

A Hero or Vigilante: A Study of Captain America Through New Historicism

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1930s the genre of comic books has featured stories to amaze, to frighten and to entertain readers. However, comic books are not just forms of entertainment, but cultural artifacts that study, mimic and bring out the attitudes of a particular period. The sphere of comic books presents unique experience with its unique characteristics. One of the most unappreciated and less researched barometers of social change is the genre of comic books. When flipping through the pages of the latest instalment of their favourite series, comic book readers are met with images of the latest fashions, music styles, cultural memes and other trends. However, while comic books portray surface level trends of a certain time period, they also show the reader some of the more deeply held truths of their society.(1)

Comic series like 'Captain America' has become cultural and popular icons throughout history. This character has often been associated with nationalism and humanism. The creation of the character in various roles differs throughout its publication history. Different writers have used different positions, techniques and ideological standpoints to write comics as reactions of their time and place. In the latest films and comics they show the readers Captain America's journey from a hero to a vigilante. There is a lack of research on how cultural and political shift has caused changes in publication of Captain America comics. For that I would be using the theory of New Historicism as my framework.

1. Introduction

History of comic books

To understand the creation of Captain America, one needs to have background information of the comic book industry as a whole, and also have an understanding of how superhero comics came to be. If there weren't any comics to begin with, then neither Captain America or other superheroes and characters like Garfield would have existed.

Since the late 80's popularity in comic books has increased exponentially, and in today's market, the subject material of comics have been the basis of some of the most lucrative movie franchises in history. Children dress up as superheroes on Halloween or buy action figures and play with them in an imaginary world where the hero always wins. Today, in a post 9/11 world, comic books often take serious matters and place them in their narratives to show the picture of current America. While superhero comics are found in every country there are considered as an American phenomenon.

The changes in American society are more evident than in the pages of the Captain America comic book series. Since the character's inception in 1941, he has reflected the ever-changing popular ideas of American society. The Nixon era Captain took on a new persona because of his disillusionment with the administration. Many Captain America fans have often been off put by their perceptions of Captain America's undying devotion to his country. To many he is seen as no more than a puppet who fails to question the motivations of the government that he serves. However, the modern Captain Americas have not shown the blind patriotism that the golden age Captain adopted. These Captain Americas have increasingly questioned the decisions of the government. (2)

Defining the superhero

What is a superhero? We ask someone they might tell us a superhero is someone with extraordinary abilities and powers. Superheroes can be characterized as having super strength, the ability to fly, or magical capabilities that utilize the elements. Most would say superheroes are usually white men, built and attractive. Many also wear costumes and masks to hide their true identity while living a double life. Richard Reynolds gives a different definition of what a superhero is in his Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology,

"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 sense...but far more often the third term has stood for the ideals enshrined in the US Constitution. Superheroes have been better Americans – as the founding fathers would have understood the term – than most of America's modern political leaders." (3)

Captain America surely fits the stereotypical descriptions of what a superhero is, but Reynolds' portrayal really lays out what Captain America stands for: the "ideals enshrined in the US Constitution."

Theories of New Historicists

The purpose of this project is to trace the character from his inception in 1941 to the modern Captain America which is shown in comics and films today. I will use the character of Captain America as a critical lens to examine how popular American sentiments have evolved over the seventy-year history of the character. I will use a critical framework that relies on the theories of the Greenblatt school of New Historicists. Particularly relevant to this study are the notions that "every

expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices," "that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably" and "that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature" (4). This view allows for a study which involves texts, such as comic books, that fall outside of the traditional sense of literature and recognizes them as equally relevant to cultural studies. New Historicism allows for the inclusion of non-canonical texts into the realms of academic criticism because it denies the notions of exclusivity of "high art" when considering what is defined as literature.

New Historicism also allows for the inclusion of historical settings in the analysis of literature. Thus, an analysis of a particular text is tied to the culture that produced it. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, I seek to examine "what is the historical relation between art and society or between one institutionally demarcated discursive practice and another". (5) This study takes the "low-art" form of comic books and relates them to American society as a whole. What do the actions of Captain America represent? Who is the Captain functioning as an avatar for? Why is it the Captain that represents the popular values of America and not other characters?

