The Psychology Behind Superhero Origin Stories
How does following the adventures of Spider-Man and Batman inspire us to cope with adversity?

Superhero origin stories help us cope with adversity. (www.halloweencostumes.com)

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“Why is every superhero movie an origin story?” complained Entertainment Weekly film critic Adam Markovitz after seeing a trailer for this summer's Man of Steel—yet another version of the 75-year-old Superman saga. Perhaps we love origin stories, Markovitz suggested, because they “show the exact moment when a normal guy goes from being Just Like Us to being somehow better, faster, stronger.”

I’m inclined to disagree. As a clinical psychologist who has written books about the psychology of superheroes, I think origin stories show us not how to become super but how to be heroes, choosing altruism over the pursuit of wealth and power. I’ve learned this through hundreds of conversations at comic book conventions, where fans have been remarkably candid about their lives and the inspiration they draw from superhero stories.

In one form or another the superhero origin story has been around for millennia: A hero battles “supernatural” forces and returns home “from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man,” as the mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote.
In my surveys of the genre, I’ve found that superheroes undergo three types of life-altering experiences that we can relate to.

The first is trauma, which lies at the heart of Batman’s origin story, in which Bruce Wayne dedicates himself to fighting crime after seeing his parents murdered. In real life, many people experience “stress-induced growth” after a trauma and resolve to help others, even becoming social activists.

The second life-altering force is destiny. Consider *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, about a normal teenager who discovers she’s the “Chosen One”—endowed with supernatural powers to fight demons. Buffy is reluctant to accept her destiny, yet she throws herself into her new job. Many of us identify with Buffy’s challenge (minus the vampires) of assuming a great responsibility that compels her to grow up sooner than she wants to.

Lastly, there’s sheer chance, which transformed a young Spider-Man, who was using his power for selfish purposes until his beloved uncle was murdered by a street thug. Spider-Man’s heroism is an example of how random adverse events cause many of us to take stock of our lives and choose a different path.

At their best, superhero origin stories inspire us and provide models of coping with adversity, finding meaning in loss and trauma, discovering our strengths and using them for good purpose. (Wearing a cape or tights is optional.)

Comic book writers could have chosen not to endow their characters with origin stories. (In fact, Batman’s back story wasn’t published until the comic’s seventh installment.) But those writers were keen observers of human nature. And they were able to translate those observations into captivating stories reflecting aspects of psychology that were confirmed by researchers decades later. In doing so, they tap into our capacity for empathy, one of the greatest powers of all.

Why Super Heroes Matter: Understanding the Mythology of Now

I’ll touch on this in terms of story-telling, but I want to start here, and mention that superheroes accomplish something in this regard outside of following mythic structure—they augment mythology itself.

In other words, the creation of superheroes and the books in which they are found functions as part of our own modern mythology; just as folktales, fairy tales and ancient myths say something about the cultures from whence they spring, superheroes are part of a uniquely American mythology. While comics and superheroes are no longer solely an American property, the invention of these things says a lot about the culture and attitude of our culture.

Comic books are the American mythology, and, much in the same way Zeus and Poseidon and Perseus come down to us from the Greeks, Superman and Batman and the X-Men represent, in some way, the culture that birthed them. These are our Gods and Heroes, our stories—and, in a way, our commentary on our society.

The early days of comic books clearly show the aspiration and American idealism of the time in which they were written—the feel good resolutions, the perfect heroes, the general attitude of optimism. Comic books have chronicled our history, and touched on World War II, the War on Drugs, the current climate of terrorism.

Superheroes have changed with the times, as have their costumes and accessories—but not as much as their attitudes; and, in fact, that attitude of comics in general. No longer completely bright and shiny, comics and comic characters are sometimes cynical and sardonic, with the heroes themselves being presented as increasingly flawed.

In other words, comics reflect the attitude and feeling of the society. This is our mythology, created and evolving decade after decade—and because of that, it’s our gift to the world, our mark on it.

If, like all great empires that have come and gone, America were to fall into the ashes, these stories and legends would still survive. Superman will be here long after any of us—the idea of him and who he was, the embodiment of the highest concentration of Idealism and Virtue will outlast the nation that gave him life, and perhaps even its memory.
With the representation of these heroes, this is the mythology that we give to the world years after we disappear.

