In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell finds that myths are used by society to transform the fears and concerns of the individual into an impersonal reflection, that all of society can deal with and express. By taking the personal concerns and transferring them into remote and distant forms, these anxieties can then be freely told and retold, becoming the legends of a society. These legends both act as a teacher for the individual showing him a different and reassuring viewpoint, and a mirror for the larger group, and how a culture sees themselves and their place in the world.

Like the ancient myths and legends, the popular icons of comic super-heroes can be seen as expressions of the needs and fears of individuals projected onto a larger shared canvass. Whether a movie or television shows, or a book or illustrated story, these modern myths serve the same function in their society. Projected into a larger text, these fears can be manipulated and controlled by society in comforting and supportive ways. The fears of the individual are molded into a cultural consciousness.

The largest icons of this type, were both created in a response to the world of the early twentieth century, and to the fears of those times. First appearing in 1938, in the first issue of *Action Comics*, Superman was both a reaction against the Nazi ideal of a genetic super human, and the reassuring fantasy of second-generation immigrants for assimilation into American society. Superman is an alien, on a world that he has little in common with. But Superman’s quest for knowledge of his origins, also becomes his quest for anonymity, as he seeks to become indistinguishable from the rest of society, to melt into the urban caldron.

Superman, as befits his heavenly origins, is stronger and faster than any human, impervious to most if not all harm that can come to humans. Yet with all these superior qualities, he chooses to be an average American. For purposes of the narrative, this daytime masquerade as Clark Kent, makes him a character that is approachable, who spends time at work and in love that any of us can identify with. The bible has stories of angels coming in disguise to test Abraham, and Greek Mythology has tales of gods in disguise, for often-licentious reasons. The Superman/Clark Kent disguise is unique, for Superman’s purpose is to pass as the lesser being, rather than as a test or a trick on those lesser being.

Superman’s origins have obvious religious parallels; cast into a cosmic Nile, he is found in his cradle and rescued by a childless farming couple. From the beginning, the character of Superman has the dual identity of being both average and superior. As Clark Kent, he is a symbol of conformity and traditionalism, reaffirming the hegemonic values of the status quo. He grows up hiding his origins, hiding the things that make him different, seeking only to fit in and conform to American society. This creates a character putting aside his higher origins and talents, and laboring to be seen as average and mundane. For Superman, the secret identity becomes a reassuring conformist fantasy.

But passing as an average person, is a false choice for Superman. This becomes a refugee’s ultimate fantasy; to be at once better than the natives and yet indistinguishable from them. Superman cannot hide from his true nature, nor can he be at peace with his masquerade. In a close reading of Superman’s first appearance in *Action Comics #1*, Richard Reynolds explores the heart of the secret identity feature of many heroes.

"Why doesn’t Clark let Lois know that he’s Superman? The discourse of the story, the soap-opera continuity which investigates the Clark/Lois/Superman triangle, would be shattered if Lois were to realize Clark and Superman’s unity. The Clark/Superman duality needs a constant supply of new dramatic situation to reveal new facets of the hero’s split personality. The explicit reasons given within the story — such as ‘They could use my friends to get at me’, reasons which have become common throughout the genre, and do not need to be spelt out when establishing a new character — are only secondary to the structural need for characters to have secret identities. This first ever Superman story [in Action Comics #1] establishes the convention by using it as if it already existed. The reader is called upon to adduce adequate reasons for the disguises. And Lois’s extreme scorn for the ‘morning after’ Clark established the width of the Clark/Superman gulf by was of a one-sided conversation:

"I’m sorry about last night —

"Please don’t be angry with me.

"But Lois coldly stares in the opposite direction. She has become a different person from the warm and yielding individual Superman held in his arms just two panels before: panels which occupy opposite ends of a three-panel sequence in the center of the page. The visual distance between Superman and Lois in the left-hand panel is similar to the distance which separates them on the right, but the emotional relationships implied by the figures are wholly different.

"What has been established is in the nature of a taboo. Refraining from a certain act (in this case revealing oneself to be Superman) wards off a potential disaster. Illogical perhaps, but the situation strengthens the appeal of our hero by establishing certain specific restraints with are peculiar to him and him alone. He pays for his great powers by the observance of this taboo of secrecy — in a manner which is analogous to the process in which warriors in many traditional societies ‘pay’ for their strength in battle by abstaining from sex, eating certain foods, and other taboos designed to isolate and protect the ‘masculine’ in their characters. Such concern with what amounts to rites of passage from adolescence to manhood is clearly of interest and concern to a teenage audience." (See figure two.) (Reynolds, 14 — 15)
social safeguards seem to be deteriorating, Batman began as an interpretation of Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel. A wealthy, member of the upper class, whose hobby was fighting crime. These themes quickly evolved, with the demimonde of the night taking precedence over the society world of the day. Batman became an almost animalistic shaman, defending society from the elements of chaos and irrationality.

