# Contents

MEDIA CONVERGENCE AND SELLING HERO CULTURE

# The Definition of the Superhero

*Peter Coogan*

**Genre**

Just what is a superhero? On the face of it, it seems pretty obvious. Superman is a superhero; Captain Marvel is a superhero; Spider-Man is a superhero. On the other hand, it also seems pretty obvious which characters are not superheroes. The Virginian is a cowboy, not a superhero. Sherlock Holmes is a detective, not a superhero. Rico "Little Caesar" Bandello is a gangster, not a superhero. But the question that arises is, *how* do we know which of these characters are superheroes and which are not? The answer is genre. Each of these characters belongs to a genre and is identified with it. But unlike the western, the detective, and the gangster genres, the superhero genre is not well defined. Typically, discussions of the superhero fall into two categories—those that take the superhero genre for granted and discuss the obvious examples, such as those noted above; and those that ignore the genre and declare any protagonist with extraordinary abilities as a superhero, including characters such as Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, and Gilgamesh. But an understanding of the superhero genre is crucial to the definition of the superhero because the definition arises from the genre.

A genre is a privileged story form, "part of a limited number of story forms that have been refined into formulas because of their unique social and/or aesthetic qualities" (Schatz 1981, 16). As such, it is a coherent, value-laden narrative system that has emerged through a process of commercial selection and repetition into "a familiar, meaningful system that can be *named* as such" (Schatz 1981, 16). This definition provides three tests to establish the existence of the superhero genre. Once the genre has been shown to exist as an independent genre, the elements that are taken for granted in some discussions and ignored in others can be elucidated and the definition posited above explained. The three tests are the ideas of privilege, refinement, and naming.

Privilege is demonstrated through the imitation and repetition of a story formula. Richard Slotkin writes, "The primary audience for any cultural production in modern society consists of those who do the same work [creating cultural products], or who participate in its production, reproduction, marketing, or distribution" (Slotkin 1985, 30-31). This primacy is grounded in the fact that only if culture workers see a character, novel, television show, film, or comic book as worth imitating because of potential sales will they create similar offerings for consumers to accept or reject. Only certain popular story patterns combine "archetypal story forms in terms of culturally specific materials" in such a way as to produce the cycle of production, popularity, and reproduction that might be called "commercial natural selection" which operates between producers and consumers (Cawelti 1976, 6).

Imitation and repetition of the superhero genre started quickly as Superman's popularity led to the creation of other superheroes. Both Wonder Man and Batman were created at the instigation of editors who hoped to capitalize on the success of Superman. Wonder Man—a blond, red-costumed superhero with powers duplicating those of Superman—had his first and last appearance in *Wonder Comics* #1 (May 1939). Wonder Man's creation was catalyzed by Victor Fox, who was

contracted with the Will Eisner-Jerry Iger shop to produce a knockoff, saying, "I want another Superman" (qtd. in Benton 1992, 22). At almost the exact same time, the editors at DC Comics wanted to capitalize on the success of Superman on their own. Vincent Sullivan, referring to Superman, asked artist Bob Kane, "Do you think you could come up with another superhero?" (qtd. in Murray 1998, 30). Kane and his friend and writer Bill Finger delivered up Batman, who debuted in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939). Both Wonder Man and Batman imitated and repeated certain conventions present in Superman—the costume, the codename, the vigilante stance, the secret identity. Wonder Man directly imitated Superman's superpowers, but Batman moved the genre forward by substituting detective ability, fighting skill, and human muscular abilities for Superman's science-fictional superpowers.

The test for refinement into formula can most easily be demonstrated by successful parody. Successful parody is a sign that the conventions and straightforward message of a genre have saturated the audience (Schatz 1981, 39). Unsuccessful parody can indicate that the audience is not yet familiar enough with the genre to appreciate the subversion of its conventions. Thus parody—successful parody—clearly indicates that a set of conventions have been refined into a formula and that a genre has been fully established in the minds of the producers and consumers, who perceive the humor of the parody within the context of the genre, not merely as a humorous text.