That is one of the many reasons why I have always been completely fascinated by superheroes – one of the reasons I have loved them since I was a child, one of the reasons why my birthday cake was shaped like Superman, or Batman, or Wolverine every year. Because, even as a child, though I was incapable of processing their importance on a conscious level, my very human psyche recognized the need for them, and was inspired by them.

**Why We (All) Love Them: Understanding the Universal Appeal of Super Heroes**

Going further with mythology, we can look at things in terms of storytelling, and how myths of Superheroes, like all heroes, appeal to us on a number of levels; certainly, they excite us and delight us because they are cool, but that’s only the beginning. They also appeal to us on a deep psychological level, for reasons both obvious and subtle.

The prototypical journey of self-evolution, represented visually.

The subtle reasons are a bit beyond the scope of this post, as they primarily have to do with Mythic Structure and the Hero’s Journey, as defined by Joseph Campbell.

To give you a very brief description, Campbell was a mythologist who looked at myths across cultures, and focused not on how or where they diverged, but how they *converged*; that is, looking at what the myths from various cultures had in common.
What he discovered is that regardless of when they are written or how far apart geographically, myths from all cultures tend to follow a particular structure. Campbell came to call this the Monomyth, and it's the defining idea behind his work.

Again, a full discussion of the Monomyth is a bit too large for this writing—and I’ll be writing several pieces on this in the future—but the important thing is the impact of the idea.

The fact that nearly every culture tells stories in the same way says something about the collective mindset of humans as a whole: the structure satisfies something innate in us. The way that heroes emerge, evolve, and complete their journey is more than a story—it’s an emotional need that every person is attracted to on a level deep within the psyche of humanity itself.

In other words, we need heroes—super and otherwise—and we need their stories to be told in a way that satisfies us on levels beyond our understanding.

The Hero Himself And The Hero Inside: Understanding Super Heroes as a Reflection of Our Desire for Better Self

One of the reasons that hero stories—particularly those told in the Monomythic tradition—is that the hero is identifiable, immediately, as an extension of the Self. As a reader, you are inexorably drawn to the hero, learn things as he learns them, see the story from his perspective. Eventually, you identify with him.

We identify with the hero for a few reasons, not least of which is that, we want to be heroic: there hero is relatable because he stands for everything we would love to stand for, embodies everything we would like to see in ourselves.

However, most of us do not see ourselves as Superheroes, initially; and so it would be hard to identify with a hero if he starts off that way. This is where mythic structure becomes more important, because the Hero’s Journey is less about getting from Point A to Point B than it is about the changes that occur to the hero along the way.
Therefore, the identification happens in part, by virtue of the way we tell stories. We can identify with them at the beginning, and we grow as they grow, cultivating that identification and carrying that identification all the way to the end.

When we watch their struggles, we feel like it is us, and we can identify with them overcoming these challenges. In other words, we inherently want to experience the Quest and the growth it brings.

Looking at heroes allows the reader insight into how they might react in extraordinary situations, if and only if they had already gone through enough struggle, and had evolved to become something more; looking at them shows what we would like to be – the best version of ourselves.

*Culturally,* these stories give us a greater understanding of and context for conduct within our society, as well as an idealized version of what that society can achieve.

*Personally,* following the Hero on his journey allows us to realize the potential for and begin to fantasize about our own apotheotic moment: a moment wherein we become whole in the highest sense of the word; a moment wherein we could set aside fear and claim the ability to do what is right or needed. And so, in a very true sense, Hero stories are not only inspirational, but aspirational; they allow us to see the potential for change, first within ourselves, and in the world.

Or, perhaps better stated, these stories help us realize that striving for positive personal change places us in the best position to change the world for the better.
Closing Thoughts

If I had to summarize all of this in a single sentence, it would be this: Superheroes (and superhero movies) are universally appealing—and important—to us because, very simply, they inspire us to greater heights.

And being inspired is what it’s all about; superhero movies teach you to want to develop yourself so that you can help others; they encourage you to be a hero so that you can be heroic, for others. In the context of training, they encourage you to get better so that you can be better—for others. I know that’s why I do it.