



UP front

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A few years ago, Hollywood heavyweight Steven Spielberg declared superhero movies to be today's Westerns. Around the same time, columnist David Crow wrote, "The superhero film is the defining entertainment of our time, as the Western (along with the musical) was for another."

On the surface, similarities between the genres are clear: Good-versus-evil, the underlying theme in both, is as ubiquitous as is heart-pounding action. But it's worth considering the subtle differences between a world in which a superhuman, as opposed to a sheriff, is the aspirational embodiment of good.

In a standard Western, both the good guy(s) and the bad guy(s) (yes, typically guys, not gals) are otherwise regular people. They don't possess exceptional physical or mental qualities. They aren't unusually large. They don't draw attention to themselves with gaudy adornments. They don't shoot fire from their fingertips. They don't have access to superior gadgetry: Both antagonist and protagonist rely on a few basic items - horse, hat, rope and gun. And it's not simply the guy with the biggest gun who prevails.

Alternatively, superheroes are...well, by definition...super. "Super," when used as a prefix, according to Merriam-Webster, means "over and above; higher in quantity, quality or degree; more than." A superhero typically serves and protects humankind. So, a superhero is "over and above" his human protectorate. Unlike a lawman in the Old West, a superhero is fundamentally different from, better and more powerful than the rest of us.

What is the implicit message in a superhero story, or a fairy tale (like the handsome prince-type)? That there are really hard problems or precarious situations beyond the capacity of "regular" people to solve. Our happiness...our survival...depends on intervention by some innately superior force. And, don't worry, help is on the way.

A Western is a libertarian allegory. There exists a basic cultural construct that includes societal norms (laws); but, the main combatants have no special advantage over one another. They fight with and over limited resources, and one wins (while the other sometimes dies). The bag of money returns to the bank and its rightful account-holders, or the outlaw spends it on a spree in Mexico, consuming tequila and saloon girls along the way.

Superheroes - they're the big government of kids' stories. At some point, you're going to need more than you can expect from yourself or your neighbors. Oftentimes, the "win" is little more than an aversion of catastrophe or crisis. For the moment, the world doesn't explode. What happens to Lex Luthor's evil business empire after his undoing? Funny how it never seems to get redistributed to everyday citizens in equal shares. In fact, it just sort of un-



ceremoniously disappears from public consciousness, the unnegotiated price of Superman's work. Meanwhile, the citizenry returns to its uninspiring workaday existence, all-but-certain that more insurmountable peril is coming soon (like...next month...in the old-comic-book time).

There are those who would connect religious doctrine to superhero fantasy, conflating the notion of God with the outlandish improbability of Aquaman, Captain Marvel or the Incredible Hulk. With religion, "the masses" surrender to a "higher authority," reliant upon it for salvation. Bad analogy, to my mind. In the classic version of Christian orthodoxy, the main character...the hero...dies about halfway through the book. Through power of example, He equips His followers to battle their own demons. Rarely does he personally fly in and rescue a damsel in distress. Never mind the discomfort of hanging from a wooden cross, Superman hasn't aged a day in 81 years.

Half a century ago, characters like those played by John Wayne were widely revered. Today, uniformed officers of the law are reviled by a significant segment of the American populace. Sheriffs, relatable heroes of a bygone era are villains in many of today's storylines.

Aristotle held that "Art imitates life." Oscar Wilde countered with "Life imitates art." In Wilde's world, our manufactured stories portend who we will become. Today, we are a culture that has discarded the Western for the superhero film. What does that suggest for tomorrow, then?

Scott A. Lawrence

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