The first superhero parody came in *All-American Comics* #20 (November 1940) with the Red Tornado's appearance in Sheldon Mayer's boy-cartoonist strip, "Scribbly." Mayer was responsible for editing the All-American Group of comics, which featured the Flash, Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the other members of the Justice Society, so he clearly knew the superhero genre well. The first two pages of "Scribbly" from *All-American* #20 feature many of the conventions of the superhero genre, but played for laughs. The limited authorities—

represented by Police Chief Gilhooley—can do nothing when Tubbs Torpino's gang kidnaps Ma Hunkle's daughter Sisty and her playmate Dinky. The costume convention is foregrounded when Ma Hunkle's neighbor Scribbly claims, "I betcha if th' Green Lantern wus on th' job we'd have th' kids back in a minute!" and then explains that Green Lantern is "a guy who just waits for somethin' like this to happen, an' then he puts on his mysterious costume so nobody'd recognize him, an' . . ." "An Zingo! He comes to th' rescue," finishes Ma Hunkle's son (Mayer 1981, 42). Ma Hunkel focuses on the idea of a costume, mentioning it in the next two panels before disappearing "in a trance" (Mayer 1981, 42). She appears in the final panel of the story as the Red Tornado, dressed in red-flannel long underwear and a helmet made from a stockpot. The ensuing adventures make fun of every element of the superhero genre, particularly the identity convention. In "his" secret identity the Red Tornado is Mrs. Hunkel, a housewife, and "he" is frequently referred to as the Red Tomato. The villains this superhero takes on include a shoplifter, a neighborhood bully, storekeepers who overcharge their customers, and a newspaper editor who will not give Scribbly a raise for his work as a cartoonist, hardly threats to world peace. The Red Tornado works as a parody of the superhero generally, not as a specific parody of Superman and not as a parody of pulp mystery men. The Red Tornado therefore suggests producers and consumers mutually understood the conventions of the genre by 1940.

Using the naming test, we can determine roughly when the superhero genre was recognized as a genre. Abner Sundell, a Golden Age writer and editor at MLJ and Fox Publications, wrote a guide to selling superhero scripts called "Crash the Comics" that appeared in *The Writer's 1942 Yearbook*. In it he discusses the hero, how he should be treated, how to create good villains, how to plot a story, and how to submit scripts. Tellingly, Sundell never defines the term *superhero*, and he uses it throughout the article without explanation or qualification;

moreover, all the heroes he discusses are clearly superheroes—Batman, Captain America, the Flag, Samson, Magno and Davey, the Wizard, and Roy the Superboy, etc. So the genre's name, as understood and used by its producers, can be dated to 1942.[1] But Sundell's casual use of *superhero* indicates that the public understood what the term meant because his audience was not comics creators, but potential comics creators—people who might be interested in selling their work to comics publishers. Sundell must have been certain that his audience would understand what *superhero* meant.

**Mission, Powers, Identity**

Judge Learned Hand ruled in favor of DC Comics in the lawsuit they brought against Victor Fox for the publication of *Wonder Comics*. This ruling shows that the definitional characteristics of mission, powers, and identity are central to the superhero genre because they are central to Hand's determination that Wonder Man copied Superman.

Hand refers to both Superman and Wonder Man as "champion[s] of the oppressed" who combat "evil and injustice" (*Detective v. Bruns* 1940), a summation of the superhero's mission. The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further himself. The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic. Without this mission, a superhero would be merely an extraordinarily helpful individual in a crisis (like Hugo Hercules, the eponymous super strong hero of J. Kroener's 1904-1905 comic strip, who might set a train back on the tracks or lift an elephant so that a lady could pick up her handkerchief). He could be someone who gains personally from his powers (like Hugo Danner, the

super powered protagonist of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, who uses his super strength to earn a living as a circus strongman); or a super villain (if he pursued his interests at the legal, economic, or moral expense of others, like Dr. Hugo Strange, an early foe of Batman).

