

KILLING SUPERMAN

*The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence.*¹

Macbeth 1.3.113-122

—William Shakespeare

Mom & Superman

It's time to kill Superman. Sounds terrible, but all tragic heroes must die so they can evoke enough pity and fear to loosen the stubborn resolve it takes for us to account for our own flaws, be they tragic or comic.

I was eleven years old, already an addicted reader of comic books. All comics: the Sunday "Funny Pages,"² *Mad*, *Cracked*, DC Comics, *Archie*, Charlton Comics, *Classic Comics* (not so much), and the Marvel Group. I was particularly taken by the posthumously published EC paperbacks, *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *Weird Science*. These were macabre, violent, dark, and provocative comics that jarred HUAC to denounce EC's stable of artists and writers as Communists and bad for the kids and create the Comic Book Code of America in 1954 (CCA).

Anything with panels, graphics, exaggerations, and brief dialogue won me over immediately. It wasn't until I was fourteen and read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* that the "macabre, violent, dark, and provocative" set me on a path to see the world as it is.

Like Golding, I was fascinated with island stories, especially those whose characters are marooned and have to fight and use their wits to survive. Other than comics this was the only literature I read. Stories like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, and H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* were transformative for a lot of young readers. Good stories, fascinating characters, instructions on how to build treehouses and island fortresses, and enough farfetchedness (re: Wells) to assure the unsophisticated reader that fiction is stranger than truth. When Golding decided to write about what would really happen to privileged British boys stranded on an island, I was just beginning to see the compelling anthropological merit of island stories, but especially his story, as it reflects on the deeply deceptive matters of human beings in conflict with interior and exterior natures.³ When I found out later in a BBC interview that he wrote *Lord of the Flies* as a microcosmic analog on Nazi

¹*Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 113-122

² Remember the scene in *The Godfather* when Don Corleone is counseling his son, Michael, on who's going to betray him? He then asks about his grandson, Anthony, and Michael says, "He's smarter than me. [...] He can read the funny papers." The Don smiles and says, "the funny papers..." as if he's never had time for a good laugh. Shoulda read the "funny papers," Vito. That's what I think.

³ Not to mention that these privileged, bossy-pants kids could not muster the effort to build a damn thing!

Germany and The Holocaust, any fond reflections on my former comic book world ceased to exist. What followed were maturing suspicions regarding anything with absolutes. And what could be more absolute than the super hero myth, and especially the greatest of all superheroes, Superman?

Back to innocence: I kept my comic book collections in boxes, carted them around every time my family moved. I read them on the beach, under my blankets by flashlight, and hidden in my notebooks at school. As a teacher I had a grudging admiration for those students who thought they could get away with that in my class.

Comics were a fundamental part of my education and imagination. I believe I learned how to read through comics, became acquainted with the shifting paradoxes of time and space via comic book storyboard panels, learned to recognize the aesthetics of visual geography and composition in photography, admired the brevity of short conversations, and became familiar with the power of the exclamation point, for which the nuns at St. Joseph's Grammar School begged me not to use to end every sentence! I'd say that for kids like me basic visual literacy begins with comics, as well as the fine art of brevity when conversing with adults:

Brevity Hath No Soul: A Short Play

MOM: Skippy, how was school today?

ME: Ok (*I hate school*).

MOM: How are you doing in math?

ME: Ok (*I'm failing Geometry for the second time*).

MOM: How are you liking *Lord of the Flies* so far?

ME: It's ok (*They killed Simon! Jesus, Mom! WTF?*)

Unlike most boys, superheroes captured my imagination until they didn't. I grew bored with how DC's *The Adventures of Superman* became predictable, driven by formula, plotted with increasingly absurd lengths of what he could do with his powers and, as absurd, how many different forms of kryptonite ravaged him. I'm not even mentioning the impossibly cosmic and cosmically stupid galactic space beings with whom he had to share space (and time).

