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Comics: Its Reflection of Entertainment, Politics, Economy and Sociality

Comics are a type of literature that expresses ideas and stories through images combined with different types of texts such as speech bubbles, captions and onomatopoeia. They originated around the late 19th century, and comics were used to challenge political ideals. Artists conveyed their opinions on certain aspects of society through drawings combined with literature. However, the content within comics drastically changed at the start of World War II. During a time period called the “Golden Age” of comics, superheroes such as Superman, Batman and Captain America were created, which drew the attention of people of all ages. They helped relieve the minds of those who were affected during the war. After World War II, comics remained very popular and began to evolve as there were more changes made in society. Although at some point comics were censored of their suggestive themes during the “Silver Age” of comics, publishers realized that readers enjoyed explicit content in comics. Therefore, they removed the censorships and emerged a period of comics called the “Bronze Age” in which authors realized that comic book plots and themes had no boundaries. Soon, other countries have even adapted the United States’ comics into

their own style. An important example is Japanese comics called manga, which are influenced by Western characters and stories, but created using their own drawing style.

Comics are not just essential for the entertainment aspect of society, but they are heavily influenced by traditional, societal and economic change in the world. For instance, superhero comics became very popular during the Great Depression and World War II because these superheroes gave hope to people during times of turmoil and distress. The comics were very relatable as the characters in them had the same ideals as the people who read them. Additionally, numerous comics are shown to have allegories that connect to society, whether it was political, economical, or social. Comics during events such as the Civil Rights Movement were shaped based on changes in society. When African-Americans, women and people of the LGBT community began to have more rights, their representation increased in more comics. When comics in the United States were at its peak in the 1970s, many other countries made their own versions of comics, such as manga in Japan. To this day, comics have changed the way stories have been told, whether it was authors taking risks with storytelling narratives or adopting these comics into films. Comics are essential not because of their entertainment value, but rather their value when reflecting on culture, morals, practices, and traditions of society.

The earliest recordings of comics were in the late 19th century. One of the first comic strips was called Hogan's Alley from Richard F. Outcault, with the leading character named The Yellow Kid, and was published in Joseph Pulitzer's New York World. With this comic being published around the end of the Industrial Revolution, this comic book helped point out the problems with living conditions and addressed issues with tenements, class

divisions, and urbanization (Wood, 2004). The name of the character was also a nod to Yellow Journalism, or overly exaggerated and sensationalized news made mainly for profit. Hogan's Alley exposed political and societal ideas to the public, and eventually laid the foundation for the future political cartoons to come. Around the start of the Great Depression (1930s) came the first series of superhero comics called Action Comics with characters such as Superman and Batman. Superman was one of the most important superheroes made at that time, because he fought for his people, "reflecting the ideals of democracy, compassion for the weak, hope for the future, defense of the rule of law, and respect for justice" (Bowers, 42). It is especially important that Superman was first published at the time of economic toil; an Action Comic in 1938 features Superman and his impatience with wealthy industrialists who put their own profits over the needs of the public. He enforces the New Deal brought upon by Franklin D. Roosevelt, rescues a miner trapped in a coal mine as a result of unsafe working conditions, and afterwards crashes a party of upper-class people, bringing them into the same coal mine to show them "how the other side lives" (Bowers, 43). This comic not only addressed many issues at the time of the Depression, it also criticized and exposed flaws in the economy and government. This is possibly an allegory to liberalism ideals then, as Superman sought change and progression for his people as a whole. Another example of allegories in terms of difference and identity of politics is another superhero comic series called X-Men, in which the superheroes, who are mutants, represent different people in society. According to the book, "Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean" by Douglas Wolk, mutants represent "accidents of modernity who are unlike ordinary people and despised for it even as they

slowly amass cultural capital. One faction of mutants wants to assimilate into mainstream society; another wants to break off from it altogether” (95). Readers slowly began to realize that there were much bigger pictures behind what writers and illustrators write and draw in their comics, and learned that there was even more meaning behind the stories than they realized.

In the 1940s, which marked the beginning of World War II, a wider variety of comics became even more popular. This time period for comics was called “The Golden Age”. At this time, the people of America did not want anything to do with the war, yet were unaware of the dangers of battles happening in Europe and Asia. To expose the public to these ideas, many forms of propaganda were released to the public, including comics. Writers had their characters fight in the actual war. Characters like Captain America, who fought Nazi Germany and was even shown punching Hitler in the face on the cover of his first comic, received much backlash. Despite this, Captain America stood for American nationalism, and his ideas about evil and justice became the standard for comics to come. When the war progressed, over a million copies of comics were sold, with most of its readers being part of the United States Army. However, not only were there superhero comics, but also comic strips with regular soldiers as their main characters, such as Joe Palooka and Terry from Terry and the Pirates. Even Superman fought alongside the American army, easily defeating the Nazi Germany army (America’s Secret Weapon : SUPERMAN #23, July-August 1943). Comics were heavily influential at times of hardship, as they contributed to American nationalism and gave support and hope to the people when they needed it the most. Because comics were so easy to read and follow, they catered to a wide audience. Civilians

loved storylines of their favorite superheroes and soldiers fighting for what they believed in, even motivating some men to enlist in the war as well. The soldiers during the war loved these comics as well, since characters in the comics fought for the same things they did, and soldiers “saw their own experiences in them” (White and Murphy). Additionally, because of comics’ massive popularity, they made a great amount of money for the country. Comics were not just for entertainment, but also acted as a shelter to the people at the times of war.