With my study of the changing attitudes of the Captain America characters, I hope to present a clear analysis of how the series have used the comic as a vehicle to discuss many social issues that have occurred during the character's existence. The goal of this study is to present the reader several "snap shots" of the Captain America character throughout his history. These snapshots will be examined in both the character's world and in relation to the real world.

America's "Super Patriot"

The United States' entry into World War II gave superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and started a big push for patriotic superheroes, and "supplied a complete working rationale and world view for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America" who embodies American values during World War II (Captain America first appeared in Captain America #1 1941). The World War II superheroes became great icons of American propaganda and slogans depicting great men defeating Nazis. The war also brought a sense of realism into comics where historical events were being adapted to fit the narrative of comic storylines.

The cover of Captain America #1 shows a daring Captain America bursting into a room full of Nazis, and punching Adolf Hitler across the face. "A new powerful figure and his young ally, born of the courage of America, leads the U.S. Army out of a raging inferno of terror and sabotage!" exclaims the opening page of Captain America Comics #1. (6) The mentioned figures, emblazoned with the colours of the American flag, are Captain America and his loyal sidekick Bucky Barnes. These two characters created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, would become an emblem of war time America's culture and values. Captain America would come to represent the determination, strength and integrity of the American spirit. The comic would prove to be a commercial success, as readers snatched up copies and millions were sold every month. Captain America was the embodiment of the perfect citizen and young readers

followed his courageous adventures with awe. When modern readers peruse copies of Captain America's golden age they are transported to a time where patriotism and justice were esteemed above all. The Captain America of the 1940s was a figure that embodied the patriotic ideals of a nation and symbolized the dreams of the American community.

Till 1941 America had not entered the war and Congress were trying to promote literary themes that inspired nationalism through various publishers. Other superheroes like Superman and Batman would stay in their respective cities and fight their foes even though the Second World War was the historical background at that time. Captain America creator Joe Simon noted that the "patriotic frenzy" of the 1940s called for the creation of a "super patriot" to inspire nationalism to the readers. (7)

In March of 1941, Captain America arrived on the scene with a bang. The inclusion of Hitler on the cover proved shocking to many within the comic book industry. Despite the fact that Hitler had risen to power in 1933, many people within the industry felt uncomfortable with the idea of naming the Fuhrer as the enemy that their superheroes were going to face. Even Simon's and Kirby's editor Goodman was reluctant to have the duo put Hitler on the inaugural cover. As other comic book writers refused to explicitly name Hitler and the Nazis as villains for their heroes to fight, Simon and Kirby felt the need to make the enemy of their patriotic superhero clear. Thus, Captain America began his tenure as America's hero by facing the country's biggest enemy head on. Danny Fingeroth asserts that Captain America's blow to the Fuhrer's face "was a literal and figurative punch in the face of fascism, and a powerful propaganda tool". (8)

Captain America proved to be one of the most powerful propaganda tools that the American war effort could ask for. The Captain was a pure embodiment of patriotism. The patriotism that the Captain embodies is that of an aggressive, engaging action. The Captain embodies the idea that it is no longer acceptable to remain passive in the face of injustice, but as Americans, the Captain and other like him must actively protect their country against outside forces.

Readers first see the Captain as Steve Rogers, a frail young man who wanted to serve his country. However, Rogers is rejected by the army because he does not meet the minimum physical standards for military service. So great was Rogers' dedication to his country that he volunteered to be part of Operation Rebirth, a secret program whose goal was to create a super soldier serum. In a secret laboratory, the serum proved successful as Rogers gained the ability to quickly heal and also amazing levels of strength, speed, and agility. However, only moments after the successful transformation of Rogers, a Nazi sleeper agent kills the serum's creator Doctor Josef Reinstein. With the Nazi agent's bullet the secret of the serum's formula dies along with Reinstein and thus, Steve Rogers becomes America's protector, Captain America. The Captain and his sidekick Bucky bravely fought Nazi forces page after page.