But the mission convention is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed. . . sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need" i.e. to "benefit mankind"(Siegel 1997, 1). This mission is not greatly different from that of the pulp mystery man Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it" (Robeson 1964, 4). Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of adventure heroes of the dime novels, pulps, film serials, or radio programs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The superhero's mission does distinguish him from certain hero types, though. Many western and science fiction heroes do not have the generalized mission of the superhero or pulp hero because they are not seeking to do good for the sake of doing good. Instead, many of these heroes reluctantly get drawn into defending a community. Superheroes actively seek to protect their communities by preventing harm to all people and by seeking to right wrongs committed by criminals and other villains.

Superpowers are one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre. Hand identifies Superman and Wonder Man as having "miraculous strength and speed" and being "wholly impervious" to harm (*Detective v. Bruns*, 1940). He cites instances when each crushes a gun in his hands, rips open steel doors, stops bullets, and leaps over the buildings of modern cities. He notes that each is designated the "strongest man in the world". These abilities are the heroes' powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—and they are the first area of real difference between Superman

and his pulp and science fiction predecessors. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science-fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner in *The Gladiator* was fairly bullet proof and possessed super-strength and super-speed. In the first issue of *Action Comics*, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner does. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as science-fiction supermen had done.

The identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename. In his ruling Hand identifies the two elements that make up the identity convention of the superhero when he notes that both *Action Comics* and *Wonder Comics* portray characters with heroic codenames—Superman and Wonder Man—who conceal "skintight acrobatic costume[s]" beneath "ordinary clothing" (*Detective v. Bruns*, 1940).

The identity convention most clearly marks the superhero as different from his predecessors. Characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro established the dual identity convention that was to become the hallmark of the superhero genre. However, the code names of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography. The Scarlet Pimpernel does not resemble the little roadside flower whose name he takes, except perhaps in remaining unnoticed in his Percy Blakeney identity; Zorro does not resemble the fox whose Spanish name he has taken, except perhaps in his ability to escape his pursuers. These minimal connections between heroic codename and character are not foregrounded in the hero's adventures, but those adventures did serve as models for the creators of superheroes in their portrayals of their heroes' foppish alter egos.

The connection of name to inner character or biography came with pulp mystery men like the Shadow and Doc Savage. The Shadow is a

shadowy presence behind events, not directly seen by his enemies or even his agents; thus his name expresses his character. Doc Savage's name combines the twin thrusts of childhood tutelage by scientists—the skill and rationality of a doctor and the strength and fighting ability of a wild savage, thus embodying his biography. The heroic identities of Superman and Batman operate in this fashion. Superman is a super man and represents the best humanity can hope to achieve; his codename expresses his inner character. The Batman identity was inspired by Bruce Wayne's encounter with a bat while he was seeking a disguise able to strike terror into the hearts of criminals; his codename embodies his biography.

The difference between Superman and earlier figures such as the Shadow or Doc Savage lies in the element of identity central to the superhero, the costume. Although Superman was not the first costumed hero, his costume marks a clear and striking departure from those of the pulp heroes. A pulp hero's costume does not emblematize the character's identity. The slouch hat, black cloak, and red scarf of the Shadow or the mask and fangs of the Spider disguise their faces but do not proclaim their identities. Superman's costume does, particularly through his "S" chevron.[2] Similarly, Batman's costume proclaims him a bat man, just as Spider-Man's webbed costume proclaims him a spider man. These costumes are iconic representations of the superhero's identity.

The iconicity of the superhero costume follows Scott McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1993, 30). In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud argues that pictures vary in their levels of abstraction, from completely realistic photographs to nearly abstract cartoons. Moving from realism to abstraction in pictures is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (McCloud 1993, 30). This stripping down amplifies meaning by focusing attention on the idea represented by the picture. McCloud explains, "By de-emphasizing the appearance of

the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (McCloud 1993, 41). The superhero costume removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume.