Batman’s origins start with the violent separation nightmare, of a young boy watching helplessly while his parents are murdered in a street robbery. His father’s death, ineffectively trying to protect his wife and son from a random act, parallels the mission of the future Batman. Sublimating all other interests, Bruce Wayne trains himself into the ultimate crime fighter. But he is a much lonelier figure that Superman; while both are orphans, the superman is cared for by foster parents, while Bruce Wayne’s childhood is never clearly shown.

The Superman/Clark Kent character is always connected to society, with a job, love interests, friends and family. Much of his story takes place in workplace, where he functions as a newspaper reporter. Against this both Bruce Wayne and Batman are more remote, isolated from society and any mundane world. Bruce Wayne, conveniently, has a fortune; enough money so that he needs no job, and to finance all the bat-objects that facilitate his obsession. Bruce Wayne has no living family, his only daytime occupation being millionaire playboy. In the latter years, this element has been almost written out of the story, with Bruce Wayne becoming something of a hermit.

Except for his criminal foes, Batman’s only regular contacts are his butler, and an occasional sidekick. The figure of Robin was initially added to humanize Batman, as well as act as a foil. The original Robin was allowed to age, and grow into his own superhero, Nightwing. The second Robin was killed, after a notorious telephone poll that allowed readers to vote on his fate. The third and current Robin is younger, and is mostly used in the television cartoon. The idea being that children can only identify with a child character. Isolated as he is, and distanced from the society that he is trying to protect, Batman is almost reduced to his elemental nature.

Similarly, Batman’s foes tend to be more elemental constructs then those of Superman. Rising out of the 1930’s, an era that saw such criminal celebrities as John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde, the extreme characters of his foes is both necessary for the narrative, and reflexive of the times. Batman’s most celebrated foe, the Joker, less a person than an agent of chaos, who sees destruction and mayhem as purpose in themselves. The Joker’s origin, first set out in Detective Comics #168 (1951), starts with the bungled robbery of the Monarch Playing Card Company. The thief escapes only by swimming through a catch basin of noxious chemicals.

As the Joker explains it:

"That chemical vapor — it turned my hair green, my lips rouge-red, my skin chalk-white! I look like an evil clown! . . . Then I realized my new face could terrify people."

"Both the Batman and the Joker have their origins in cruel twists of fate. Just as the Batman responded to his tragedy by dedicating himself to justice, the Joker responded to his by dedicated himself to perversive absorbtist crime. Both single-mindedly pursue their goals, the Batman striving to impose order on an unjust universe the Joker doing his best to enhance the chaos of a meaningless world. Just as the Batman adopts a distinctive costume which enables him to blend with the shadows of the night and to strike terror into cowardly, superstitious criminals, the Joker makes the most of his deformity by adopting a jester-like outfit to strike terror into his victims. Both acquire endless accessories based on their names and costumes, the Joker striving to keep up with the Batman with his Joker-mobile, his own utility belt, etc." (Pearson, 198.)

Correspondingly, in Batman’s world the villains can be seen as representations of the essentials forces; the force of Nature (Poison Ivy), primordial fear (the Scarecrow), lust and desire (Catwoman), scientific progress (Mr. Freeze), and greed (The Penguin).

Superman’s main nemesis, Lex Luthor, is a mix of amoral capitalism and fascist imperialism. He dreams of greater power in a transnational world, while appearing to be a concerned corporate citizen. But because of Superman’s otherworldly origins, for narrative purposes, many of his foes have to be alien in nature. This also conforms to the assimilated fear of enemies from the old country, pursing them to the New World. Superman’s most consistent foe comes from the same doomed world of Krypton, as he was born on. Brianiac, a computer given artificial life, seeks to destroy Superman, as the last of his organic masters.

While Batman is much more isolated from the society that he wants to serve, being of earthly origins, he speaks of the perfectibility of man. On the other hand, Superman has amazing gifts caused by the circumstances of his birth; it is Batman’s obsessive nature that drives him to his superior, though still human abilities. Batman’s talents are available to anyone, given that they had the same overriding passion and obsessive spirit. Perhaps Batman is more symptomatic of the later 20th Century America reflecting a workaholic’s delusion rather than an immigrant’s fear. Batman’s obsessions drive him to greater performance by a compulsive need. And Batman at times comes close to the psychotic who can lose his personality behind a mask of constant action.

