that allows them to be so powerful in diverse modernity. By analyzing each of these texts in depth and bringing to the fore the importance of creation in each text, I hope to expand our understanding of function of the superhero and the superhero genre as a whole in modern American literature.

Methodology

Drawing on the insights of superhero studies, as well as on graphic novels from the time of the superhero's transformation and on other modern superhero novels, I will use close reading of the novels in the context of the superhero's changing historical function to inform my analysis for my thesis. I will also rely as needed on methods for analyzing graphic novels, insofar as they aid in the study of superheroes.

Scholarly and Critical Background

Superhero Studies

Critical scholarship of the last decades has examined the role of superheroes in comic books and other forms of media where they appear (e.g. movies, television, graphic novels) using a wide range of perspectives. These include early psychological reactionary pieces that viewed the superhero figure as inculcating dangerous Fascist ideas (Ong, Wertham 1954), attempts to fit the genre under the umbrella of other larger, perhaps more noteworthy genres (Cawelti 1977, Rollin 1970), historical studies seeking out the genre's origins (Coogan 2006, Jones 2005) or separating comic book history into ages and making historical connections (Reynolds 2013, Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013), and studies choosing particular moments of meaning to focus on (Klock 2013, Hatfield 2013). Both scholars and comic-book writers themselves have examined the relationship between author and content in the comic book (Feiffer 2013, Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, Bukatmen 2013).

Insisting on the legitimacy of superheroes as the subject of academic study, some scholars have examined superheroes autoethnographically, explaining the importance of the inter-generational nature of the superhero and its ability to confer meaning in personal lives (Steinem 1972, Jenkins 2006), and arguing that importance of superheroes today to Western culture is so great that they deserve a “canon” similar to the Western Canon proposed by Harold Bloom (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013). With the emergence of superhero novels – works of fiction making use of the superhero phenomenon – more attention has been given to this unique subset of the genre, although most of the focus has been on the dissolution, failure or subversion

of the superhero within these texts (Gavaler, 2016, Condis 2012), a viewpoint that I will challenge in this project.

When the first superhero, Superman, was born in the comics in 1938, he was created as a figure with which to identify: “[he] was successful because he represented what every American male wanted to be” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 7). Endowed with incredible abilities beyond that of any normal human but also with a backstory and identity as Clark Kent that humanized him, he functioned as a sensational role model (Wertham). He was the ultimate immigrant, originating from a dying planet but also growing up in rural America (Bukatmen 179). He was “unaffected by the Great Depression” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 7). In this way, not only because of his powers but also because he was above the problems that universally plagued a generation, he was “super” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 7) and spawned a slew of other superheroes in his wake, some of which remain to this day. But with the end of the 1940s, “failing readerships” all but ended superhero comics; instead, crime, horror, and detective comics became more popular. (Reynolds 100).

Under the Comics Code which stipulated that evil not triumph (Reynolds), superheroes returned at both DC and Marvel in the late 1950s to 1960s but this time, at Marvel, a unique development occurred. The comic books created under Stan Lee in the 1960s introduced “moral ambiguity” into the superhero tale, as hinted in the line, “With great power must also come—great responsibility!”; the death of Uncle Ben due to Spiderman’s inaction in *Spiderman* was another indication of the new trend (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 8). The question began to emerge: what would we really do if we had superpowers? (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 8). In the early 1970s superheroes began to grapple with real-world issues, as The Green Arrow and The Green Lantern in their civilian identities took off “in a truck together and hopscotch their way across

the country to experience the real America” (Nama 256). Finally, the deconstruction of the superhero reached its apex in the 1980s with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, where superheroes lose even their “super” moniker and are referred to as “masks” (Moore 168), and in *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which author Frank Miller goes against years of Batman history by aging Batman (Klock 118) and having him nearly die when fighting a younger villain (Miller 33).

