Mt. Olympus, Gotham City, and Metropolis:
The Power of Heroism in Shaping Cultures and Futures

By Julia French

Puget Sound Undergraduate Philosophy Conference Submission
September 30, 2018
Abstract

Stories reflect the cultures they arise from and their heroes help direct the mindset of future generations. From ancient Greece to modern America, the human creativity behind these worlds has allowed us to promote new beliefs and virtues through the adventures of our heroes. “Mt. Olympus, Gotham City, and Metropolis” explores how mythological heroism has changed over time and now conflicts with itself as religious and secular story-tellers alike wrestle with the teleological foundation within heroism.

In America for instance, Batman and Superman are the pillars of our modern pantheon, and their recent movie *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* seeks to reconcile the ideologies of Nietzsche and Christianity that are increasingly present in society today. How should a hero handle nihilism, autonomy, and despair? Both Batman and Superman would answer differently in their imaginary worlds, but this thesis will conclude that the simple act of raising this debate in film challenges us to consider the value of hope and belief in our culture today. Heroes are the role models of the future, and how we understand them will determine where we go from here. The dialogue to promoting a better world begins with them.
Man has always created stories. We weaved them with words and images, and sang them across campfires. The tales we told varied just as much as their speakers and listeners did, but a key element has remained in this chain of creation from the earliest of cavemen to today’s twenty-first century cartoonist: heroism. Likewise, the question behind every reincarnation of the hero is the same: what sort of person should we aspire to be? A teleological question at its core, this search for identity and perfectibility of man has persisted throughout history as storytellers attempt to work out an answer. Certain virtues such as courage and justice are repeated in every generation of heroes while other qualities such as humility and generosity are debated. But this dynamism of heroism amidst the steady tradition from early mythology shows how heroic characters reflect the mentality and lifestyle of their creator’s age. Because of this, myths and their heroes, in whatever form they take, come to represent the values of a culture. In our most popular and culturally influential storytelling today, modern mythology is played out by “superheroes” who fight, fly, risk, and race across the pages of comic books and screens of television. By comparing the god-based heroes of Greece and a recent superhero blockbuster that struggles with the question of heroism, we can identify the need for hope and faith in our world that is tipping toward further nihilism, radical autonomy, and despair as both religious and secular storytellers alike try to promote their own answer to heroism’s teleological question.

The heroes of a society’s mythology are essential to understanding its people because of the hero’s inherent ability to connect with the common man. When a person is creating a hero to be “admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities,”¹ he will draw from the profound human experience of his audience as well as the populace’s imagination in order to bridge the gap between myth and reality. In a way, everyone in society creates the hero. Passions, perceptions, ideals, fears, and struggles are all projected onto a heroic figure who then

through the power of words is able to adapt to the changes of time and thus embody the heart of a culture. Hero-worship becomes the life-breath of society, and even though this worship may change, “the heart of the whole business of the age… is to do it well.” This hero-worship over time is best captured in the format of a myth since it is traditionally tweaked during its oratory dramatization. New quests, descriptions, and details are added and removed from the original story as each generation personalizes the story’s thread. Joseph Campbell best describes this when he writes, “for when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, and the age.” The myth is the constantly changing heartbeat of society that incorporates diverse ideas and emotions to unify the people under one hero. They shape and maintain national identity as heroes rise from their writing and become symbols of the nation. For instance, what would England be without Shakespeare or his Macbeth, Italy without her Dante, or Greece without Homer? This power of myth and heroism enables the audience to interact with the story of the nation and influence it accordingly, and because of the increase of documented stories, mythology can be a window into the past that allows us to trace a culture’s evolution through the development of their heroes.

Greek mythology is a robust and iconic example of this insight into the past. The gods reigned high over the world of men from Mount Olympus, watching, directing, and sometimes even descending to more directly partake in man’s affairs. Innumerable accounts of these tales have been passed down, and some bear more resemblance to masterful literature than oral myth.