Both of these figures are set in urban locals. As a current editor of the comic book said, “[Batman’s] Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 A.M., November 28 in a cold year. [While Superman’s] Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Street on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year.” (Pearson, 9) While this reflects the differing tones to the two settings, together it displays a concern with life in an industrial urban environment, where the usual social safeguards may breakdown.

It is also important to realize that these characters are part of an industrial art form. The rights to these characters, and their storylines are owned by corporations. The writers, editors and artists who create and maintain these characters are employees, and all artistic choices are secondary to the drive for sales and profits. This creates in the storylines an almost authoritarian need to maintain the status
quo, and to further seek conformity and harmony over any individual needs.

Lastly, it is interesting to note the use of science and magic in the world of the superheroes. “This feature is fundamental to the nature of the universe which the superhero comic portrays. Science is treated as a special form of magic, capable of both good and evil. Scientific concepts and terms are introduced freely into plots and used to create atmosphere and add a background detail to artwork — but the science itself is at most only superficially plausible, often less so, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational. Explicitly ‘magic’ powers are able to coexist quite comfortably with apparently scientific ones.” (Reynolds, 16.)

Appendix 1

My name is Clark Kent. I spend my days as a reporter for a newspaper, tracking down stories of crime and politics, and all the bizarre and strange things that happen in the city of Metropolis. I am respected by my co-workers, well liked by my friends, and loved by my girlfriend. I am an average human, trying to do my job the best, and make my way through this world, the best way I know how.

But the biggest story of my life is the one I cannot tell. For I am not human, or average, and I am one of the strangest things that happens in Metropolis. This is a secret that no one knows, that would shock my friends and loved ones, and isolate me from everyone and everything I care about. I would be little more than a lab rat, poked and prodded, tested and re-tested, as white-coated scientists would try to quantify my secrets.

I was not born on this planet, and as hard as I try to be human, I cannot be human. My father, or rather my stepfather, says that it is a gift. That everyone has some god-given gift that sets them apart. Except that in most people, the gift is much smaller, much easier to hide.

I was born on another planet, sent here as an infant, just before a cataclysms totally destroyed my true planet, and all the people like me. Now, through a fluke, as the cells in my body react to the yellow sun of earth, I’m practically invulnerable. Stronger, faster, able to fly through the air and see through walls, this is my curse.

Like I said, it is a gift. And as I gift, I must use it to try to help other people, to try to be there, when nothing else can help them. But it is too easy to be there all the time for everyone, and loose myself and my own being as I race around the world trying to stop all the pain and grief that are part of this world. I would have nothing left for myself, nothing left for who I am, and want I want.

And so, even as I try to save others, I have to hide myself. I write newspapers stories about others, but hope that no one ever finds out the truth about my story.

Appendix 2

When I was young I was weak and afraid. When I saw my parent killed as we walked home from the movies, I swore that I would never be weak and afraid again. I swore that I would fight those demons that live in darkness and prey on the innocent.

I trained in the martial arts, and studied criminology. I tried to be a policeman, an FBI agent. But those are about law and the process of justice. I wanted to fight the demons that lurk in the twilight at the edge of society. I tried to do it quietly, just a silent figure fighting against the villains that live in the city of Metropolis. But I realized that while I was not afraid, I could make the criminal very afraid. I could scare the demons of the world, by becoming my own demon. Creating an image with a Halloween costume and some public relations. And I became Batman.

I was born Bruce Wayne. At first, I thought it was fun, being Bruce Wayne during the day, and Batman at night. It was a game, playing at being the self-indulgent ‘millionaire playboy’. But it grew dull. I became more obsessed with cleaning up my city, protecting my people, stopping the villains who challenged my power. I had no time to waste on the empty fundraisers and social happenings, the things that filled out the role of Bruce Wayne.

Now, I spend less and less of my time as Bruce Wayne. I’ve hired people, good people, to take care of the companies and properties I own. I pay them well, and they do a much better job with those things than I ever could. Some of them think that I’ve gone a little crazy, moving from a playboy to a hermit. The think I’m like other millionaires, hiding in my mansion, afraid of people and germs and paranoid plots against my life.

But I’m not afraid, and I’m not paranoid. My true self is as the Batman. Fighting every night against the evil that pervades this world. If people were to make the connection between Batman and Bruce Wayne, it wouldn’t really be a problem. I’ve made plans; another hidden base, a second set of secret bank accounts. But it wouldn’t change my life as Batman, or change the way that I fight the fear and weakness within me.


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