Color plays an important role in the iconicity of the superhero costume. In his chapter on color, McCloud shows the way the bright, primary colors of superhero comics are "less than expressionistic," but therefore more iconic due to their simplicity (McCloud 1993, 188). This simplification makes the superhero costume more abstract and iconic, a more direct statement of the identity of the character. The heroes of pulps, dime novels, and other forms of heroic fiction are not similarly represented as wearing such abstract, iconic costumes.

The chevron especially emphasizes the character's codename and is itself an iconic statement of that identity. Pulp-hero costumes do not similarly simply state the character's identity. The Shadow's face—the most common way the character is identified on pulp covers—while somewhat abstract because of the way the nose and eyes stand out, contains too many specific details to reach the level of the chevron's abstraction. The chevron by itself—Superman's S or Batman's bat—can stand for the superhero, as is evident in chevron-embossed merchandise that flows from the film studios with each new superhero film.

The superhero costume functions within the narrative in a way that the pulp-hero costume does not. Once the genre was established, the costume identifies the superhero's role in a criminal encounter. In *Nightwing: Year One*, Dick Grayson abandons his Robin identity and visits Superman in Metropolis, where the two confront a pair of suicide bombers about to kill the President. Superman stops one bomber, while Dick Grayson goes after the other a block away. Superman's bomber immediately understands who Superman is and why his bomb has failed. Dick Grayson, dressed in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt,

confronts his bomber but provokes only puzzlement. Grayson thinks, "Without the mask and company colors I had to explain myself. Obviously there's a slight credibility gap when you're a hero in a hooded sweatshirt and tennies" (Beatty and Dixon 2005, 8, 10). The superhero's costume places his actions in a comprehensible context, much as a police officer's uniform or a surgeon's scrubs would. It announces who the superhero is and explains what he is doing to the people in his world and the reader as well. Thus the costume is generically functional for both author and audience.

The importance of the costume convention in establishing the superhero genre can be seen in characters who debut with mystery-man costumes but develop regular superhero costumes. Both the Crimson Avenger and the Sandman first appeared between the debut of Superman and that of Batman, before the conventions of the superhero genre had been fully implemented and accepted.[3] The Crimson Avenger begins with a Shadow-inspired costume of a slouch hat, a large domino mask, and a red cloak. In *Detective Comics* #44 (October 1940), his costume changes to red tights with yellow trunks and boots, a smaller domino mask, a hood with a ridge running from his forehead backward, and a chevron of an eclipsed sun. His ward and sidekick Wing acquires an identical costume with a reversed color scheme. They are founding members of the Seven Soldiers of Victory in *Leading Comics* #1 (Winter 1942), a superhero team designed to capitalize on the success of the JSA (Benton 1992, 169). With these new costumes, they formally shift from pulp heroes to superheroes.

The Sandman debuted in a double-breasted green suit, a purple cape, an orange fedora, and a blue-and-yellow gas mask.[4] When Jack Kirby and Joe Simon took over the character in *Adventure Comics* #69 (December 1941), his outfit was changed into a standard yellow and purple superhero suit. That both these characters debuted before the

superhero genre had fully been established, that both were tied more to the style of the pulp mystery men (Benton 1992, 23, 27; Goulart 1990, 13, 318), and that both moved into standard-issue superhero garb indicates that DC Comics felt that the characters needed to be in step with their counterparts and that costumes such as these signified superheroism. The missions and powers of both characters remained constant as did their codenames, but their costumes changed in order to assert a genre identification. The costume is the strongest marker of the superhero genre.

**Generic Distinction**

These three elements—mission, powers, and identity—establish the core of the superhero genre. But it is easy to name specific superheroes who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and also heroes from other genres who display all three elements to some degree but who should not be regarded as superheroes. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. In his attempt to define the genre of romantic comedy, Brian Henderson quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of games to show that universal similarity is not necessary to define a genre. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote:

> For if you look at [games] you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances" (ellipses in Henderson 1986, 314).

The similarities between specific genre narratives are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. Thus, if a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.