---

4 Carlyle, “The Hero as a Poet. Dante: Shakespeare.” Carlyle goes on to suppose that a nation with a Dante is united in a way that no Russia could ever hope to be. His lectures were given in 1840 before Tolstoy or Dostoevsky debuted.
Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are such works whose human heroes have captivated audiences for millennia, and this longevity proves how strongly their heroes resonate with societies even across time. Odysseus and Achilles, two of the most prominent men in the epics, are constantly described as being “godly”, “god-like”, and “heroic”, and their glory reveals what the Greeks valued.\(^5\) Edith Hamilton, a famed author and historian of mythology, writes that “Greek artists and poets realized how splendid a man could be, straight and swift and strong. He was the fulfillment of their search for beauty.”\(^6\) This notion that the heroes represented a fulfillment of excellence suggests how foundational Greek heroes were to shape the culture. In presenting their heroes, “the early Greek mythologists transformed a world full of fear into a world full of beauty,”\(^7\) and they did this by creating stories that listeners and readers could aspire to. The great Hercules overcame the impossible, Odysseus outwitted all trials, and Achilles won magnificent glory. In these myths, the evil in the world was overcome by heroic men, some of whom who were so heroic that they were later raised up from the ranks of mortals to be truly godly on Mount Olympus until the end of time.\(^8\)

And yet, we do not look up to Odysseus or Achilles today. Even Hercules has been displaced from his rank as the best of men by our modern heroes who have climbed down from Mount Olympus to live among us. In his study of the hero myth, Joseph Campbell wrote that “the spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to a fully awakened consciousness; and modern

\(^6\) Hamilton, 6.  
\(^7\) Hamilton, 8.  
\(^8\) Cf. “The tale of the end of Troy shall have no ending, for it is lifted up forever into living echoes, immortal as our hopelessness and our hope.” G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 80.
man emerged from ancient ignorance.”

Modern stories centered around heroism do not describe men following the bidding of the gods and solving divine feuds but, rather, simple humans rising to greatness. This “rags to riches” theme is most evident in the prominence of rebellion-based stories that have permeated popular culture. Books and films such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* target the youth and urge honorable revolution against oppressive authority. For adults, one of the most popular TV shows of all time was *Breaking Bad*, a series that focuses on the radical story of an average chemistry teacher becoming a drug lord in response to the tragic flaws of government. And even more explicitly, superheroes themselves have transformed dramatically since their inception in the 1930s. These heroes that dominate the sales of the film industry are often vigilantes, anti-police, and at the extremes of human ability. These figures are our modern mythology, but instead of the heroes fostering a relationship between themselves and the inhabitants of Mount Olympus, our heroes today are seeking to displace the pantheon itself. How did this happen? Why did society’s mythological heroes change so radically? Heroes were transformed from being quasi-divine to supremely mortal, and the origin of this shift can be traced to the departure from religion and the embrace of Enlightenment thinking.

The Greek civilization had a certain understanding of the world when Homer was creating the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Courage and justice were among the highest virtues, and spirits and magic were as much a part of nature as we understand carbon and nitrogen to be today. Since then, however, the progression of science and knowledge has slowly dispelled the presence of the supernatural and discouraged our belief in it. There is no room for childish wonder and awe in a world heralded in by the age of Enlightenment with its measurements and calculations.

---

9 Campbell, 334.
10 Courtney Subramanian, “Game of Thrones Beats Breaking Bad as Most Pirated TV Show” *TIME* Magazine, December 2013. According to *TIME* magazine, the series’ finale of AMC’s *Breaking Bad* is the second most pirated episode as of 2013.
Humanity’s place in the world was thus drastically changed when the focus of our gazes shifted from being directed up towards a divine reality to falling down towards the evolution and progress of our species. The physical and visible were elevated above the metaphysical and invisible, a system of thought epitomized by the publications of Nietzsche in the nineteenth century. As Thomas Hibbs writes in *Shows About Nothing*, “Nietzsche traces the origin of nihilism to the death of the Judeo-Christian, to the vanishing of the supernatural from human life.” So when worldviews became more nihilistic than spiritual, the mirror of the myth likewise had to change to reflect culture appropriately. If people do not value the quality of “divine”, then the appeal towards most of these Greek heroes is lost. Hercules could not be a role model in a society where gods do not exist. A new hero needs to be created because if there is no Divine, there is no guarantee that the Good will triumph, and all that remains is man. The tradition of heroic divinity must be cast aside by this new hero to mirror society’s development, and he must become a Hercules reborn for this post-Enlightenment humanity.