When reflecting on the early days of the comic, creator Simon recalls: The U.S. hadn't yet entered the war when Jack and I did Captain America, so maybe he was our way of lashing out against the Nazi menace. Evidently, Captain America symbolized, if that's the correct word, the American people's sentiments. When we were producing Captain America, we were outselling Batman, Superman, and all the others. (9)

The comic was so popular that following the publication of the first issue there were nearly a million copies of the book sold every month. In the aftermath of the Captain's introduction "there came a platoon of red, white, and blue spangled superheroes: American Avenger, American Crusader, American Eagle, Commando Yank, Fighting Yank, Captain Flag, Captain Freedom, Captain Courageous, Captain Glory . . ." and so forth. (10) However, none could compete with the popularity of the Captain. Captain America Comics were not only popular with readers on the home front, but also with many American soldiers who had been deployed in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. (11) Statistics show that every one in four magazines that were shipped to troops were comic books. The Captain allowed readers to feel as if they were supporting the American war effort. (12)

However, it soon proved that not everyone was a fan of the Captain or his ideals. Simon, Kirby, and their employers Timely Comics (later known as Marvel Comics) were flooded with hate mail filled with death threats. The situation was that homegrown Nazis were angered by Captain America stories. While no acts of violence actually occurred, the situation alerted Americans that danger was lurking closer than originally thought. Although American propaganda pictures the country as strictly anti-Nazi, the actions of the Captain's detractors proved that some American people accepted the ideology of the Nazis. Thus, Americans and the Captain had to combat prejudice and injustice both in the foreign war fields and at home.

When Kirby and Simon designed Captain America they made sure that he was identifiable to his readers. Unlike many other superheroes of that time Captain America was not born on make believe planet like Krypton or the fictional Gotham city but was born on Manhattan, New York. The creators placed Captain in the real world, in a tangible place that the readers could identify with. The origins of Captain America are similar in the films just like the comics. When readers reflect on the Captain America of the 1940s they are reminded of images of great battles and victories over Hitler and his troops. The character was a projection of American patriotism and integrity. He was a character that all Americans could look up to, regardless of race, creed, or economic background. Readers across the nation read his adventures and cheered for his victories. Troops were comforted and encouraged by the messages that they saw woven into the fabric of Captain America Comics. The very first film of the Captain America trilogy also showed the viewers how under the leadership of Captain how his Howling Commandos were victorious over the Nazi troops. These battles inspired the Axis and they were close to winning the war with the help of Captain

America. Kids would take up the role of Captain and lead their friends to battle while playing.

The character and his comic book continued to thrive throughout World War II. Soon after the end of the war America's rabid patriotism began to fade and along with it the passion for Captain America. As the country sought to move on from the horrors of the war, comic book readers no longer needed the Captain and in February of 1950 the character was removed from Timely Comics' main line up. However, one cannot overlook the contributions that the character made to America's war propaganda or to the greater American culture. The character represented the ideals of a war time and oppressed peoples. While the character and his patriotic ideals were shelved at the beginning of the 1950s, they would not remain there for long. In the film, after the presumed death of Captain America the hero was only remembered for a short period of time. His data was kept hidden with S.H.I.E.L.D and was never released to the public after the 1960s which made Captain a myth and was known to only people with higher ranks in the U.S army and S.H.I.E.L.D. The patriotism and ideals showed by Captain America in the film vanished over time and with the modernization of the world and the creation of S.H.I.E.L.D. In the end of the film, he wakes up after seventy years and relives his memories of World War 2 and lives with the idea that America has still not achieved peace and they are still at war.

Captain America "Homecoming"

Comic books sales slumped in the aftermath of World War II. The heroes who once were the role models for millions of comic book readers no longer held the same importance that they previously had. Even Captain America was a part of the superhero group whose comic sales were falling down.

During the war Captain's adventures had been read by millions of readers each month. However, the post-World War II Captain could not generate enough interest from his readers. It appeared that the youth of America no longer needed a larger than life soldier to idolize. Peace time had settled in America and many readers may have wanted to distance themselves from the violence and gore of war which was so present in superhero comics.

The function of comic books during World War II had been to spread the message of America's might and fighting spirit. However, once the victory that Captain America and other superheroes had fought for was achieved, there was no longer a need for them. Victory was clinched and the soldiers were no longer as entertaining when there was no foreign threat for them to combat. Thus, the rash of patriotic superheroes that had held readers captivated during the war years were quickly shelved and most were never utilized again. Instead, the romance, western, and horror genres of comic books drew a lot of attention. Comic book readers were tired of the war and all the propaganda that surrounded it. The lighter stories that dominated the romance genre drew in more female readers. Horror comics provided a scare that was purely supernatural in origin, instead of the horrors of war. The western genre took readers back to an idealized time in American history and featured a different more attractive, roughhewn hero. The

comic book industry had evolved and the soldier hero was outdated.