For example, the Hulk can be said to be a superhero without a mission. At times he seems absolutely anti-social, and he frequently finds himself in conflict with the U.S. Army, which is not presented as corrupt or maligned, but with the welfare of American citizens as its motivating force. Stan Lee claims the Frankenstein monster as an inspiration for the Hulk, "He never wanted to hurt anyone; he merely groped his tortuous way though a second life trying to defend himself, trying to come to terms with those who sought to destroy him" (Lee 1974, 75). The Hulk was Lee and Kirby's attempt to make a "hero out of a monster" (Lee 1974, 75). The green-skinned goliath's adventures do not arise from his attempts to fight crime or to improve the world. In two early adventures, Bruce Banner moves to stop the Metal Master and the invasion of the Toad Men; but as the Hulk, he offers to join forces with the Metal Master, and once in control of the Toad Men's spaceship he thinks, "With this flying dreadnought under me I can wipe out all mankind" (Lee and Kirby 1977, 42). The Hulk eventually loses his calculating intelligence and wanders the planet seeking solitude while being drawn, or stumbling, into the plans of super villains. The Hulk fights primarily for self-preservation but inadvertently does good. He effectively acts as a superhero but does not have the mission or motivation to do so. His tales, though, are suffused with the conventions of the superhero genre: super villains—the Leader, the Abomination; superhero physics—the transformative power of gamma rays; the antagonistic authorities—

General Thunderbolt Ross; an endangered girlfriend—Betty Ross; a pal—Rick Jones; and so forth. These conventions keep the Hulk within the superhero genre.

Regarding the powers convention, Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers (Kane and Andrae 1989, 99). His mission of vengeance against criminals is clear, and his identity—represented by his codename and iconic costume—marks him as a superhero. While he has no distinctly "super" powers, his highly developed physical strength and mental skills allow him to fight crime alongside his more powerful brethren. As with the Hulk, Batman operates in a world brimming with the conventions of the superhero genre: super villains—the Joker, the Penguin; the helpful authority figure—Police Commissioner Gordon; the sidekick—Robin; the super team—the Justice League; and so forth.

The Fantastic Four illustrate how elements of the identity convention can be absent or weak and yet the characters remain superheroes. In the first issue of *The Fantastic Four*, the powers and mission conventions are clear. After their space ship is exposed to cosmic rays, each of the quartets manifests a superpower. The ship's pilot, Ben Grimm, declares their mission: "We've gotta use [these powers] to help mankind, right?" (Lee 1974, 32). The identity convention first arises shortly after Grimm's statement. The heroes place their hands together and proclaim their codenames: Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and the Thing. These codenames fit with the powers they have received and are expressions of the characters' personalities.

The secret identity and costume elements of the identity convention are absent from the debut of the Fantastic Four. Stan Lee claims that he wanted to do away with these aspects of superheroes:

I was utterly determined to have a superhero series without any secret identities. I knew for a fact that if I myself possessed a

super power I'd never keep it a secret. I'm too much of a show-off. So why should our fictional friends be any different? Accepting this premise, it was also natural to decide to forego the use of costumes. If our heroes were to live in the real world, then let them dress like real people (Lee 1974, 17).

The secret identity is a typical, but not necessary, convention for the genre. It clearly has great importance to the genre as its stable presence in superhero stories shows. Lee and Kirby were trying to be inventive and so chose to disregard aspects of the genre that they felt held them back. But the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* is clearly a superhero comic book, as is evident from the characters' powers and mission, the superhero physics, and the super villainous Mole Man with his plot to "destroy everything that lives above the surface" (Lee 1974, 42).[5] And it is so without costumes. Significantly, although the Fantastic Four initially wore ordinary clothes, they quickly acquired costumes. The cover of issue three announces, "In this great collectors'-item [sic] issue, you will see, for the first time: The amazing Fantasti-Car, the colorful, new Fantastic Four costumes, and other startling surprises!" According to Stan Lee:

We received a lot of fan mail. The kids said they loved [the Fantastic Four]. We knew we had a winner, and we were on our way now. But, virtually every letter said, "We think it's the greatest comic book, we'll buy it forever. Turn out more, but if you don't give them colorful costumes, we won't buy the next issue. (qtd. in Gross 1991)[6]

Like the Crimson Avenger and the Sandman, the Fantastic Four were given costumes to assert their superhero-genre identification.

