

Character traits of superheroes



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard rolled into one.”

His intense wave of inspiration perhaps a small parallel of the inordinate abilities possessed by the mythical heroes and strongmen he himself had name checked, he proceeds to feverishly write away the night producing what would become the very first Superman script. By connecting his creation of this contemporary Super being to both the biblical figure of Samson and the Mythological hero of ancient Greece, Hercules, Siegel shows us that his Superman and the legions of costumed adventurers that his presence will inspire the creation of are to be seen and revered as godly totems. In fact Thor, the Norse god of thunder himself would go on to star in his very own serialized adventures with Marvel Comics.

When superheroes are the subject of a discussion, an important point to try and ascertain is just what exactly the definition and nature of a hero is. A hero, in its simplest of definitions is a person who conquers his or her own limitations and fears to achieve or perform an act that under normal circumstances would be considered extraordinary. Regarding the harsh reality most of us inhabit, the soldiers and military personnel who lay their lives on the line for a concept that is bigger than them as individuals, the astronauts who risk their lives to further the reach and imagination of our collective species on missions with a high probability of a lethal outcome and the firemen who take their lives in their hands daily by entering burning buildings and combating deadly blazes. These men and women are regularly and with good reason, the yardstick by which heroism is measured.

Furthering that idea, perhaps with less lethal professions, is the doctor who will spend his or her long days and nights treating the sickly and infirm, or the schoolteacher who sees to it that our children receive decent educations to put to use further on in their lives ahead. Perhaps even, a different but no less impressive display of bravery, in which a sufferer of a particularly debilitating disease, or trauma, will endure painful and physically draining rehabilitation to regain their strength and good health.

A hero is supposed to personify the traits within ourselves that we deem to be the best. Be they morally, socially or lawfully. They are standards that warrant our admiration and aspiration. And while this unwritten rule considers the heroes of the reality that surrounds us it still applies to our fictional heroes, of the page, the stage or the screen.

Fictional heroes have been an ever-present institution of modern-day societies and past mythologies and cultures throughout history. Michael Corleone from The Godfather films, the gun slinging Dirty Harry or the 'Man with No Name' as both portrayed by Clint Eastwood, Phillip Marlowe, Rambo and Sherlock Holmes, for example are all indeed human in their emotions, their nuances and their foibles in spite of their inherently fictitious nature. But could we seriously consider those characters as heroes? Or are they, for all the adventures they may endure or the nefarious plots they may foil, simply compelling, but ultimately human protagonists that enthusiasts can relate to? We feel that given the right opportunities, we could become them in some capacity. Casting a glance further back in time, there is also an all-too obvious distinction between the more ancient mythological heroes and the costumed supermen and superwomen of today. Hercules, Thor, Beowulf,

<https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

Gilgamesh and Moses for example, all display the qualities of nobility, courage and the strengths both mental and physical we have come to associate with that of a hero.

But somewhere within the cultural evolution of these fictitious heroes, the genome seemed to split off and create a sub category of its own. One that saw the hybridization of the ancient hero's super-human strengths and the pop relevance and accessibility of the more contemporary fictional protagonist. This new strain of heroes were defined by a characteristic fearlessness as opposed to the more human ability to adapt to and ultimately overcome fear, with a set of skills honed to a meta-human standard. Even Batman, who, while not possessing the conventional super-strength or x-ray vision proclivities that his inked brothers and sisters may share, belongs amongst them more so than his more human peers. He proves himself by displaying the fearlessness to patrol the rooftops of Gotham city come nightfall, leaping headlong into violent situations and making use of his inordinate intellect and physical training to foil the designs of his villains (even going as far as to recover from a broken back in *Knightfall: Part One* (Moench, Titan Books, 1993) while never compromising his own morality and ultimately keeping his lifelong vow to restore safety and peace, earning the respect and admiration of the community as he does it. This raises an interesting point. While the origins and talents of superheroes are often incredibly varied on an individual to individual basis; the one constant amongst their equally as varied psychological repertoire is adopting and living by a value system and an unflinching, immovable

dedication to enforcing said system. Although, ironically, as Daniel Fingeroth notes in his book *Superman on the Couch* (Continuum, 2006, page 17)

“ These are also, interestingly, the characteristics of a villain. And, as the saying goes, every decent villain thinks of himself as the hero. Hitler had no doubt that he was the good guy.”