Specifically in the New World, however, this Enlightenment nihilism and cynicism have taken deep root. The United States of America was founded on the principles of the self and individual liberties, but while initially this sense of independence was coupled with a theological background, these two ideas have since split into separate entities: the Church and State. This divide has now grown so distinct from its original unity in America’s founding that

---

12 Further investigation of this idea can point to the departure from “happily ever after” in fairy tales and the loss of what Tolkien calls the mythological “eucatastrophe”; an event that portrays the hope of an abundant and good life after suffering. See his essay “On Fairy-Stories” for further description.
13 Interestingly, Grant Morrison connects Superman to Zeus, Wonder Woman to Hera, and Batman to Hades in his book *Supergods* which describes how some Greek tradition has remained in our modern mythological storytelling.
14 The cynicism that bolsters this reasoning has especially flourished in the past century as humanity has been struck by both natural and moral catastrophes worldwide. Such events include both world wars, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina.
15 See the United States of America’s Declaration of Independence for specific wording and references to freedom and the individual.
the explicitly theistic words of the Declaration of Independence have been redefined, an event exemplified in the 1992 *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* decision where liberty was defined as “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

This assumed autonomy that is free of divine intervention and judgement has pervaded American ideology and accordingly been reflected in popular culture and media. And just as the Greeks projected their ideals onto their mythological heroes, so has America likewise projected her ideals onto her most iconic superheroes: Batman and Superman. Both of these Goliaths are household names, but each represent a different side in the cultural divide rooted in Enlightenment pride.

First, the personality of Bruce Wayne as Batman has developed in comic books, novels, television series, and movies that have all led to this superhero achieving world renown fame. In 2008, *The Dark Knight* was released in theaters and rose to the top of the revenue charts for the film industry. While the movie is centered around the expanding nightmare of crime in Gotham City and the subsequent pursuit of justice, Batman adopts a distinct persona that reflects the state of America when religion has faded from daily thought. There is no God in Gotham City, only Batman who has reached the pinnacle of human strength both physically and mentally. His abilities seem somewhat unhuman, but that is what classifies him as a “superhero”: he is the epitome of human physicality without much outside help. This attainment of power allows Batman to wield incontestable autonomy because without a god, no other human can stand in his way. In fact, when he dons his dark mask, the real identity of Bruce Wayne is shielded from both

---

17 Superheroes could also be argued to represent the different sociological issues America encounters. For example, both the Hulk and X-Men stories about the possible superhuman effects of radiation were released in 1962 and 1963 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Black Panther emerged as the first African American superhero in 1966 after the civil rights movement gained momentum. Further research could explore how these heroes promoted certain ideologies and influenced American opinion.
18 *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Warner Bros. Pictures), DVD. According to Box Office Mojo and Google analytics, the film grossed $1.005 billion worldwide.
the world and himself as the Batman emerges in the night to embody the will of the people.\textsuperscript{19} What Batman does is what he thinks the people of Gotham desire.

But as \textit{The Dark Knight} portrays, Batman is not a nihilistic figure. He strictly abides by a single rule: he will not kill. This commandment guides his morality and deliverance of justice throughout Gotham in a way that contradicts nihilism, and yet holding firm to this rule bears an implication that perhaps leaves Batman in a worse state. The implication entailed by refusing to murder is that Batman cannot kill the Joker, the closer embodiment of nihilistic chaos in \textit{The Dark Knight}. As the police unknowingly recognized after the Joker’s temporary arrest, the Joker can only sow the seeds of nihilism in his wake.\textsuperscript{20} They cannot match an identity to him; the Joker is no one. There is no rhyme or reason to his history or how he became himself. He just \textit{is}, but without knowing where he has been, no one can know where he is going next. Batman finds himself caught in a circle of violence. The Joker will always manage to escape prison, and Batman will always have to return to the streets to stop him from wrecking the peace because “this is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.”\textsuperscript{21} No matter what the Dark Knight does, evil will still hold Gotham in its clutches.

The consequent despair that then arises is felt wholeheartedly by Batman because he operates under a flawed system of autonomy. Batman’s physical excellence as a human raises him to a standard that is unreachable by anyone else. This is beneficial to Gotham because it means that Batman can usually save others with ease, but such power also implies that if Batman himself ever needs help, he has no one to call on. He has no one ultimately watching out for him.

\textsuperscript{19} Harvey Dent, a police detective of Gotham, points out that it was the city who appointed Batman to rule the streets when “all of us stood by and let scum take control of our city” (\textit{The Dark Knight}, 20:34). See also Tom Morris “What’s Behind the Mask? The Secret of Secret Identities” in \textit{Superheroes and Philosophy}, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2016), 250.

\textsuperscript{20} When checking the clown into prison, a detective reports on what they had gathered about the Joker’s identity: “Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name. No other alias” (\textit{The Dark Knight}, 1:23:57).