After World War II, more genres of comics, such as crime and horror, came to a rise, and more superheroes were created. Despite their increasing success, comics met a great deal of criticism. In 1954, a book called “The Seduction of the Innocent” from German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham was published, condemning the suggestive content and themes within comics. During the Golden Age of comic, which was during and after World War II, they were very explicit to its audience, depicting the drastic turmoil at the time. Wertham used various examples of drugs, sex, and violence from the same comics to argue that this will increase juvenile delinquency in the future. This urged many parents to campaign for the censorship of comics. Because of this, the Comics Code Authority was voluntarily put into place by publishers of many comics, sparking a new era of comics called “The Silver Age”. This, however, had a major downside: there was a huge decrease in sales after the censorships put into practice. These publishers could not handle the unexpected drop in sales, so they discarded the censorship of comics as a whole, and soon its sales went back to normal (Roshanem, 2016). People embraced how explicit these comics were, as they reflected the reality of the world around them. Additionally, these comics reflected our culture, and what kind of ideals we had before. For instance, how characters are portrayed

in comics was essential in knowing how we viewed each other as people, and what society was like at the time. Before the 1960s, people of color and women were heavily discriminated against, and the way they were portrayed by artists and writers truly showed how society perceived different people back then. The Detective Comics' debut in 1937 displays a picture of a Chinese villain, with "a drooping Fu mustache, sawtooth teeth, and wildly exaggerated facial features" (Hartsell, 2017). The Chinese villains portrayed in the comic were shown saying different stereotypical and offensive phrases. Additionally, black people and women were not represented as much as others in these comics before the 1960s. After the Civil Rights Movement, attitudes of gender and race in America began to evolve. More black heroes such as Black Panther and Green Lantern were being created. Additionally, women became publishers and creators of comics and, as years progressed, the LGBTQ community was represented in these comics as well (Demby, 2014). Although these comics faced backlash during their release, it was evident that comic book authors supported liberalist ideas and pushed for these ideals into society. Comics had no limits, whether it was talking about suggestive themes, discriminating against others, or going against the ideas back then. Although these things have been detrimental to society, it reflected our culture and has been very helpful in portraying how society was like during those time periods. These comics helped us learn from our mistakes and are not something we should be regretful of. The suggestive themes in comics only reflect what is happening in the real world, and the discrimination in comics inform us of how people viewed each other then. The comics that came out during the Civil Rights Movement taught us how our perception of people changed from before. If censorship was still practiced in comics, we

would have a much less understanding of our past. Additionally, it would limit the writer's imagination, and would not be as enjoyable for readers. This opened up endless possibilities that led to creation of many acclaimed and enjoyed comics that captivated the audience.

During the 1970s-2000s, more authors went out of their comfort zone to create storylines that broke standards, something that readers began to enjoy more. One of the first and significant comic to do so was called *The Amazing Spider-Man: The Night Gwen Stacy Died* (1978). In this story arch, the main character named Spider-Man is being targeted by his arch nemesis named Green Goblin, who targets the people he loves in order for him to feel emotional pain. By doing so, the Green Goblin goes after Spider-Man's girlfriend named Gwen Stacy, kidnapping her and bringing her to a tower located at a bridge in Manhattan, New York. In a turn of events, the Green Goblin pushes Gwen Stacy off the bridge and although Spider-Man does catch her with his spider web, he realizes that she died from the whiplash of the fall, ending the comic on a very mournful and dark note. This shocked readers at the time because no author ever killed important characters such as the love interest, and it was one of the first times a superhero ever failed to rescue someone, especially one of the main characters. Another example of a comic that broke the standards was the Bronze Age Batman, but specifically the main villain in that comic series, whose name was the Joker. When the Comic Codes Authority was still practiced in 1954, the Joker used to be a prankster whose sole purpose was to distract and annoy the Batman, as everything such as violence, drugs and gore was censored by publishers. When the Comic Codes were lifted, characters such as the Joker have taken different turns as characters and

their relationship to their respective comics. During the Bronze Age, the Joker became a homicidal psychopath, who believed that he cannot exist without the Batman to stop him, highlighting the violent and horrific side of him that no one has seen before. During the Silver Age of comics, readers could no longer expect happy endings all the time; comics became unpredictable, and instead left readers on the edge of their seat because the possibilities were endless. The standards of comics were evolving, and readers enjoyed the freedom that comic book writers had, embracing the fact that almost anything was possible in comic books.