However, as Richard Reynolds is quoted as saying in his book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (University Press of Mississippi, 1994) page 74

“ Superheroes are by and large not upholders of the letter of the law; they are not law enforcement agents employed by the state. The set of values they traditionally defend is summed up by the Superman tag of Truth, Justice and the American Way. Sometimes the last term has been interpreted in a narrowly nationalistic way...but far more often...has stood for the ideals enshrined in the US Constitution.”

Reynolds claims that the superhero is a symbol that inherently represents, and continues to represent, the ever-changing values of whichever society creates him or her. A trait almost wholly unique to the superhero, with such prominent cycles of revision and reinvention rarely being attributed to those fictional heroes of past eras (For instance, you may be hard pressed to find a 60s-era Moses or a 80s-era Lone Ranger). Reynolds' theory is, both visually and thematically, very distinguishable when looking through the back catalogues of a number of today's popular heroes. For example, in the 40s, Superman fought the Nazis, in the 50s, communists, in the 60s and 70s he became more involved against governmental issues like widespread corruption. Compare early, campy Batman to the dark, brooding Batman

established in the late 80s and early 90s and literally witness a night and day transformation. But, regardless of such evolutions, whatever the time and place, the hero will always know what the morally correct course of action is.

But what is it exactly that dwells within people and causes them to harbour such intense craving for these hyperbolic tales of greater valour? Why are we not content with the truer and undoubtedly more realistic tales of human heroism? Take for example, a typical everyman character. Would his encounters with extraordinary situations or extraordinary people be a better example of an inspirational role model, and the very idea of a super being leaving us mere mortals feeling wholly inadequate? Perhaps we as people and congenitally social creatures, find hearing about the man of steel from the distant planet of Krypton easier to digest than say a neighbour who outclasses us physically, socially or hierarchically. Therein may lie the key to the whole question. Maybe these heroes tap into our group consciousness and shared doubts about us, as individuals, failing to measure up to our potential or the standards others may expect of us. The notion of a character not quite living by the same societal doctrines as the rest of us, allows for an amount of comfortable dismissiveness regarding our own perceived human failings.

Let's focus on who many consider to be the alpha-superhero, Superman. Superman (or more accurately, Kal-El, his given Kryptonian name) is from the planet Krypton. It is rather unlikely that any sane human could ever also make that claim. So feeling inadequate after seeing him stop an earthquake or reverse time by flying around the planet backwards is prevented by a buffer zone of suspended disbelief. Batman, on the other hand, was always a

<https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

perfectly normal little boy (and, obviously, an earthling) who swears an oath to himself to be better, stronger and smarter over the murdered bodies of his parents. Not only does little Bruce Wayne swear to it, he grows up and accomplishes it. That kind of human dedication could potentially rub a person who had, so far, failed to get where they wanted in life, or were prone to procrastination, the wrong way. But while Batman is more of a human hero than say Superman, he's none the less a larger than life character that displays characteristics that are absent or unrealistic to expect within ordinary people. Even the pop culture characters more rooted in reality seem to operate in places where certain degrees of 'magic' or 'pseudo science' are possible. Rambo or The Punisher couldn't really dodge so many bullets or use their weapons so casually without incurring significant collateral damages, yet these characters are still believed to be 'normal' within their genre. Whereas if you or I, average people, ever found ourselves in a fist fight, were ever struck or struck someone else in the face, it would be an unforgettable event that we would relay to anyone who wished to hear it whether we knew them all that well or not. We'd seek medical or legal advice, press charges to bring the perpetrator to justice. It would become an important footnote in our life's story. Yet to the more 'human' of serial fictional heroes, physical altercations are an everyday occurrence, a part of the job. With characters that don't have the disadvantage of needing to be portrayed by real life actors, the number of fights they will undertake is a truly staggering number. How many kicks and jabs has Batman landed over his sixty plus years of existence? It would be an almost incalculable number that would put the body counts of most modern flesh and blood 'action men' to shame. So, the fact must be that, even in our "real" heroes, people feel

the compulsive need to imbue them with qualities, powers and abilities that far exceed the rest of our capabilities. More so even than those amongst us in peak shape and of outstanding performance.