For the purposes of this project, I am interested in particular in the dualism present in superhero mythology through the form of the alter ego. It has already been suggested by Roger B. Rollin that Superman’s Christ-like Clark Kent acts as a counterpoint to his identity as Superman (“Heroes cannot...remain lambs: crises call for lions” [Rollin 93]). In *Watchmen*, *Rorschach*’s identity is so consumed by his masked character that when his mask is taken away from him he calls out “No! My Face! Give it Back!” (Moore, 406). *Rorschach*’s mask is no longer something he puts on to become a character, but a marker of his true identity. Other superheroes such as *The Thing* and *The Incredible Hulk* have little power over their identities. *The Thing*, it has been argued, goes through a process of reconciliation with his alternate self: “Although he gains super strength, Ben is [initially] horrified by his new appearance... As the years pass, Ben Grimm seemed to become much more comfortable as the Thing, particularly thanks to meeting and falling in love with the blind Alicia Masters” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 173). *The Incredible Hulk*, by contrast is “hunted... his anger [which activates his bestial, at times out-of-control superpowered identity] combined with other peoples’ misunderstandings continually forced the Hulk to flee humanity” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 174).

Also of interest to me in this project is the a related issue of the emotional/psychological conflict that can arise within (and outside of) superheroes. This can sometimes arise as a struggle between the dual aspects of a superhero, as happens in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*: “In a

psychomachia, the retired 'Batman' taunts the aging Wayne, you are nothing...a rusty trap that cannot hold me --smoldering I burn you" (Klock 133). Meanwhile, in that same graphic novel, Batman's sanity is called into question even by those labeled insane. The Joker, a former resident of Arkham Asylum, says, "Out of your mind..." after Batman half blinds him with a batarang (Miller 79). It can also be a mark of relatability as with *The Incredible Hulk*, who "came to symbolize the potential for anger we all have inside us" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 174). In a related trend that will be explored in the thesis, sometimes a superhero's weakness can become a strength, as in the case of Daredevil, "the first superhero with a disability" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 28), whose blindness heightens his other senses and allows him to become super-powered.

The ways in which superheroes will sometimes challenge social norms or even their whole world are also of importance for my thesis. Though in traditional superhero narratives "The superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to reinvent it" (Reynolds, quoted in Romagnoli and Pagnucci 10), revisionist narratives will sometimes have superheroes challenging prevalent norms. One example is the appointment of John Stewart as the new Green Lantern in 1971, which critics have read as a challenge to the racial norms of the superhero tradition: "Until John Stewart, Green Lantern and his successor...were all white men" (Nama 258). This challenging of the status quo was met with pushback from the original Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, who deemed Stewart too "angry," until Stewart proved him wrong; as Adilifu Nama argues, this characterization is itself a racial stereotype (258).

The Superhero Novel

In contrast to the superhero tradition more broadly, contemporary novels that draw on superhero mythology have not been studied in depth. In one of the few studies looking at this fiction as a

broad phenomenon, Chris Gavalier argues that “The inclusion of superheroes in literary fiction—a category traditionally dominated by narrative realism— reverses the character type’s genre expectations” (Gavalier 1). Gavalier gives a substantial list of recent novels in which superhero conventions have been subverted (3). Contrary to Gavalier’s assertions, in certain exceptional cases, contemporary superhero novels are easily identifiable as such (e.g., Austin Grossman’s *Soon I Will Be Invincible*). The characters are explicitly classified as superheroes and supervillains and the tropes that many critics (Romagnoli and Pagnucci, Reynolds) use to classify superheroes are explicit as well: the costume, the dual identity, powers above the reach of humans, accidental/tragic origins, goals that must be reached but are never attained. Furthermore, certain incidents in superhero novels are taken directly from the pages of comic books, a prominent example being the return of the most powerful superhero after death (as follows “The Death of Superman”).

For Gavalier, the subversion of superhero conventions in superhero novels results in a cultural critique. He goes further, though, and claims that the strength of this critique depends on the necessary failure of the superhero figures in these novels:

The figure of the superhero assumes a contradictory role in fiction, de-mythologizing without re-mythologizing. These literary superheroes are degraded physically, psychologically, politically, and morally. They are icons of abject failure diametrically opposed to the character type’s origins in Manichean triumphalism that reinforces unexamined cultural biases. (Gavalier 13; see also Condis and Mayer)

Gavaler and Megan Condis are the only scholars I have yet encountered to offer this perspective on superhero novels. I will draw on their work but also offer an alternative to it, by asking how these novels can help us reexamine the nature of a superhero and expand our definition of the superhero in a way that other mediums cannot. Rather than representing “failure,” as Gavaler and Condis claim, I will examine the possibility that superhero novels allow for the exploration of flaws in a way that perhaps the Golden Age superhero did not, and that in the novels I examine, the superhero protagonists’ capacity for creation becomes a way to mitigate their flaws and find a form of redemption.

