Superheroes

Joan Ryan and Cultural Symbols

Duration: 45 minutes

Grade Level: Grades 6 – 8

Learning Objectives:

- Learn about the history of superheroes in the United States
- Develop an understanding of superheroes as cultural symbols
- Learn about artist Joan Ryan and her exploration of American culture
- Examine Joan Ryan's painting *Death Planet*

Outcomes:

- Students will learn about the rise of comic books and superhero movies
- Students will develop an understanding of cultural symbols
- Students will utilize critical thinking and visual skills by analyzing a piece of contemporary artwork by Joan Ryan

Associated Activities:

- Father's Day Activity Pack
- Make a Superhero Mask

Superheroes as Cultural Symbols

Introduction

Superhero narratives are a popular genre in the 21st century for movies, televised programs, print media, and comic books. In more recent years, Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Comics regularly release movies and are expanding their reach by producing televised series available on select streaming platforms. Each of Marvel's recent movies boasts a budget larger than $100 million; the budget for Avengers: Endgame was $356 million and brought in more than $2 billion dollars in box office revenue. Children and adult alike collect and play with action figures, read comic books, wear superhero themed clothing, and dress as their favorite characters for holidays and events. It is clear that superheroes are a marker of American culture, but what is the origin of superhero movies, and why have they taken the United States and the world by storm?

> **Learn more:** Watch **a 3-minute video** that surveys superhero comic book movies in the United States between the years 1936 and 2000

What is a superhero?

A superhero can be described as a selfless being (not always human!) with superpowers that seeks to keep safe and better the lives of those they are dedicated to protecting. Superheroes can be distinguished by their codenames, iconic costumes, and array of extraordinary abilities. At the core of each hero is their mission, powers, and

Figure 1 - Image from science20.com

identity. They typically keep their true identity hidden and attempt to live two lives—one where they regularly save the world and the other working a relatively normal day job.
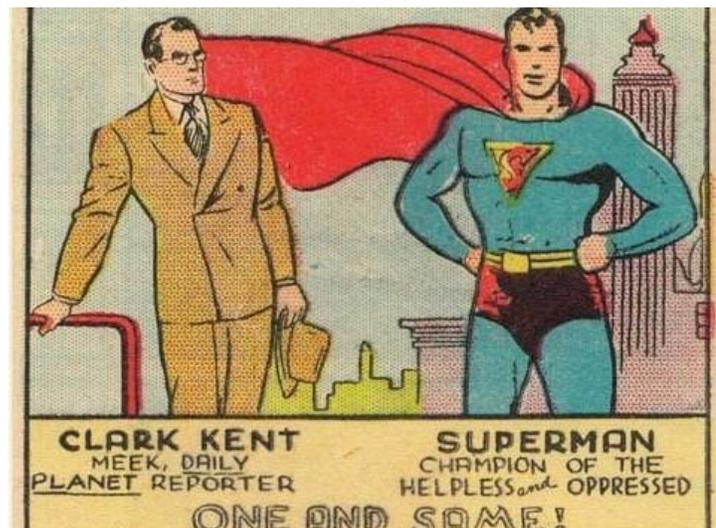
The Rise of the Superhero

Some have argued that superheroes are a type of modern mythology. Mythology is defined as, "a collection of myths, especially belonging to particular religious or cultural tradition." Ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians used storytelling and cultural icons, such as, Zeus or Athena (Greek Mythology), to make sense of their world and so do we in modern day! This means that rather than disregarding superhero movies as "just another movie" it is important to understand their historical origins and meanings.

In the United States comic books predate superhero movies and were often infused with social and political messages. 1938 marked the beginning of the "Golden Age of Comic Books" with the introduction of popular superheroes, such as, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Captain America, and Captain Marvel. An example of Superheroes as a cultural symbol is during World War II when many comics featured superheroes fighting and ultimately beating Nazis and Hitler. This is a classic example of comics following traditional mythology themes where the hero overcomes all odds.
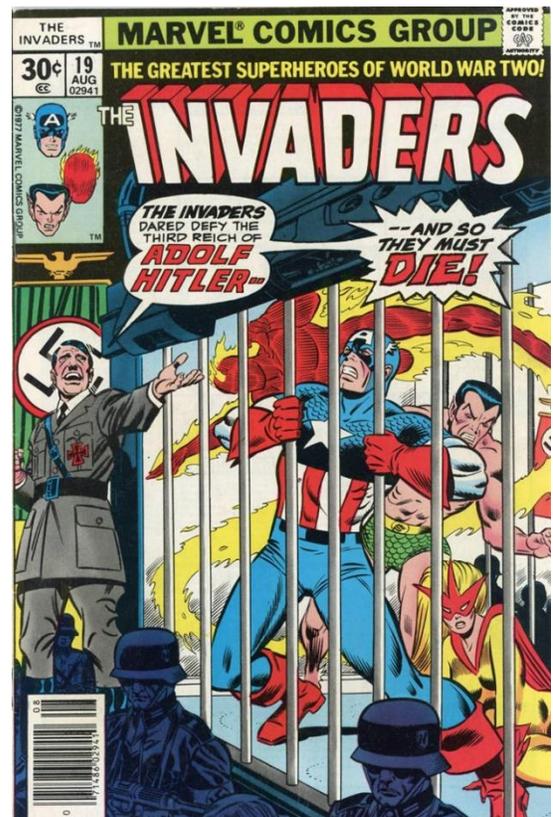