Looking back at the idea of the regular person dealing with punching, or having been punched by somebody, any event like that, that can elevate itself above those of the everyday; will change a person's constitution in some way. Be it physically, mentally or socially. And change is invariably the one constant, be it large or small, in our lives. But Superman will never retire. He'll change, certainly. You only have to compare his adventures now to those of the 30s and 40s to see it. But he is still, in essence the same Kryptonian that landed on Earth all those years ago. Comic writers allow their creations something known as 'the illusion of change', which is true of most serialized characters, and, possibly, a part of their appeal. For, we grow older, witness it in our friends and relations and eventually die. But superheroes are always there. They age remarkably slowly, if at all. We learn from our life's experiences and grow, existentially as people. Fictional creations do not.

An inescapable fact of life is that, as we age, we will acquire some level of wisdom from our experiences. We can find witnessing others go through the same situation inspirational and instructive. As we grow, we learn and as we learn, we change. All we can do is hope we are changing for the better. It can be delayed somewhat, but never be truly avoided. But superheroes change incredibly slowly. Slow enough that any change could barely have been said to have occurred at all. After just over half a century, Superman still hides his identity from Lois Lane and continues to battle Lex Luthor, Batman still hides <https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

his identity from the people of Gotham city and continues to battle The Joker, and Spiderman still hides his identity from Mary Jane and Aunt May while continuing to battle Doctor Octopus and still remaining the unattached and troubled teen. Of course, this is in spite of occasional deviations from canon in which they may be seen wedding their respective sweethearts or appear to “die”, before exploiting some catch in which they can be revived, which are designed to indulge fans who may have since aged and moved on to the next phase of their lives and who may wish for a little more pseudorealism or ‘social politics’ that speaks to their present situations. But no matter which version you may have seen, be they married, single, perpetually teenage or maturing young adult, the ‘illusion of change’ still applies. But can a character that doesn’t really age ever learn from his or her life and experiences? Or change as a direct result of it? In truth, only superficially, as to truly change as a result of an encounter or life experience would involve a sense of closure and the following transition from the character’s previous, unenlightened standpoint to a more knowledgeable or enlightened stance. If this rule was in effect, perhaps Batman would eventually get the need for his own brand of vigilante justice out of his system after a couple of years in real life. Maybe in his participation of his particularly elaborate neuroses he’d receive an injury that would prevent him from continuing with his crusade, or inadvertently harm an innocent bystander, accidentally kill one of the criminals he was fighting or even be arrested or incarcerated within a mental asylum himself. The finality of consequence is never the character stopping of their own free will because perhaps, it is too difficult, dangerous or the character has an epiphany that affords him the insight to see the

ludicrousness of his own self-imposed mission. Too many people are invested in Batman keeping to his convictions, be they fan or businessman.

Whenever we turn the final page of a book we were reading or see the end credits roll for a film we were watching, there is always an acute feeling of disappointment as our time in the company of those characters is well and truly over. With serial fiction or television, that feeling can be prolonged almost indefinitely (though usually to the program's detriment) and by extension the connections we attribute to the characters just as much.

However in that case, something is always lost in the process. Namely the dramatic highs and lows, as, we know Superman will never truly die. But with that comes a sense of permanence and continuity (and predictability) that means, to people of an uncertain world such as ours, that through the greatest trait of the superheroes, their immortality, that we, throughout our short, fragile and unpredictable lives, can achieve a percentage of immortality too.

Without a doubt, the representation of the modern superhero we have come to recognize today has left such indelible marks upon our culture that maybe you yourself have unknowingly made reference to it at some point in your life, whether you are a fan of the genre or not. Perhaps you've been told "you're not exactly Superman", whilst trying to achieve something thought of as difficult or outside of your perceived abilities? You've told somebody not to "hulk out" if they're showing signs of a shift in their temperament, or you've been with someone who has told you their "spider-sense is tingling" to convey their wariness of a particular person or situation? The superhero is

so ingrained on our collective consciousness that our metaphors and minds tend to take for granted just how and why exactly they came to be so.