Criticism of the Novels

Criticism on Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* has discussed the split personality/ schizophrenia/ trauma of the narrator and how it affects reading the text (Bearnarts 2009, Giles 2013, Vickroy 2015), as well as the novel’s examination of commodity culture and rebellion against capitalism (Mendieta 2013, Del Gizzo 2007, Dodge 2015, Burgess 2012). Many have commented on the prominent exploration of masculinity in the text, especially in the wake of fan reactions (Boon 2003, Kavaldo 2005, Mendieta). Though some have discussed the novel in terms of utopia (or “transgressive heterotopia”; see Burgess, Dodge), the only scholar to even approach the idea of the superhero in *Fight Club* is Eduardo Mendieta, who discusses Tyler as an example of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* or “Overman.” This German precursor to Superman worked its way into one of the consciousness of one of the creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel, via Philip Wylie’s *Gladiator* (Jones 2013:18-19). However, it is clear from Mendieta’s analysis that he is only referring to the Nietzschean precursor, and not to later developments in the superhero genre. Therefore, despite the many similarities to between the Narrator/Tyler Durden and modern-day

superheroes, from my research it appears that it has never been examined as a superhero novel, which I intend to do in the thesis.

Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001) has been read alongside other post-Holocaust fiction, in explorations of how third-generation Holocaust writers write about the Holocaust (Berger 2010, Behlman 2004, Gasiorek 2012, Chute 2008). Others have written about the power of Chabon's novels to have the reader escape disbelief itself, registering Chabon's own incredulity that a novel about comic books would have such power (Davis 2008), or examined the question of Sammy's homosexuality, whether in connection to his Jewishness or to his own innate homophobia and its implications for the homosocial/ homosexual sidekick relationship (A. Levine 2011, Wang 2012).

Several studies have addressed heroes or superheroes found in Chabon's novel. Daniel B. Levine sees Joe Kavalier as a modern Odysseus, while also tying him to the Wandering Jew, while Richard Landon considers the influence on the novel of celebrated bodybuilder Charles Atlas. Most important for the purposes of this thesis is Shu-li Chang's claim that it is ultimately the "everyday heroics" of the two main protagonists that rescue them after two failed attempts at escape. Though Chang asserts that "neither Joe nor Sam is a superhero" (36), the recognition that *Kavalier and Clay* creates a relationship between the ordinary and the heroic will be helpful for the interpretation that I will intend to pursue in my thesis.

Chapter Outline

Introduction: In order to support my argument that the novels offer a new interpretation of the superhero, I will provide background on the modern graphic superhero novel and the modern

superhero novel and discuss how both deviate from the superhero's classic "Golden Age" definition. Then I will provide a chapter breakdown to guide the reader along to my conclusions.

Chapter One: In this chapter I will propose that the true superhero of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is Joseph Kavalier. I will consider the place of creativity in Joe's journey, beginning with the first act of ingenuity I quoted as an epigraph, Joe's making of a perfect cigarette from nothing. Together with his escape from Nazi Europe, this beginning presages Joe's transformation into a superhero of sorts as he creates a superhero that is true to his own identity as an escape artist: The Escapist. I will examine the novel as a *kunstlerroman*, showing that Chabon allows Joe to mirror the Escapist in reality, with both finding liberation and liberating Sammy when he cannot liberate himself. In this way, by having Joe live out certain tropes of superheroes while simultaneously creating a superhero on the page, the novel sets in motion an inversion process whereby the creator of the superhero becomes the superhero, one who belongs in a realist world with all the traumas of the twentieth century.

Chapter Two: In this chapter I will propose that *Fight Club* can also be read as a superhero novel. I will show the considerable textual evidence which supports such a reading, while also arguing that when read together, *Kavalier and Clay* and *Fight Club* offer an (admittedly somewhat radical) post-1970s reading of the superhero as artist. In examining the novel, I will show how Tyler's depiction as a perfect human and as a creator contributes to his incarnation as a superhero. However, because in truth the narrator and Tyler are one, I will show that *Fight Club* makes a powerful statement about the agency of the average person to oppose the corporate chains that enclose him through an act, even an unknowing act, of creation, and through that act to become himself the superhero

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