More and more, an odd god-like divinity was conferred upon Superman's virtues and his omnipotence and invulnerability. I didn't know it at the time, but this near deification replicated the tactical error we make when distancing ourselves purposely between the god we adore and want to emulate and the god we imagine will rescue us—the distance distorting the moral accountability we have towards ourselves and each other. God-Almighty! Why won't we even try to lift a finger?

Then I started reading Marvel Comics and found myself re-grounded, closer to the heroic, but flawed everyman, like me—the conflicts stirring within my own mortal coil as once-familiar shared human symmetries. In most Marvel titles there was also the presence of the “macabre, violent, dark, and provocative” subtexts of EC Comics legend. It stands to reason, as key Marvel illustrators and writers—Jack Kirby and Wallace Wood—were outcasts from the EC stable, bringing darker subtleties to the new menagerie of super and not-so-superheroes. Marvel's chief,

Stan Lee, was also in his own rebellion against the CCA, protesting its restrictions regarding the naturalism of comic book noir.

Marvel Comics appealed to a deeper narrative humanity, often creating a canvas upon which to write and draw a reader's sympathies and epiphanies. Indeed. I was in great sympathy with Peter Parker, a bit intimidated by Sue Storm, and wanting to hang out with The Thing because, while he was a lumpy and freakish and had teenage complexion issues, his juvenile sarcasm appealed to me. Plus, his blind girlfriend, Alicia, was the perfect epiphany for a shy boy like me. Would she "see" in me what she "saw" in Ben? Is love really blind? More importantly, can a super hero find love?

The motions of youth demand that we seek meaning. Our habits and plans aid and abet this search. Every Tuesday I'd sneak out of St. Joseph's school yard during recess, skip over to Vaillancourt's Pharmacy and plunk down less than a dollar twenty-five in saved-up lunch money for that week's newly-published Marvel titles (they were twelve cents each back then). I bought them all and even sent away for back issues. I had the entire collections of *Fantastic Four* (subtitled "The World's Greatest Comic," btw), *Spider Man*, *The Avengers*, *Ant Man*, *The X-Men*, *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *Daredevil*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Dr. Strange*, *Sgt. Fury and His Howlin' Commandos*—all #1's to whatever number for every title. What a collection!

Those comics are now worth a fortune. I stopped reading them when I grew more interested in music, baseball, and girls. But the boxes of them followed me around with a few more moves and I eventually gave them all away when I went to college. My mom said it would be very nice to give them to a children's hospital, so I did. At least a million dollars worth of comic books to sick kids. Yep. What a guy!

Brevity Hath No Soul: A Short Play, Part 2:

MOM: Skippy, what are you going to do with all these comic books?

ME: I dunno (*Stop bugging me about this, Mom!*).

MOM: Do you read them anymore?

ME: Sometimes (*Not really*).

MOM: Why don't you give them to some little kids in the neighborhood?

ME: Who? (*Have you lost your mind?*).

MOM: You're a little too old to be reading comic books, Skippy.

ME: Ya think? (*Just you wait, Mom! Pretty soon America will be a comic book!*).

MOM: You know what you should do? Give them to the North Shore Children's Hospital. They'd love these comic books.

ME: Ok (*Soul retrieved*).

Nine years ago I moved back to Salem and a few months ago—about fifty years from giving my childhood fortune away—I finished unpacking the last boxes of things that, for some reason, I had kept from those halcyon years. Discoveries:

- > *Sub Mariner* #1 comic (Want it? \$100,000)
- > *Beatles Monthly* #'s 1 & 2 (\$50,000 each)
- > The original map of Disneyland, circa 1957 (\$1 million)

- > *Mother Jones* magazine #1 (\$5.00)
- > *Heavy Metal* magazine #1 (\$25,000)
- > The oversized *Superman Versus Spider-Man* “Jumbo” comic (best offer)
- > Two copies of the *Ramparts* issue about the “Death of the Oceans” (5 cents)
- > 1961 DC Comic Annual—*Imaginary Tales* (priceless, and you’ll soon know why).