Why does our society view the superhero, both consciously and unconsciously, as such an important cultural element? And why must we take the time, and exert the mental energy to create and develop these fictional saviours? What exactly are they saving us from? After all, outside of the pages of their comics, it's not like Superman truly crushed the Third Reich, or Spiderman truly makes it safer to walk around your town or city at night. But, perhaps their very existence, even if it is indeed, only within a few pages of pulp entertainment, plants a mental seed in us during our youth, deep, deep down in the subconscious. A seed that, however subtly, reassures us that there are perhaps such beings out there, putting themselves on the line for the sake of truth, justice and the protection of the innocent. That maybe, if we did walk around our cities in the dead of night, we'd be alright, because it feels as though we're being watched over. Or, perhaps we slightly imbue ourselves with the traits we see in these pulpy heroes to help us press on through an unpleasant place or situation. After all, Batman wouldn't be scared to walk through town at two in the morning, or succumb to nerves when thinking about the PowerPoint presentation he has to give at work the next day.

Daniel Fingeroth goes on to pose the question of whether or not our attraction and preoccupation with such heroic yet utterly fictional fantasy beings is necessarily an entirely healthy position to have. Neatly summarising it as the following

“ Do superheroes provide us with super-excuses?”

For If we adore such characters and partially establish elements of their personal ideologies to our own perceptions of right and wrong or law and order, are we effectively living in a dream world whilst, in some ways, shirking our own responsibilities when faced with the handling of our own problems? Are we dependant on their authority? For after all, the inherent trait of the superhero, to possess the superior judgment to arbitrarily discern what is and is not morally wrong, then use their extraordinary abilities to violently enforce that very idea, is rather a fascist notion. Perhaps holding Superman to that level of authoritarian calibre is in truth not that dissimilar from the myths of the Aryan Übermensch (which translates from German as ‘overman’ or ‘superman’), or The X-Men and the distinct metaphor for racial tolerance (between mutant and non-mutants) their stories embody may very well lull people into believing the struggle for racial harmony has gone as far as it really needs to.

Or perhaps what these stern, unbending paragons of unwavering morality provide is merely a healthy totem for us to project our darker impulses upon. For don't we, as a society, often gain a certain bloody satisfaction from seeing the villains or other such characters of low moral fiber receive a swiftly violent and richly deserved punishment? Through, say, Wolverine's violent actions, our own violence is rendered unnecessary. Further still, the perceived perfection of both a physical and ideological nature one may attribute to a superhero, may well provide solace for a reader who may be becoming jaded with their place in a society that, at its core, is morally corrupt and defines its own rules on what is and is not acceptable regarding

the physical appearance, while possibly encouraging that same reader to exit this fantasy world he or she was engrossed in, with an adopted desire to go out and perform good deeds of their own. It's unlikely they'll don a cape, mask and tights whilst leaping from rooftop to rooftop, but the influence of wanting to do good amongst their community is assimilated without the more fascistic and unattractive authoritative aspects that present themselves when analyzing a superhero's modus operandi.

A popular symbol of super heroism and the special brand of masked vigilante justice that accompanies it is the concept of the secret identity. But it seems rather counterintuitive. What is it that could cause a person to hide who they are? If anything, people of today tend to seek out credit and adulation wherever they can. They enjoy that feeling of pride. But in real life, there can be equally valid reasons why a person may want to, or need to conceal their identity. The example that may immediately leap to mind would be a criminal wearing a mask whilst committing his crime so as to evade the attention of the law and escape the threat of incarceration. But the identity can also be hidden for more noble reasons. For instance, someone who is courageously rebelling politically or socially in a place where such action would evoke serious, perhaps deadly, repercussions or an informant, masking their voice while providing important, potentially life-saving information to figures of authority. Deviating far from the concept of nobility and courage, consider for a moment, a member of a radical hate group such as the KKK. His identity may well be known by close friends or family members, but his hood would prevent recognition from victims or law enforcement. There is also a psychological element of terror that wearing a

mask or a hood produces in others. There are also philanthropists who work anonymously out of a sense of modesty and desire to let their generous acts speak for themselves without adding their own personal sense of glory.