America was soon involved with a battle against the Communists in the Cold War. The next major conflict for America was the Korean War. The comic book industry remained mostly ambivalent to the conflict. In World War II, nearly every major superhero engaged the Axis forces in some form or another. The Korean War failed to draw much attention from either comic book producers or readers. The few comic books that did address the war were actually war story comic books. No superheroes filled their pages, only soldiers. Also, the enemies in these war story comics were more concrete for readers. Traditional comic books feature super-villains, who have colourful costumes and usually follow some sort of theme in their crimes. War story comics, however, featured realistic enemies that soldiers were actually facing during the war. Following on the heels of World War II, the Korean War did not inspire the same need for patriotic superheroes. Thus, any stories addressing the issue were relegated to a niche genre, while the superheroes battled more imaginary foes. So Captain America Comics were soon retired to Marvel's shelves.

Although the Korean War failed to draw the attention of the comic book industry, the Cold War quickly became a major plot point in many comic book stories. As the entire comic book industry's sales had suffered in the aftermath of World War II, many executives hoped to revive the superhero genre with Cold War stories. The Cold War was more of a universal issue that, like World War II, could possibly impact most of the world. As such, it was appropriate to bring back several of the superheroes that had previously fought for the American ideals of freedom and truth. Marvel decided to bring back an old favourite to combat the "red menace" and, thus, Captain America was once again utilized on the pages of Marvel comics.

The comics were more of a distortion of the Golden Aged Captain than an updated version of the hero. The Commie Smasher Captain was self-righteous about his stance against the Communists that he battled, but did not provide any rationale for his actions. Although the Captain's actions appear extreme to modern readers, one must look at the comic in its historical period. During the 1950s, the "Red Scare" was pervasive in America. In World War II, America's enemies were clear and far away. However, America's new enemies were not as easy to identify. The fear of Communists who could blend in with American society was prevalent. Anyone could be a Communist, including your neighbour or best friend. This attitude was displayed in issue seventy-seven of Captain America Comics. In the issue, the Captain and Bucky are in a Chinese neighbourhood searching for a Communist spy known as the Man with No Face. They realize that the spy is actually the twin brother of an honest, hardworking man who had earlier assisted them. As the spy throws himself from the roof of a building to escape capture, the Captain exclaims "So *Wing's own brother was ready to kill him for the cause!* Another example of the brutal twisted thinking of the reds . . . When brother can be turned against brother". The message conveyed by the comic was, of course, an extreme, but real fear in 1950s America.

However, even though the fear of a Communist regime was all too real to Cold War Americans, comic book readers did not buy into the Captain's Commie Smasher adventures. After only three issues the Captain and Bucky were once again retired to Marvel's shelves. The disconnect between the comic's stories and its readers could be explained by noting that many comics are read by younger readers. The fear of "Commies" may not have been all that interesting to them, because there was no real combat to be seen in Cold War America. There were no epic battles taking place on the corner between America's defenders and the Communists. Instead, it was more of a battle of ideology, which is a bit harder to convey in action-packed comic books. Also, the western, romance, horror, and crime genres of comic books had become increasingly popular during this time period. Hayton and Albright argue that the superhero as propaganda model of comic books was just not attractive to readers. Readers no longer felt the need for clean-cut, patriotic superheroes who could do no wrong. Instead, grittier characters, like cowboys and detectives, became more popular figures in comic books which resulted in the cancellation of Captain America Comics again.

While the Avengers featured many popular superheroes of the 1960s --Thor, Iron Man, Ant Man, Wasp, and the Hulk-- Marvel editors felt that the team was missing something. They concluded that the team needed a patriot, a character that outwardly represented the ideals of American society. In March of 1964, Marvel editors made the decision to revive the character of Captain America. This meant that Marvel had to explain away the Commie Smasher Captain and thus the imposter Captain story. The new history of Captain America stated that while attempting to disarm an explosive aboard an experimental plane Bucky is killed by the blast, while the Captain is thrown into the ice-cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. His body is frozen and because of the super soldier serum he is not killed. In 1964, the Captain's body is discovered by the Avengers. After the ice melts, the Captain is revived and chooses to accept the invitation to become a member of the Avengers (Avengers #4).

