



STEWART SLATER

Ancient Archetypes and Modern Superheroes

Stewart Slater (b. 1975) works in London in the field of finance. He grew up in Greece and studied Classics at Oxford, and his work typically draws on ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy to illuminate current social and political issues and popular culture. Slater's work has been published in *Quillette*, *Spiked*, *Modern Stoicism*, and other internet magazines, including *Areo*, where "Ancient Archetypes and Modern Superheroes" first appeared in October 2022.

In this selection, what Slater finds worthy of debate is film critics and directors like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola who look down on modern superhero films. Actually, says Slater, if you classify modern superheroes on the basis of their "greatness"—and how they acquired it—Superman and Spider-Man are not so different from their counterparts in ancient Greece and earlier. Only Batman, says Slater, has "no ancient model."

MLA CITATION: Slater, Stewart. "Ancient Archetypes and Modern Superheroes." *Back to the Lake: A Reader and Guide for Writers*, edited by Thomas Cooley, 5th ed., W. W. Norton, 2024, pp. 506–10.

Nothing is said that has not been said before.

—TERENCE, *Eunuchus*

- 1 **WE LIVE IN AN AGE** of superheroes. In every one of the past five years, with the exception of 2020 (atypical because of the pandemic), the highest grossing film in the US has either been part of the Marvel cinematic universe or featured a character from DC Comics.
- 2 For other ways of classifying movies, see p. 478. This development has not been greeted with unalloyed joy by the creative community. Martin Scorsese has described such films as "theme parks"; Ken Loach, Britain's leading producer of worthy, political cinema, considers them a "cynical exercise"; while to Francis Ford Coppola—whose 1972 movie *The Godfather* was, for a time, the highest grossing film in history—they are "despicable." Alan Moore, creator of the graphic novels *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, all of which have been turned into movies (none of which he likes), says that the trend has "blighted cinema and also blighted society to a degree."
- 3 But such films are undeniably popular: the box office does not lie. So, is the ascendancy of the superhero film a sign of cultural decline or are such responses simply snobbery? Should we bemoan the rash of sequels or see them as continuing and updating literary tropes that have existed for millennia?
- 4 Heroes have always been with us. The earliest surviving work of fiction, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, relates the adventures of the titular character—"supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance"—as he first battles and later befriends the wildman Enkidu (shades, here,

of Wolverine—Marvel’s modern model of feral masculinity—and Captain America and Ironman—who must overcome personal differences to work together) and then embarks on an ultimately fruitless search for the secret of immortality. Generations have been brought up with the Greek myths, with their stories of heroic figures doing great deeds. Over time, these stories and their descendants have shaped our expectations about what heroes are and how they behave, expectations that superheroes match.

Malvolio’s words in *Twelfth Night*
 When you identify a type or archetype, you describe its main characteristics (p. 460). —“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”—aptly describe three heroic archetypes, all of which are represented in the superhero canon, and all of which have historical antecedents.
Born Great: Superman

- 6 “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound,” Superman is undeniably great. This greatness is innate: it is a result of a physiology adapted to his home planet of Krypton, which enables him to handle the much less challenging conditions on planet Earth with ease. (Compare the Xelayan security officers Alara Kitan and Talla Keyali in Seth MacFarlane’s *The Orville*, whose exceptional strength is an adaptation to conditions on their high-gravity home planet.)
- 7 Notions of heroes who are superior from birth are as old as fiction itself. Gilgamesh also owes his greatness to his birth as a son of “Uruk, the goring wild bull.” Achilles is the son of the goddess Thetis. Heracles is the son of Zeus.
- 8 Greek heroic literature is generally aristocratic. The heroes of *The Iliad* are kings and their heirs and close relatives. The lower classes are generally nameless spear-fodder. Thersites—the one instance of a named character from outside the nobility—is there to provide comic relief. Heroes occupy a different hereditary caste from the masses. They have patronymics, which indicate the importance of their lineage. (Thersites does not.) Indeed, we learn the name of Achilles’ father before we learn his own name. Noble birth is not a guarantor of heroic status—Achilles dispatches Priam’s son Lycaon with relative ease; Paris is no great fighter—but it is a prerequisite. Not all nobles are heroes, but all heroes are noble—and nobility can only be acquired through birth. Like Superman, and like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s very rich characters, Homer’s heroes are “different from you and me.”