In the middle of the 80’s, Hollywood caught up with Stan Lee’s empire of traumatized superheroes. Yes, the 1940’s studio system—specifically, Republic Pictures—actually produced a *Captain Marvel* episodic movie series, but back then Marvel Comics was geared to a cult readership that system ignored. We even had a super-nerdy club: “The Merry Marvel Marching Society,” and I still have the flexi-disc to prove it (\$1 trillion, thank you!).

TV took a chance with *The Incredible Hulk*, but the initial shopping mall palace cinema default would be to DC’s Man of Steel. With the success of Christopher Reeve’s dashing Superman and the “new” realism of taking flight, the comic book genre blasted off. And after *Batman* used themes of trauma to pay due homage to long suffering pulp comic fans, Marvel stepped in with its growing stable of somewhat-traumatized heroes and has never looked back.

Unfortunately, after X amount of topped-tiered film grosses, the genre is once again stale and overpopulated—trauma notwithstanding—except, ironically, for some of the *Batman* entrees slipping into the mainstream of the otherwise semi-adult fantasy film consumer diet. I say that because clearly almost everything in terms of action superhero films is geared to the twelve-year old male.

And another thing: It dawned on me that superpowers are overrated, especially if they are only going to be used to smash things and visually replicate the WHAM!-CRUNCH!-THWAT!-POW! over-modulation of comic book action’s throttling descriptions and exclamations! I’m tempted to say that comic book theatrics are the same kind of theatrics that mirror a society that thinks more of itself than it should. I say this for a lot of reasons, but in terms of America being an “action nation,” we are far from it.

We’ve lost two wars since comic books surfaced into the juvenile pop mainstream, skeddaddled or finessed other military incursions, and we are now reluctant to enter one that has existential consequences for all who live on this planet. I’m not smart enough to know what should be done, but doing something other than footing the bill would go a long way in defining the exceptionalism of a nation that could actually bring Superman’s motto—“Truth, Justice and the American way”—to other nations. By shedding our cloak of braggadocio and flexing a little bit of our muscle in the direction of those places where another superstate uses its own super powers to simply slaughter innocent people, the US of A may give coin to the proclamation, “Never Again!”

I thought we were all in this together! This is MAD!⁴ Great Caesar’s Ghost! We have spent a lot of money pumping up the volume of our military prowess, but do nothing but whisper economic threats and fill the trough of corporate war profiteers. This is what happens to any nation that cannot see through the paradoxes of wished-for power and fanciful invincibility.

⁴ MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction—the understanding that adversarial nations using nuclear arsenals is a ‘Catch-22’ End Times imbroglio. Worked for a while, but now we are at the nuclear rubicon. What now, generals, admirals, anyone—Bueller?

This is why I say, alas: It's time to kill Superman. Not the man—the conceit. It's America's conceit, and it needs to humble itself to the progress much smaller and more rational and humble nations make by not spending so much of its substance on all things military and getting on instead with living and not killing. Oh, yes, super-naïve, but not really. Super naïveté is our super power. There's dozens, maybe hundred of books, that have unmasked the truth about how America destabilizes too much of the world, not to bring about democracy, but to open markets, steal valuable resources, exploit cheap labor, and install leaders who are friendly to our corporations and enrich themselves by doing so. Let's face it, while we rail against Russia's obscene oligarchs, we are equal to their oligarchy and may soon share in the austerity resulting from monolithic wealth. Austerity is the inflection point for all kinds of fascist madness and chaos.

We need to grow up. Look at us; look at America: Politically divided, fat and unhealthy, prime polluters, increasingly sub-literate, incurious about science and history, indifferent, often hostile to our own diversity, endlessly distracted by the buffoonery of instant culture and our creeping inclinations towards autocracy, theocracy, oligarchy, and catastrophic debt. We can't even follow simple directions to care for ourselves and each other. Compassion now is confused with woke-ness; the benign is replaced by the malignant. We are a political and global policy simpleton and an embarrassment—our politicians and courts owned and operated by international conglomerates and dark money donors, the latter maneuvering justice for their gain.