During his tenure with the Avengers, the Captain finds himself functioning as a man out of time. He still holds his 1940s ideals with great pride, but finds it difficult to function in the new world that he is thrust into. The Captain is also suffering from what would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the combat that he lived through in World War II and his guilt over the death of Bucky Barnes. In his article "Captain America, Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and the Vietnam Era," Shawn Gillen posits that many of the Captain's actions following his revival can be attributed to his continual grief over the death of Bucky. At times, the Captain finds it hard to function as a member of a team because of his guilt. On one occasion, the Captain is haunted by hallucinations of his former partner. But the fact remains that comic book readers were shown that the perfect patriot has weaknesses of his own.

This weakness is what some comic book scholars allude to as the Captain's excuse for not participating in the Vietnam War. Unlike with the Korean War, many superheroes were

featured in stories that dealt with the conflict. Iron Man frequently engaged in battle with Communist troops. Gillen notes that even Thor participates in a battle in Vietnam. It seemed odd that only Captain America would be absent from the fray. The super patriot should be the one defending the ideals of freedom against the oppression of the Communist regime. However, the Captain only appears in two stories that take place in Vietnam. The first was Captain America #125 in May of 1970, where the Captain intervenes to protect a doctor who has pledged to treat people from both sides of the conflict. The second time that the Captain appears in Vietnam is in The 'Nam 41, retroactive story that was not written until February 1990. In the issue, the Captain, alongside other heroes, appears in a soldier's fantasy sequence of what would have happened if superheroes had fought in the war (13). Thus, during the United States' involvement in the nearly ten-year duration of the Vietnam War, the Captain only appeared once.

The Captain's absence from the Vietnam War was noticed by many comic book fans. Gillen notes that many readers were disappointed that the Captain was not engaged in the war. In 1965, when President Johnson sent troops into Vietnam many "readers wrote to Marvel suggesting that Captain America ought to go as well. Other asked that he stay out" (14). As the war became more controversial with the American public "the letters to the editor became a forum for pro-war and anti-war readers to debate the political issues having little of nothing to do with the stories in the comic books" (14). The Captain's refusal to discuss or participate in the Vietnam War sparked a major uproar amongst his readers. Many debated the role that the Captain played in the modern world and argued that his patriotic ideals were too outdated for 1960s ways of thinking.

Although the Captain passes no judgment on the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, his reticence speaks volumes. Marvel writers acknowledged that the Captain was a character that was functioning out of his time. Even well know Marvel writer Stan Lee wrote that Captain America "simply doesn't lend himself to the John Wayne-type character he once was" and went on to further question the need of super patriotic characters in 1960s society (14). The Captain who had only been revived for two short years was already having his ideals questioned. What does this Vietnam Era Captain represent? One can speculate that the Marvel writers' refusal to place the Captain in Vietnam related stories speaks to an anti-Vietnam stance on their part. One must not forget that the Captain can only act in the stories that he is placed. It appears that Marvel writers could not justify placing such a patriotic and blatantly American character in a situation that was so controversial. Unlike World War II, where there were fewer detractors, the Vietnam War was a divisive issue among the American people. As the Captain is supposed to act as a representation of the ideals of the American people it is questioned just who is he supposed to represent. The Marvel editors avoided putting the Captain into the conflict to avoid taking sides in the conflict. It is acceptable for other heroes to enter into the conflict because of who they are. Iron Man is a billionaire business man who was in the weapons business. Many of his actions were actually protecting his own assets. Thor is a god who can intervene where he sees fit. Captain America, however, is an embodiment of the America spirit and his support represents

the allegiance of the American people. Marvel writers recognized that the Vietnam issue was so inflammatory that if the Captain were to endorse either side, then a portion of the comic's reading audience would be alienated, and thus, the issue was avoided.

As the Captain had managed to avoid addressing the Vietnam War, he stayed his course in the battle against evil. He began to release some of his guilt over the death of Bucky and stopped showing signs of PTSD. The Captain was once again serving his government through his own individual adventures and with his adventure with the Avengers, until 1974, when the Captain must realize that the government that he serves is as corrupt as the other enemies that he faces. In the early 1970s, America was watching the Watergate Scandal unfold. President Nixon was implicated in a cover up of the scandal and the American people were forced to ask who they could trust. If the most powerful man in the country is corrupt, then who can they trust to lead them? Eventually President Nixon chose to resign his presidency in an attempt to avoid further scandal.