There are graffiti artists who express the simple fact that they ‘ were there’ through tagging various architecture whilst still maintaining a degree of anonymity. There is also the anonymity that the internet or the telephone provides. The lack of face-to-face interaction can allow people the feeling of liberation to say or do things, socially acceptable or otherwise, without repercussion.

But why has the idea of a secret identity become such an intrinsic element of the superhero mythos? Late stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce presented a theory as a part of his act. He believed that the masked man hides himself because he doesn’t want to be thanked. If he became too dependent on the praise, how would he feel when he wasn’t being thanked? The masked man wants to keep his motives pure, to make sure he does what he does because it’s the right thing to do, not to be thanked. That may present a piece of the puzzle as to why the idea of a masked hero appeals to us, the every-day people. Because they want their heroic actions to stand by themselves, which is a sympathetic and universal human desire.

To which fantasy does the idea of a double identity/life appeal? Perhaps it speaks to those amongst us that believe, deep down within us, we can be so much more than we appear. They covet the notion that “ if only people knew how truly special I am”. For, in a sense, we all possess secret identities, sides of ourselves that we do not reveal to many others. A dual, and secret, identity is a place where fantasy and ambition can take hold and we eagerly

await the time when ‘ the power within’ can be unleashed without risk or social reprisal. After all, there is always the risk that, once released, people would not warm to ‘ the real you’ and you are forced to once again repress your true self and re-presenting the false, approved one in hope of fitting in once more. But of course reality is not that clear cut, and there no doubt be events throughout our lives in which the false self and the true self may overlap. One will always bleed through at some point. Having two identities, wearing those metaphorical masks gives us greater control on how we present ourselves to the world that surrounds us.

Masks, be they literal or metaphorical, have been an important cultural factor across both time and civilization. For example, African and South American priests would wear ceremonial clothes, often with accompanying mask, to perform their various holy rituals. In those instances, it is unlikely the mask was intended to preserve the identity of the wearer, but endow it’s wearer with a mixture of both social importance and simultaneous characterlessness. An everyman bestowed with holy connotations. The mask itself is seen as the symbol of power, the man behind it less so, if at all.

A mask can be intimidating, so limiting it to association with common contemporary criminals seems like a grotesque waste of resources. Why not rally the intimidation factor against those people who would ultimately behave in ways that negatively affect our society? In the world of heroic fiction it can be used to drastically turn the tables on those individuals. But that also presents another valid reason to keep one’s identity a secret. To protect their loved ones. Which, when you really stop to ponder it, could be applied, in theory, real-life scenarios, such as a teacher who may work with

delinquent or anti-social children or a policeman who walks a beat in a particularly dangerous area. Though in a more negative spin on that theory, it could allow violent vigilante groups or ‘ death squads’ to emerge. But masked justice is rarely blind justice. It has agendas and rarely exists to just give the police force a little more ‘ edge’. It is only the Superhero who disguises his or her identity for truly noble and altruistic reasons whilst still maintaining his or her integrity in the eyes of the public.

According to Gary Engle, in his essay “ What Makes Superman So Darned American?”, he theorizes that the concept of a secret identity is deeply rooted in the experience of being an American immigrant, and applies this to whom is arguably considered the ‘ alpha hero’ and greatest example of a direct dual identity, Superman.

“ The myth simply wouldn’t work without Clark Kent, mild-mannered newspaper reporter...Adopting the white-bread image of a wimp is first and foremost a moral act for the man of steel. He does it to protect his parents from nefarious sorts who might use them to gain an edge over the powerful alien. More-over, Kent adds to Superman’s powers the moral guidance of a Smallville upbringing . Clark Kent...is the epitome of visible invisibility, someone whose extraordinary ordinariness makes him disappear in a crowd. In a phrase, he is the consummate figure of total cultural assimilation, and significantly, he is not real. Implicit in this is the notion that mainstream cultural norms, however useful, are illusions.”