We are deceived by a Constitution that easily summons misinterpretation, abuse, and comforts our indifference to our daily mass shootings and evisceration of our reproduction and voting rights. Our quality of life grows more impoverished year by year, our treasure and substance squandered by military excess. And, yes, for a nation that loves war, we can't even morally rise to the occasion of participating in stopping a bonafide genocide masquerading as war that, if allowed to persist, will eventually swallow more nations and consequently make everything I just mentioned worse. It will be World War III without a name tag. Oh, sure—we can finance it from the bottomless ephemeral credit access we borrow on our good name, but by any other metric, we are broke and biding time and looking for business, even if it is war-profiteering. As former US Ambassador to the UN and author of *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power asserts: "Silence in the face of atrocity is not neutrality; silence in the face of atrocity is acquiescence." Sure, money talks, but talk is cheap when action is required.

Is this the American Way about which Superman frets? Which reminds me: What does this have to do with comic books? We are a comic book nation and behave like one. EC and Marvel comic books taught me that, but I didn't realize the deeper implications of their manifest instruction until I was eighteen. Up to that point I had been sleeping.

If it took a few conservative psychoanalysts to determine that EC Comics were bad for America, surely we can concede that if we paid closer attention to the dark side of American power that emerged as a consequence of the Cold War we might be wiser for the effort. Alas, we chose to censor and sleep through our once secretly, now blatantly, focused military and economic hegemonies. I have to ask, though: Where the hell was Superman during all this instruction? Where were we?

Superman was doing his day job. Ahhh... the Day Job—the first Ring of Hell. Who has time to think when you have a day job? And most of us have day jobs. Hey, I don't want to write this. I mean who the hell wants to read it? Do I speak some truth? Is it arguable? Of course. Therefore, I must default to the wisdom of the ancients—the old philosophers who folded their ideas about tragic nature into human nature to resolve that courage is oft born from cowardice. Not willful cowardice, but the blind cowardice that obstructs an essential recognition of the flaws in our nature. That is the point, which is to summon the courage to face our collective *hamartia*, the tragic flaws all possible overtures to attaining greatness possess. So defined by Aristotle, the subtext of *hamartia* is unrelenting *hubris*—the excessive pride and conceit that confers upon the tragic hero an ignorance that, unaddressed, dooms the inevitable face-to-face encounter with a *nemesis*. For a superstate, or rather, a *tragic-state*, like ours, who is our *nemesis*? It is us, and it's in the form of a claim to exceptionalism that looks more like perfidy than puffery.

I partly blame the ethos of Superman for this deeply flawed conceit and for the seemingly endless array of failures and disappointments in us to live up to his galactic promise. It's time to kill him. So I did. I wrote a story treatment, based it on an old imaginary comic book tale about his death, shaped it into a screenplay, and tried to reach out to the film industry. I expected and encountered indifference and a warning by a player that the industry was a closed one, that Superman's trademark owner wanted nothing to do with Superman being turned into an existential hero.⁵ That's what I did: I made him a martyr to our magnificent conceit. And I did it knowing that my effort had no chance of becoming the flickering light in a movie theatre. That still doest mean I don't want to kill him. The supreme, maybe comic, irony is that I once loved Superman... until I didn't.

Superman is no longer relevant in a world over-populated with superheroes. The ratio between hyper-powerful beings and ordinary beings further marginalizes the latter while the former become so specialized that they marginalize each other. With whom does a kid identify? In these times of specialization, generalization become the unique promise of wholeness. Yet, despite Superman being “wholier” than the rest, why is he an also-ran in the iconography of comic book heroes? Why can't we relate to him in a deeper way, aside from the fact that he was fiction created out of thin air? Do we not long to be whole instead of parts? Maybe we are truly just gas and dust particles. Worse, maybe we are fiction created out of thin air.

