

BEYOND THE CAPE OF SUPERHEROES

THE NEED FOR SUPERHEROES

Why do people need heroes or superheroes?

Myths are stories told by cultures—in poems, songs, oral narratives, and so forth—that often feature larger-than-life individuals who teach us something about ourselves and our place in the world. There is a fundamental paradox here, though. Why do we need tales of fantastical beings and creatures in order to make sense of our all-too-ordinary lives?

The stories that come out of these global mythologies are rich and varied. Many of them discuss the origins of the universe and the natural phenomena we see around us. Others offer keen insights into human nature and lend themselves as lessons in morality. Still others seek to establish what binds a people together. Scholars debate what myths are really trying to do. Some view them as failed attempts at doing science: astronomy, sociology, and so forth. Other scholars think that this totally misses the point. Myths were never intended to be taken as literally true, but as metaphorically true. These debates will unlikely ever be resolved.

So what about that paradox? To bring it back to superheroes, why do we need a story where a teenager has the power to crawl on walls like a spider to reflect upon issues of power and responsibility? Why do we need a story about a guy who dresses up as a bat to fight crime in order to reflect upon what justice demands and what responsibility the government versus individual citizens have in ensuring that justice is done?

Well, we don't quite need these stories to think about such deep matters, but they sure do help. And they help in a variety of ways. The fantastical elements of early myths helped us share these stories. In cultures dominated by oral traditions, it's easier to remember and pass along the details of larger-than-life narratives than ordinary ones. For us, communication isn't the problem. But engagement is. If we want young people to think about power and responsibility, we can sit them down and give them a lecture, or we can hand them Spider-Man. Do you want to guess which one is more effective?

Superman is a myth about the immigrant experience. Batman emerged as a way to address dissatisfaction with crime and government complicity. The Silver Age focused a tremendous amount of attention on America coming to terms with the unfathomable power it had acquired through the atomic bomb.

As superhero stories continue to be consumed by new generations of people across the world, the challenges facing different communities in different cultures will find their way into our expanding modern mythology of mightily powerful agents of good and dastardly villains. And that is all for the best. Mythologies that last are not static, but dynamic. So here's to the next generation of globally-informed superhero tales!

The Rise of Superheroes and Their Impact On Pop Culture
Smithsonian Institution



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1. What is a myth? Use the definition given in the article and discuss it.
2. What is the use of a hero or a superhero?
3. Are the hero stories always following the same pattern?
4. « Mythologies that last are not static, but dynamic » Explain.



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