Achieved Greatness: Batman

- 9 Unlike Superman, there is nothing innately great about Batman. Born to extremely rich but mortal parents, Bruce Wayne has no natural powers or abilities. At the beginning of Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012), he is a student at Princeton who drops out of college to pursue his vendetta against the criminals who killed his parents. During his quest, he falls in with the League of Shadows, which teaches him the skills and techniques that he will use as Batman. Returning to Gotham City, he adopts his alter ego and uses his effectively unlimited wealth to fulfill this mission. At the end of the trilogy, he leaves the heroics behind to start a new life with his girlfriend.
- 10 There is no ancient model for Batman. The ancients believed that heroes were born, not made. This story-arc of self-creation had no place in their heroic archetypes: there is no ancient equivalent of the training montage. However, there is a modern analogue in Edmond Dantès of Alexandre Dumas’ 1844 novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*.
- 11 When the story begins, Dantès is a promising young sailor of a type one might find in most ports. Then he is unjustly imprisoned in the dungeons of the Château

d'Iff, where he meets the Abbé Faria, who trains him in skills ranging from chemistry and philosophy to fencing and pistol shooting. After escaping from the château and discovering a vast treasure whose location the Abbé revealed to him, Dantès, in the company of his faithful servant Ali, adopts the guise of the Count of Monte Cristo, using his new skills and resources to wreak vengeance on those who wronged him before sailing off into the blue horizon with his young love. Like Dantès, Nolan's Batman is an ordinary man who suffers an injustice that prompts him to acquire new skills and knowledge, which he uses to fulfill his mission, after which he retires. Like his predecessor, he appears to give away all his money at the end of the story.

Greatness Thrust upon Him: Spiderman

- 12 While Superman is born great and Batman achieves greatness, Spiderman has greatness thrust upon him. Peter Parker is a geeky teenager who has no special powers until fate intervenes in the guise of a radioactive spider, whose bite confers superhuman abilities. However, in the Sam Raimi trilogy (2002–2007), he does not immediately choose to be a hero, initially using his powers simply to win an underground wrestling tournament. It is the death of his father figure Uncle Ben, which he could have prevented, that sets him on the path to heroism. From then on, however, his arc develops very differently from those of his superhero peers. In contrast to Superman who, in the latest television series (Greg Berlanti and Todd Helbing's *Superman and Lois* [2021–]), is happily married to Lois Lane, Peter Parker ends the first film, *Spider-Man* (2002), by rejecting the love of his life. In the second film (released in 2004) he gives up his heroics briefly due to the toll his role is taking on his private life, while the final 2007 film ends with the death of his best friend. Spiderman is the suffering superhero.
- 13 That heroism might come at a cost to the hero would have been no surprise to the ancients. Aeneas, son of the goddess Aphrodite, is one of the few survivors of the fall of Troy. Like Peter Parker, he is set on the path to heroism by a father figure when his father Anchises interprets an omen that reveals that it is Aeneas' destiny to found a second Troy: Rome. This mission causes him romantic troubles when the gods force him to leave his beloved Queen Dido behind at Carthage. He is subsequently tempted to abandon his mission altogether and has to be chivvied¹ along by his late father's ghost. Even when he reaches the site of the future Rome, his troubles are not over: his beloved friend Pallas is killed in battle.
- 14 While *Superman* and *Batman* present an upbeat picture of heroism, Raimi's *Spider-Man* is part of the more nuanced tradition of the *Aeneid* in that it points out the burdens his mission places on the hero and even prompts the audience to wonder whether it is all worth it.

But it is not just tales of solo superheroes that represent long-standing tropes. Series like *X-Men* and *Avengers* feature teams of heroes. While some critics have seen these as exercises in "bloated cynicism," attempts to get fans of several different franchises to shell out for the same film, this genre would have been recognizable to the ancients. The crew of Jason's *Argo* include Heracles, Zeus' sons Castor and Pollux, Orpheus and Achilles' father Peleus. People have always been interested in heroes working together.

Mindy Kaling
takes a
different
approach in
"Types of
Women in
Romantic
Comedies
Who Are Not
Real" (p.
489).

- 16 Even the rise in sequels is something our ancestors would understand. Homer only covers a brief period of the Trojan War, but later hands set to work filling in the blanks in what came to be known as the *epic cycle*.

Aeschylus uses Agamemnon's homecoming from Troy as the basis of his *Oresteia* trilogy, while Sophocles' *Ajax* continues the story of the hero after the events narrated by Homer.

17

One reason to classify things is to learn more about the world (p. 462).

That we can so easily find historical analogues for modern characters should not be a surprise, for culture always builds on what has gone before. Early works created expectations that new creations generally attempt to meet. Heroic narratives are explorations of human greatness. Heroes fascinate us because they are outliers. They can do things that others cannot, and this raises the question of which is more important: nature or nurture. Cultures with hereditary aristocracies may find it easier to relate to figures like Achilles and Superman, who were born great, while post-industrial modern societies with their increased possibilities for social mobility might find inspiration in self-made heroes like Batman and the Count of Monte Cristo. Meanwhile, the stories of Aeneas and Spiderman address the perennial issue of whether heroism is more trouble than it is worth. Rather than a sign of cultural malaise, superhero movies are merely the latest meditations on questions that have intrigued us since the dawn of civilization. ♦

FOR CLOSE READING

1. According to Stewart Slater, some well-known film directors dislike recent films that feature superheroes. Why? What do they dislike about them?
2. Despite their critics, says Slater, superhero films are “undeniably popular” (3). By what measure?
3. Do today's superheroes deserve the popularity they enjoy? What do you think accounts for it?
4. How and how well does Slater's essay address the key question he raises in paragraph 3: “So, is the ascendancy of the superhero film a sign of cultural decline?”
5. Because he comes from Krypton, Superman is not bound by Earth's gravitational field. Under what conditions can he, nonetheless, be brought down? Would this be considered his Achilles' heel? (If you don't know the term, do a quick internet search to find out its meaning and the story behind it.)

STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES

1. Slater classifies superheroes, both ancient and modern, into three types, based on their “greatness” and how they acquired it. Are the categories in his (and Malvolio's) classification system mutually exclusive? Are they jointly exhaustive? Explain.
2. Batman has no equivalent among ancient superheroes. How does Slater deal with this exception to the classification system he has set up?
3. For what **PURPOSE** is Slater classifying superheroes here? How and how well does classifying his subject support what else he has to say about it?
4. What is Slater's **THESIS**? That modern superheroes derive from ancient models? That the popularity of superhero films is not “a sign of cultural malaise” (17)? That “culture always builds on what has gone before” (17)? Some combination of these? Explain.
5. *Other Methods*. As he classifies superheroes, Slater gives **EXAMPLES** of each type. Which ones do you find particularly effective? Why?

THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE

1. What are the implications of Slater's use of the word “canon” to describe a group of figures drawn from comic books (5)?
2. “Patronymics” (8) are names derived from those of a father or ancestor. According to Slater, why is having a patronymic a sign

of nobility?

3. "Analogue" (10) refers to types that are similar but not necessarily models for each other. Why might Slater choose this term when discussing the relationship between Batman and the Count of Monte Cristo?
4. A "montage" (10) is a mixture of bits and pieces that combine to make a new whole. What does the term mean when applied to film in particular?
5. Slater says that *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas's novel of 1844, is a "modern analogue" for Batman (10). What does he mean by "modern"?

FOR WRITING

1. Do some research on the role of Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and explain, in a paragraph or two, the context of the stodgy character's famous pronouncement about the three types of greatness.
2. In a paragraph or two, outline the categories you would use if you were classifying superheroes based on their weaknesses rather than their strengths or how they became great.
3. Write a brief **PROFILE** of a hero (or villain), real or fictional, who had greatness (or great evildoing) thrust on them.
4. Write a five-to-seven-paragraph **EVALUATION** of your favorite superheroes in which you explain why they are the greatest of them all. Base your evaluation on the nature of their deeds rather than how they obtained their powers. Give lots of **EXAMPLES**.
5. Using Slater's essay as a point of departure, write a 400-to-600-word **CRITICAL ANALYSIS** of superhero films in which you argue for or against the claim that they have "blighted cinema and also blighted society to a degree" (2). Be sure to identify the films on which you base your analysis.

Check Your Understanding: 1 Of 5

INCOMPLETE

Question

From what source does Slater draw the classification system of the three heroic archetypes?

Select an Answer

- ☐ A. Malvolio's words from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*
- ☐ B. Beowulf's words from *Beowulf*
- ☐ C. Homer's words from the *Iliad*
- ☐ D. Malvolio's words from *Twelfth Night*

Report Issue

Check Answer

Check Your Understanding: 2 Of 5

INCOMPLETE

Question

Which of these heroes fall into the category of "born great"?

Select an Answer

- ☐ A. Superman and Batman
- ☐ B. Batman and Ironman
- ☐ C. Uruk and Wolverine
- ☐ D. Superman and Gilgamesh

[Report Issue](#)

[Check Answer](#)

Check Your Understanding: 3 Of 5

INCOMPLETE

Question

According to Slater, how does Dantès, the Count of Monte Christo, attain his greatness?

Select an Answer

- ☐ A. He was born with superpowers.
- ☐ B. His wealthy father hired all the best tutors and mentors.
- ☐ C. He learned it from pirates while working on a sailing ship.
- ☐ D. He learned it while imprisoned in a dungeon.

[Report Issue](#)

[Check Answer](#)

Check Your Understanding: 4 Of 5

INCOMPLETE

Question

According to Slater, the burdens of heroism fall most heavily on

Select an Answer

- ☐ A. Batman and those of his type.
- ☐ B. all types of heroes equally.
- ☐ C. those who are born to be great.
- ☐ D. those whose greatness is thrust upon them.

[Report Issue](#)

[Check Answer](#)

Check Your Understanding: 5 Of 5

INCOMPLETE

Question

Slater draws parallels between ancient hero tales and our modern ones. He asserts that the ancients would even recognize the modern devices of

Select an Answer

- ☐ A. heroes of all genders working together.
- ☐ B. sequels and fan fiction conventions.
- ☐ C. time traveler adventures.
- ☐ D. sequels and heroes working together.

[Report Issue](#)

[Check Answer](#)