The impact that comics had on numerous films is perceptible, and there is no doubt that many movies have made adaptations based off of them. One significant example of these films is those from Marvel Cinematic Universe, which is the shared universe centered on a series of superhero films from the comics, independently produced by Marvel Studios. At the start of 2008, many iconic superheroes from Marvel such Iron Man, the Hulk, Captain America, and Thor have made it to the cinema, making more than billions of amount of dollars from their adaptations from many comics. Arguably the most important important Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) film is *The Avengers* (2012), a movie that included numerous superheroes into one movie. This was a huge success, with a box office of 1.5 billion dollars, an amount that shattered records at the time, and paved the way for the success for the rest of the franchise. The reason for the MCU's success was not just because their movies drew many parallels to fan-favorite comics, but also because directors took different turns from what comics have depicted. One example in which the movies take a different turn is *Thor Ragnarok* (2017). In this film, the Norse god of thunder named Thor

gets stranded and imprisoned on a planet called Sakaar, which is a galaxy away from his home, Asgard. He attempts to escape the outlandish planet with in order to save the Asgardian people from his evil half-sister, Hela. Even though the stakes in this movie are high for Thor, he is not depicted as a critical, serious and pragmatic Norse god like in the comics, Thor is shown as a silly, fun and carefree person that people can relate to. *Thor Ragnarok* in general strays away from the dark themes that other Marvel films, and creates an amusing, creative and colorful environment that many watchers enjoyed, accumulating \$854 million in the box office after a month into its release. Another series in the MCU that takes a different direction from the comics is *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2016 & 2017), which follows a team of individuals from different worlds/universes who fight in space to keep the peace. The director for the trilogy, James Gunn, takes a wacky and diverting tone for the plots and main characters of the movie. Furthermore, second volume of the series has many lighthearted and touching moments as well, which is not often seen in the comics and even in the other Marvel movies. Over time, more comic book authors and eventually film directors took risks with the creation of their stories, leading to more complex and compelling storytelling narratives and characters, essential for shaping the entertainment industry to the way it is now. The comics and films changed expectations, capturing the attention and minds of many readers and watchers. Soon, people learned that these comics and films could be about anything with limitless possibilities. The entertainment industry would not look the same without them.

American comics are not the only ones to make a global impact. There are numerous comics that are significant as well, such as manga in Japan. People believe that the origin of

manga was around the 12th and 13th century, starting with many ancient Japanese drawings. One of them was called Choju-Giga (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals). The artists' drawing techniques there were adopted by many other artists in the present day. The rise of manga started in World War II when the United States occupied Japan. The Americans brought with them Disney comics and cartoons, such as Mickey Mouse, Bambi, and Betty Boop. Manga artists then created their own styles of drawing, while still being influenced by American comics. They published their comics in newspapers, leading to the creation of many famous characters such as Astro Boy (1951). The reason why manga gained so much traction by the end of the 20th century was because of its mass production and exposure. As of today, manga makes up more than forty percent of magazines and books in Japan (Graillant 2006). Because of this, more than a billion copies of manga are sold each year globally. Manga has become more popular in Japan than comics have in The United States. Manga also became a way of teaching students in Japanese schools as well. Additionally, people grew fond of manga because of its distinct art style, with characters displaying exaggerated facial expressions, drawn with Japanese ink and calligraphy, while American comics became popular because of their distinct characters and designs. Similarly, both manga and comics have been essential to television and movies. Many mangas were adapted into successful anime series and movies, and many storylines from comics were made into box office phenomenon. There is no doubt that American comics had an influence on Japanese manga to this day. One example is Yamashiro Takuya, who was influenced by Marvel's Spiderman. His creator, Toei, bought rights to make his own version of Spider-Man and heir his show on Japanese television, which was also named Spider-Man.

(Toei 1978). Another example of a Japanese hero influenced by American comics is Supah Jaianto, who has powers very similar to Superman. Similarly to how comics were essential for numerous films and mangas, mangas influenced the creation of many animes and Japanese versions of American superheroes. This helped manga become a popular media that will play as a major factor for Japanese and even American culture.

Comic books are a type of literature that should not be taken for granted. Firstly, comics are known to have allegories that directly connect to many events and ideas in the real world. Comic books have helped us through tough times, such as the Great Depression and World War II. With the creation of many characters that fought for freedom and justice, it gave many readers hope. Additionally, comics help us reflect on what kind of society we were in the past, and the perspective of people then. Comics before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement were very different from each other, from the way they portray different characters to the amount of representation in every comic. Ever since the Comic Codes Authority was overruled, comic book authors let their imagination run free, breaking the standards and challenging the expectations of the readers. This directly influenced numerous film adaptations of these comics, as directors took different paths for their movies as well. Finally, comics had a huge impact on literature around the world. Japanese manga was motivated by many American comic book characters and storylines. In 1977, writer Michael Ulsan said, "Comic books have expressed the trends, conventions, and concerns of American life... Comics have been a showcase for national views, slang, morals, customs, traditions, racial attitudes, fads, heroes of the day, and everything else that makes

up our lifestyles.” Comics are not just here to entertain us, but rather educate us on our perspectives of the past as well as on our society.

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