According to Engle, the origins of the immigrant are the core of his entire identities; only insert being an extraterrestrial from another planet in place

of being from another country. Superman isn't unlike that of a young person from immigrant roots who may well speak his native tongue at home, around his family, but outside that dynamic, adjusts his identity to fit in with his adopted homeland. The immigrant wish to excel whilst staying anonymous. To make his parents feel proud without making them feel ashamed of who they are or where they come from. These feelings of 'immigrant guilt' were also profoundly felt by Superman creators Siegel and Shuster, who the projected their experiences into those of Superman. As Gary Engle continues to note:

“Immigration, of course, is the overwhelming fact in American history. Except for the Indians, all Americans have an immediate sense of their origins elsewhere. No nation on Earth has so deeply embedded in its social consciousness the imagery of passage from one social identity to another....”

-80

Further,

“Superman's powers...are the comic book equivalents of ethnic characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically and spiritually. The myth of Superman asserts with total confidence and a childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture” -81

For many readers of comics, particularly those old enough to have been around and enjoyed them when they were freshly conceived, they themselves may be immigrants or indeed the children or grandchildren of

<https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

immigrants. Perhaps reading these stories would allow for some manner of vicarious and symbolic re-enactment or unified identification with their roots and the characters they are enjoying reading about. The idea of a secret identity can further allow the readers to become conscious of and experience their own dilemmas. For instance, discovering whether or not they were being the version of themselves that makes cultural compromises and they let the outside world see, or are they being the self that they project in their home lives? Which of those two masks is truly the ‘real them’? Which do they prefer being and which do they want to be? In many ways we all at some time or another feel we are ‘strangers in a strange land’ once we leave the sanctuary of our homes and venture out into society to go to work or school. Home is familiarity, we are comfortable with ourselves and confidently know what it takes for us to survive and thrive there. But who do we become once we venture outside and have a choice in how we present ourselves to the world? It’s a basic choice that we are all forced to learn through trial and error from very young ages and the Superheroes are forced to make them too, albeit in much grander and colourful ways. Superman isn’t just an immigrant, he’s also an orphan. He arrived on our planet as a sole representative of his race, without his parents. He has an idea where he is from, but could barely recite a fact about the place aside from the fact that it is no more. Knowing, instead, a great deal more about where he currently is. The opportunity that he is presented with, however, is that, as an immigrant and an orphan, he is free to construct his entire history from day one. Not that he ever has much choice in the matter, for all that he knows of our world at that point is that he is from somewhere else. As pointed out by Gary Engle:

<https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

“ Orphans aren’t merely free to invent themselves, they are obliged to.”

So perhaps the double identity is more of an integral component in what defines Superman than say x-ray vision or the ability to fly. He can ‘ cherry-pick’ aspects from the best of us as a society and ingest them a part of himself. While he is an alien, he is an alien that resembles a human, and a handsome human at that. He can fit in to a crowd if he wishes and he can distance himself to the fortress of solitude on a whim just as easily. His life as Clark Kent can enrich his life as Superman and vice versa. However, Superman’s chosen identity is fraught with a hypocrisy that could be said to highlight an immigrant’s internal conflicts and insecurities. A simultaneous need to both blend in and stand out from the crowd. Clark Kent is a reporter, a career that requires a degree of courage and bravery, for instance, when attempting to acquire the scoop on a dangerous situation . Yet to his peers, Clark is seen as a cowardly person who is always nowhere to be seen when danger is close, yet, somehow he still manages to get the scoop which is rather conspicuous for a person trying to remain amongst society inconspicuously.

As an interesting side note, as with most other popular superheroes, the ‘ civilian’ identity is often the ‘ real’ identity and the public and more heroic face is the adopted persona. This is not the case with the Man of Steel. It is in fact the complete opposite. Superman’s true self is Superman, yet he must adopt a more unremarkable persona in Clark Kent to fit in.

One of the fundamental questions with regards to identity is if it is in fact a more courageous act to be who you are or who you pretend you are. The superhero asks this too, only louder. The superhero’s answers to such <https://assignbuster.com/character-traits-of-superheroes/>

existential questions are usually within the realms of “ I will be who I must in order to fulfil my task of doing good. Whatever serves that purpose is who I will be both in and out of my costume.” Whichever other questions these heroes may hav