In the Marvel Universe, the Captain was discovering that the government that created him and that he fought for was just as corrupt as the Nixon administration. In an eight-issue miniseries, the Captain uncovers that an organization called the Committee to Regain America's Principles (or CRAP) is secretly a fascist group that is striving to take over the United States government (14). As he digs deeper into the organization he finds that their leader is none other than the President of the United States. The villain commits suicide after he is confronted by the Captain.

In the aftermath of the encounter Captain America becomes disillusioned with the government that he once served. As he tries to reconcile the knowledge that he had uncovered he doubts his own role as America's protector. In Captain America #176 he questions "So, when people take a look at me -- which America am I supposed to be symbolize?" The Captain cannot accept that he is supposed to protect a corrupt government and casts off his Captain America uniform and becomes "Nomad, the man without a country". Captain America writer Steve Englehart explains his motivation for the story arc: "*I was writing a man who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook. I could not ignore that. And so, in the Marvel Universe, which so closely resembled our own, Cap followed a criminal conspiracy into the White House and saw the President commit suicide. And that was the end of Captain America...*" (15)

The Captain's tenure as the Nomad is brief, but during his time he finds that his friends and partners do not approve of his choice to abandon his post as America's hero. He soon returns to the cowl and shield and vows to protect America from the corrupt both within and without.

Fallen Hero

"*Steve Rogers, that skinny blond-haired kid who grew up on the streets of New York showed us that the ideals of the American Dream . . . actually works!*" are the words that Sam Wilson, the Falcon, uses to describe the effect that Rogers has

had on the Marvel Universe's America (16). Wilson delivers this line while giving the eulogy at Rogers' funeral. In 2007, the original Captain America was assassinated and both the Marvel Universe and the real world mourned the passing of the hero. Before his assassination Rogers had taken part in Marvel's Civil War, a storyline that has echoes of real world politics.

As in the real world, Captain America soon became weary with the demands of the government. In July of 2006, Marvel comics began publication of series entitled Civil War. In the series, the superhero community is divided when the government attempts to pass legislation called the Superhuman Registration Act. The act would require all superheroes who wished to continue to fight crime to register their real names with the government and receive training. This would create a superhuman police force controlled by the government. While many, including government officials, believed that Captain America would side with the government, it was surprising when he openly defied the Registration Act. Marvel writers created the Captain's dissent as a vehicle to set up a situation where their superheroes would be divided into two factions; one in support of the registration act and one in protest. The Pro-registration faction is led by Iron Man, while the Anti-registration side is led by Captain America.

Many readers of the Civil War series found the fictional United States government's actions and policies similar to those in the real world. In the wake of 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States experienced a period of extreme patriotism. At that time a majority of the public agreed with the government's decision to declare war and nonconformists were branded as cowards or unpatriotic. However, in the ensuing years public sentiment began to change and the actions of the government were increasingly called into question. The Civil War Captain America is a representation of the disillusioned patriot. This Captain America, unlike his previous incarnations, functions in a world that mirrors "*political and social realities of the post9/11 world, such as privacy issues, controversial wiretapping, and civil liberties compromises rising out of the Patriot Act*" (17). During the Marvel Civil War, Captain America is fighting a battle not only against the Superhuman Registration Act, but also against the violations of civil liberties. This battle between national security and personal freedom is what inspired Marvel writers to use Captain America, the long-argued embodiment of America's popular opinions, as the leader of the resistance. As he is such a fundamental and political figure of the Marvel Comic's world, the actions of Captain America carry more weight and influence than others, which places the burden of the battle for civil liberties on his shoulders giving the storylinemore relevance.

The fundamental argument that is presented in the Civil War story arc is the battle between personal freedom and national security. In the Marvel Universe, this is represented by the battles between the Pro-Registration and Anti-Registration factions. In essence the Superhuman Registration Act would force heroes to give up their autonomy and become civil servants. This would take away their abilities to choose what battles to enter into, which heroes they associate with, and would also force them to give up portions of their identities. The

heroes that for decades have volunteered to protect the innocent would now find themselves obligated to act. The heroes would also face the possibility that the official roster of their real names could fall into the hands of an enemy who could harm not only them but also their families.