The codename, the other aspect of the identity convention, is nearly omnipresent among superheroes. A rare example of a superhero without a codename is Arn Monroe, Roy Thomas' substitute for Superman in the *Young All Stars*, which came out in the post-Crisis period when Thomas was not allowed to use Superman in the World War Two era. Even Arn gets a superhero moniker of sorts, being referred to as "Iron" Munro and "ironman," an obvious, tongue-in-cheek reference to Marvel's armored Avenger, but he never uses these names as superhero codenames. The lack of a separate codename is a bit more common among sidekicks. Some sidekicks retain their ordinary names, a tradition that probably derives from Tonto and Kato, sidekicks of the Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet respectively. Captain America's partner Bucky, the Crimson Avenger's houseboy Wing, the Human Torch's companion Toro, the Star-Spangled Kid's chauffeur Stripsey, and Magno the Magnetic Man's boy partner Davey all fit this pattern. Ever since the Shadow re-established the single-hero magazine in 1931, mystery men and superheroes have needed codenames for marketing reasons. Sidekicks can keep the same name for both their super and ordinary roles because they are secondary heroes and rarely achieve their own magazines.

Generic distinction is useful in considering the most slippery aspect of defining the superhero genre, the distinction between super heroes (heroes who are super) and superheroes (protagonists of the superhero genre). Generic distinction marks off from the superhero genre those characters from other genres that fall within the larger adventure meta-genre established by John Cawelti (1976, 39).[7] These characters often possess extraordinary abilities similar to those of superheroes—the strength of Beowulf or the Jedi-senses of Luke Skywalker—or even fulfill elements of the identity convention—the codenames and costumes of The Shadow and the Phantom. These characters are superior to ordinary human beings and ordinary protagonists of more realistic fiction in

significant ways. When they are called super heroes, *super* is best understood as an adjective that modifies *hero*; but they are not superheroes, that is they are not the protagonists of superhero-genre narratives.

An excellent way to understand this distinction is through Northrop Frye's theory of modes. Frye sets up a system of classification of fiction "by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (Frye 1957, 33). According to his scheme, in myth the hero is "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment" and is a divine being. In romance, the hero is "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment" but is identified as a human being, and "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (Frye 1957, 33). The other categories are high mimetic—the hero, a leader, is "superior in degree to other men but not his natural environment"; low mimetic—the hero is "one of us" and "superior to neither men nor to his environment"; and the ironic mode—the hero is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves" (Frye 1957, 33, 34). Thought of in this way, heroes who are super—all those characters who are referred to as super heroes but do not fit the generic definition of the superhero presented herein—are romance heroes. Referring to these characters as romance heroes, though, given the contemporary use of *romance*—stories of couples whose love relationship develops to overcome all obstacles—would be confusing; instead it makes sense to refer to them as super heroes.

Besides The Shadow, Buffy the Vampire Slayer is the character most often put forward as a superhero to challenge the definition presented herein. Superficially, Buffy could be seen as qualifying as a superhero. She has a mission—to fight and slay vampires and other demons that threaten humanity. She has superpowers—her training raises her to the level of Batman in fighting ability and her physical strength is greater than the chemically enhanced strength of Riley Finn, an agent of the U.S.

military's demon-hunting Initiative, or the supernatural strength of Angel, a vampire. Buffy has an identity as the Slayer. But this identity is not unproblematically a codename like Superman or Batman. This identity is not separate from her ordinary Buffy identity the way Superman is from Clark Kent, whose mild-mannered personality differs greatly from Superman's heroic character. The Slayer is not a public identity in the ordinary superhero sense; even the well-financed and government-sponsored Initiative views the Slayer as a myth, a boogeyman for demons. Buffy does not wear a costume; and while such a costume is not necessary, it is typical and a significant genre marker.