Figure 2 Image from tabletmag.com

Historically, comics were upbeat and carried positive messages, though in the 40's and 50's, horror comics were criticized by psychiatrists as corrupting young readers. By the 1980s, the "Modern Era" of comics began as Marvel and DC Comics battled to be the number one producer.

Local Connections: Southington, CT was home to James Aparo, an illustrator for DC Comics. He worked on renowned comics such as *Aquaman*, *The Brave and the Bold*, *Green Arrow*, and *The Spectre*. Learn more about Aparo's career and legacy: https://connecticuthistory.org/drawn-to-superheroes/

During this time, most of the today's well-known comic characters were created. The digital age has made superheroes so well known and accessible that superhero narratives are now made into films.

Any story reflects the values and feelings of their audience and time. This includes social relationships, gender roles, racial views, political ideas, legal processes, and national identity. For example, American superheroes triumphing over Nazis was meant to boost morale during a time of war and showcase America's feeling of superiority over Germany, Italy, and Japan. Most often comics used racist depictions of the Axis powers to further emphasize the positive attributes given to American heroes.

Questions for Consideration

- Consider the late 1930's, the time period that comic books first became popular. What was the United States like?
- What other events in U.S. History can you think of from 1930-2000?
- What events do you think superhero narratives embraced? What events do you think they ignored?
- What ideas and values do you think superheroes were meant to represent?
- How has the United States changed? How has it stayed the same?
- What do you think superheroes represent today?

Joan Ryan and Cultural Myths

Joan Ryan is Boston based artist and full Professor of painting and drawing at the Lesley University School of Art and Design. Ryan frames her work as a reconsideration of American cultural myths and identity. She draws from magazine images and advertisements in the 1950's and 1960's and reimagines them by also incorporating aspects of modern day into her art.

A central goal of her work is to make the viewer challenge their notions of American history versus the reality. While her work is not solely centered on superheroes as American icons, superheroes did take popular culture by storm largely in the mid-twentieth century and are often included in her artwork.
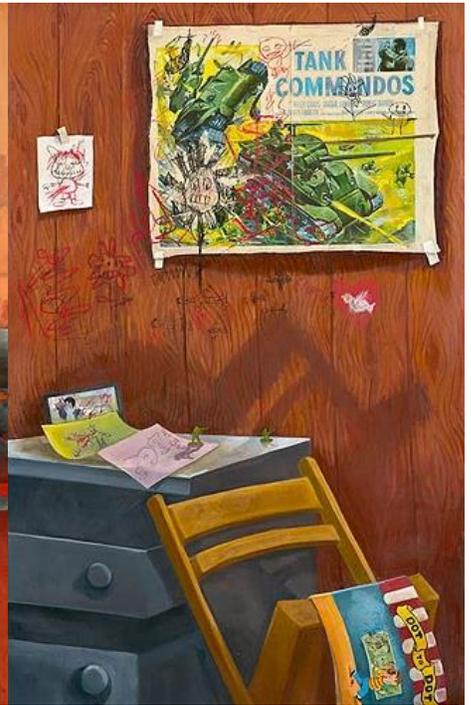
Figure 3 - Bang Bang   *Figure 3 - Girl Meets Boy*   *Figure 5 - Love Made Strong*

Art Analysis –*Death Planet*

Historically Comic books and today also superhero movies are used as a type of mythology to convey cultural ideas pertaining to many aspects of our lives. Using what you learned about the cultural importance of superheroes and Joan Ryan's work, examine the paintings above and *Death Planet* on the next page and consider the following questions:

- What objects do you see in *Death Planet*?
- As we know, Ryan includes both historical and modern objects, can you identify any of the objects? Are they historic or modern?
- Is there anything you do not recognize?
- What is the mood of the piece?
- How does her choice of colors and lighting support the mood?
- Do you think Ryan is being critical of superheroes and their cultural importance? Why or why not?
- What do you think the superheroes represent?