Readers of Marvel's Civil War can find similar instances in the 'Patriot Act' which are the issues presented in this series. The individual has to choose between extreme safety measures or fighting for the rights of an individual. Captain America and his fellow heroes defy the act and stand on the side of personal freedoms. The explosive battles between the heroes become the fight against a paternal government's ideologies. If any of the Captain's fellow freedom fighters are arrested they are imprisoned without any type of legal representation in the Negative Zone, a fictionalized Guantanamo Bay. However, despite the Anti-registration side's best effort, they soon surrender. After a lengthy battle with Iron Man, in which Captain America has the upper hand, the Captain pauses to look at the devastation that the heroes' battles have caused. In fact, some of the crowd watching the battle attempts to save Iron Man from the Captain. As he looks at the damage and reactions to the battle, Captain America remarks to his fellow hero, the Falcon, that the crowds are right, "*We're not fighting for the people anymore, Falcon . . . Look at us. We're just fighting*" (18). As Langley notes the battle is "*a fight that they were winning physically but loosing philosophically.*" This failure during philosophical battles is reminiscent of the Captain's avoidance of the Vietnam War. Although the Captain can easily win battles against physical enemies, he fails to with battles that deal with ideology. Thus the defenders of personal liberty surrender to the forces of security and the Captain surrender to the Pro Registration side.

Only a short time after the end of the Civil War story line Captain America is assassinated. After being dressed in his uniform and paraded down the courthouse steps, the Captain is shot by an unknown assassin. His death is greeted with shock in the Marvel world and in the real world with headlines in the New York Times and many other publications. The decision by the Marvel editors to kill off the character of Steve Rogers proved to be a controversial one. Comic book message boards were flooded with posts by fans wondering about the intentions of the Marvel editors' decision to kill off one of its most long-lasting characters. One fan wrote "*I'm definitely pissed off. . . He's supposed represent all our ideals, everything we're supposed to aspire to and they couldn't leave him intact? And the way he died -- with two bullets to the chest by a sniper? Come on!*" (19).

As the above fan reaction reveals, the death of Captain America/Steve Rogers is much more problematic than simply killing off a fan favourite character. By killing the original Captain America, Marvel symbolically killed a portion of the American spirit or at least an idealized version of American values. The character was created as a propaganda piece for the war effort and a protector for the oppressed in 1941 and continued in his role as the representation of popular public sentiment for decades. The death of Steve Rogers, the man who agreed to be experimented on because he wanted to fight

for his country, signified the death of a portion of America's idealism and innocence.

2. Conclusion

Over the years the Captain America comics have provided different views of America to the readers. From the patriotic to the disillusionment to the post 9/11 period, the character has been used as a vehicle for Marvel's writers to express the world around them. Thus, readers can look at each issue of the comic book series and see the "historical relation between art and society" that Greenblatt discusses in his works. In his role as the embodiment of American ideals, what Captain America faces in the Marvel universe are many conflicts that are mirrored from our world. Captain America functions in a world which is filled with superheroes and villains, but it does not change the fact that his stories reflect the concerns of real world Americans.

Although the genre of comic books is often overlooked as unimportant or antieducational, it is apparent that just the opposite is true. Readers can pick up any issue of the Captain America series and see snap shots of American culture. The Captain, through his actions and speech, conveys to readers the popular attitudes of the times, be they pro- or anti-government. The Captain represents ideals and beliefs across the American political continuum.

From World War II to the post-9/11 America, the Captain and his fellow heroes have provoked readers to examine what it means to be an American. In the 1940s, many were

supportive of the character, but there were also those who disagreed with the ideal of an American protector of all people regardless of race. Later during the Vietnam War, the letters to the editor page of the Captain America comic books became a forum for readers to discuss the merits of American intervention to the threat of Communist regimes abroad. Then in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, comic book message boards were filled with readers arguing the merits of Marvel's Civil War storyline and the Captain's actions during the conflict. The defining theme for the decades of discussion comes down to one question – what does it mean to be an American?

When one looks at the seventy-year history of the Captain it is apparent that Captain America Comics are not just a collection of brightly coloured, action sequences, but are cultural artifacts that attempt to bring out the questions of power, ideology and cultural complexities of several different political and social regimes. Although the Captain cannot fully embody the ideals of each and every American citizen, the character does portray the basic tenants of what defined patriotism in the 1940s and continues until today: a love for his country, the courage to fight for his beliefs, and the hope that tomorrow will be another day to correct the injustices in the world.

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