Finally, and more importantly for the purpose of demonstrating that generic distinction is a crucial element in defining the superhero genre, the Slayer is a hero-type that predates the superhero, fitting firmly within the larger horror genre and specifically within the vampire sub-genre. Literarily, the vampire hunter descends from Dr. Van Helsing in *Dracula*. Historically, the hero-type descends from actual vampire hunters, including the *dhampir*, the supposed male progeny of a vampire who is particularly able to detect and destroy vampires.[8] Thus, though the writers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* draw on superhero conventions, the stories are generically distinct from the superhero genre. Therefore, Buffy is a super hero, but not a superhero.

Another way to clarify the issue of genre distinction is to look at supporting-cast characters in superhero narratives who are clearly identified with other genres or who are otherwise excluded from being superheroes. Gotham City police detective Harvey Bullock is a police officer. He is a normal human being and falls into the "loose cannon" stereotype of police officers. If he accompanies Batman on a raid or even tracks down a super villain like the Joker on his own, does he suddenly become a superhero? When Ben Urich, reporter for the *Daily Bugle*, shares information with Daredevil that helps the hero bring down the Kingpin, does that interaction transform him into a superhero? Does the

ear-wiggling ability of Willie Lumpkin, the postal carrier whose route includes the Baxter Building, count as a superpower because he is an acquaintance of the Fantastic Four and occasionally sees super villains while delivering mail? Are these interactions as transformative as radioactive spider bites? All these questions can be answered easily with a firm "No." These characters do not fulfill the mission, powers, identity, and generic distinction elements of the definition of the superhero. Neither do strongly genre-identified characters who live in superhero universes, such as Nick Fury (spy/secret agent), Adam Strange (science-fiction hero), Ka-Zar (jungle hero), or John Constantine (occult investigator). These characters may battle villains (mission) and have extraordinary abilities or high technology (powers), but they use their own names instead of codenames and their clothing is genre-specific and functional within each's environment; finally their strong genre identifications make them generically distinct from the superheroes they live among and befriend; they are super heroes (heroes who are super) but not superheroes (protagonists of the superhero genre).[9] These characters merely show that tropes can be borrowed from genre to genre.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued for a definition of the superhero comprising mission, powers, identity, and generic distinction. Clearly the superhero has been studied previously without this definition in place, so the question arises, why do we need it? The answer to this question is that we already have it and it is already in use. My definition brings forth the unstated assumptions that generally guide the study of the superhero and the production of superhero comics. As the ruling of Judge Learned Hand shows, a recognition of the mission-powers-identity triumvirate as the necessary elements of a definition of the superhero existed very early

in the superhero's history. Generic distinction merely accounts for the "family resemblances" of the other conventions that mark the superhero genre off from the rest of the adventure meta-genre.

Establishing a definition in this way is useful because of the nature of genre study. Genre tales are some of the most important of cultural products because of the way they embody and promulgate cultural mythology (Cawelti 1976, 35-36). All genres have boundaries. Some are narrow, like the superhero, and others are broader, like science fiction. A well-defined genre can be studied for the way the culture industry responds to and shapes popular taste. It can be seen as a way of examining the resolution of cultural conflicts and tensions that audiences regard as legitimate. A poorly constructed definition that fails to distinguish between superheroes and super heroes or fails to account for the metaphoric use of *superhero* renders the term meaningless as tool for genre criticism and analysis.[10]

A sloppy definition of the superhero genre makes it more difficult to examine the way the superhero genre embodies cultural mythology and narratively animates and resolves cultural conflicts and tensions. A tight definition enables scholars to focus specifically on the genre itself, separate it from related genres, and compare it with other genres. Hopefully this chapter provides a basis for the study of superheroes and will help to expand superhero scholarship and our understanding of the meaning of the superhero.