It's not like he doesn't try to relate to us. He hides behind Clark Kent, a secret identity so modest and dumbfounded by his counterfeit ordinariness that most of us who aspire to any spark of might and right find him repulsive. And how many fans no longer see Superman's honed persona of humility as a virtue? That said, we certainly could use more of this virtue in our national claim to exceptionalism.

Our form of humility is a Fifties masque, worn over the grin, smirk, and grimace of the insidious ambitions of realpolitik, these ambitions masquerading as the schizophrenic market imperatives of an America as a business first, a nation of citizens second. We are a costumed people. Just as Clark wears the unflattering, ruffled suit of a 1940's beaten-down daily news

⁵ I even had to re-design the cover of this little book, as Amazon and Warner Brothers were concerned about my use of the Superman insignia infringing on DC's “property.” Super glad Betsy Ross did not trademark stars and stripes.

reporter, and Superman clings to his pre-spandex, form-fitting, muscle-flattering hero costume, this dichotomy of American “fashion” is symbolic of how we present ourselves to the world, yet unable to locate any compromise that subverts the emptiness of first impressions.

Superman, the Concept, confuses the issue of who we are and who we want to be. We can no longer pretend to be the golly-gee, wild-West, aw-shucks-plain-folk we aspire and perspire to be, especially in light of the super-ethos of the material pragmatist imperatives we pursue. After the “Good War,” as we were GI-Jonesing into a new labor force and building cookie cutter houses in our new, safe, white suburban enclaves, our corporate-military-industrial complex went into super gear to bring about this righteous chest-pounding and God-given claim to exceptionalism, despite the warning of President Eisenhower—on the surface, a perfect model of the modern major general whose immutable persona was cut from the cloak of humility.⁶ But who is mightier than God? It does not surprise me that the more we ignore Ike’s super power of prescience, the more we rely on God to step into the shoes of Superman, USA. God and Superman: avatars awaiting our thoughts and prayers.

Thoughtful humility gives birth to quiet outrage, which should lead to deliberate action, not mere reaction, which seems to be our cultural superpower. If I were in charge of DC Comics, I’d have Clark muscle-up in front of the press corps to get the day’s exclusive or tell that president, governor or bureaucrat to read Ibsen if they want to know who the real enemy of the people is. I’d have him tell Perry White in no uncertain terms that he was not going to play tag-team infotainment journalism with Lois Lane. For the sake of Clark’s suppressed libido, I’d have him flirt with Lois and bad mouth Superman as a lost cause, not worthy of her wit and tenacity. He should do a deep dive into his friendship with Jimmy Olsen (he did, after all, give him a watch!) and reveal his secret identity. Who needs peace of mind and a buddy more than Superman, whose idea of a vacation is fortressing himself in solitude in the Arctic among the polar bears and penguins? And if he didn’t want to endanger his friends by shedding this humility, he should ask Perry White to assign him to an overseas bureau so his alias can crush our permanent adversaries while he does the tough work of a war correspondent. He’d be doing both personas a big favor. Damn! If need be, he could fly home in seconds to rescue Lois and Jimmy and the rest of us.

Can you imagine the grownup plot twists of a Superman who engaged the larger world that we continue to either exploit or ignore at our own peril? He would become the super ambassador of all ambassadors. Forget Lois, Ka-El (Superman’s birth name); partner up with Marie Yovanovitch or Fiona Hill for a more fruitful d’affaire d’heart. Maybe “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” would actually mean something more than a pre-Cold War comic book motto. As the world struggles to right itself, I’d have AOC and the rest of The Squad summon Superman to a House Hearing and grill him on just what the hell he, as an emissary of “We the People,” has been up to.

⁶ Old “I Like Ike” was more sheepish than humble, more engaged in golf and fishing than governing, unwilling to confront the Commie-baiting Joseph McCarthy, and slow to contemplate the long-term effects of racial justice and covert military interventions abroad.

Do something, DC (or Warner Brothers—whoever your corporate masters are). Look to the promise of the tragic myth itself, which, within its noble heart and at its novel best, pursues myth in glorious, unpredictable, and sobering detail.