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Dark Knight}, 2:13:26.
who is capable of rescuing him in a time of crisis. At the top, Batman is utterly alone, and likewise is Bruce Wayne. Apart from his butler Alfred and the fleeting love interests that conceal his nightly disappearances into the streets, this billionaire is alone, always on guard and ready for flight or fight at any moment. This sense of individualism is almost too familiar to the current “period of liberation from all external standards [that] bestows the highest value on self,” but the consequences of such autonomy are manifest in Bruce Wayne. He has tried to overcome this lack of higher purpose by becoming Batman and striving to help his city, but even he recognizes that he is walking on the edge of nihilism in the loneliness of such autonomy. Without a higher power, the world of Gotham as well as our own is conditioned into a state of hopelessness and search for illusive fulfillment.

Batman’s heroism thus reflects the distinct autonomy, underlying nihilism, and faltering hope that is only growing in secular society today, but alongside this dark caped crusader stands a second hero of our time: Superman. While Batman focuses on doing the best he can even though it is pointless, Superman sees the world as having fallen from its ideal state, and he works to show others how it can be improved. There are three crucial components of this Krypton character that starkly contrast those of the Bat: Superman is divine, works within the laws of government, and holds a distinct hope for humanity. These three features color Superman’s

---

22 For an exploration into Batman’s capacity for friendship, see Matt Morris, “Batman and Friends: Aristotle and the Dark Knight’s Inner Circle,” Superheroes and Philosophy, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2005), 102. Even though Alfred the butler could possibly be argued to be a savior for Batman, his abilities are restrained by the limits of technology and his physical age.

23 Hibbs, Shows About Nothing, 7.

24 Cf. The reports of rising depression and anxiety rates in today’s world, particularly among teenagers.

25 “Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69. This idea is similarly stated by Detective Harvey Dent: “you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain” (The Dark Knight, 20:51).
actions and movies with a unique mood and worldview that counter Batman’s despair of nihilism and autonomy.

Superman’s divinity is a core element of his story as is anyone’s origin tale, but such a background starkly contrasts that of Bruce Wayne. While young Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents’ murders and was attacked by a mob of bats, Superman was sent in a spaceship by his parents to Earth in an effort to save him from the destruction of his planet. Despite being raised by the Kent family on a simple farm in Kansas, Superman grows into an outstanding man with a unique outlook on life due to his supernatural heritage. Clark Kent’s backstory allows him to see the potential in humanity instead of their hopelessness. As Mark Waid writes in *Superheroes and Philosophy*, “he is as close as contemporary Western culture has yet to come to envisioning a champion who is the epitome of unselfishness.”26 His acts of kindness and service do not make sense in a capitalistic world where *quid pro quo* reigns, but that uniqueness is what characterizes Superman as the embodiment of the American way. As a secular savior of humanity, he is fighting the same evil, corruption, and Nietzschean figures that the Dark Knight is dueling in Gotham City.

This class of enemies, however, is ironic given Superman’s creation history and name. Throughout the early twentieth century, Friedrich Nietzsche and the *Übermensch* were connected to the rising powers of Germany and the Nazi regime. The original vision of this “Super-man” was distorted in the eminence of Hitler and World War tensions, and a short story comic debuted with its character resembling such a misunderstanding of the *Übermensch*. Later, however, two American Jewish cartoonists, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster “reinvented Superman as nearly the opposite of their early Nietzschean Super-man… They redeemed it, although [the word]

---

remained subversive.”27 In his reincarnation without the hyphen, “Superman is strong, creative, noble, independent, and life-affirming, but unlike him, [Nietzsche’s Super-man], Superman is compassionate and looks out for the little guy.”28 By embracing all of humanity, from the weakest to the strongest, Superman establishes himself as the “grandfather of all superheroes”29 as he overtakes the negative connotation of his name and transforms it into a symbol of hope rather than fear while pursuing truth and justice in Metropolis.

With these two heroes, one of man and one of gods, standing as icons that mirror our culture’s thought and world perspective, the present crossroads is clear. Society will lean either towards Superman’s optimism or Batman’s cynicism, and in the expansion of technology into every moment of daily life, we almost always encounter the echoes of each mythology. Batman’s dark vision is broadcast across news channels while Superman’s belief in human capability is misconstrued in trending hashtags of “YOLO.”30 And underlying all talk about the future is a doomsday subtext that makes any approaching evil seem inevitable since nihilism, radical autonomy, and the acceptance of despair pulsate through our society and beyond. As more mythology turns away from the divine and towards the elevation of human power, the resonance of Batman can only grow stronger, and the traditional hero-path leading toward the supernatural will fade.31 Our culture is struggling to establish what sort of heroes we should emulate, and whichever hero is chosen will determine the trajectory of society because mythology symbolizes who we idolize and later become. And yet, “it is not society that is to guide and save the creative

28 Barkman, 91.
29 Waid, 3.
30 An acronym for “You Only Live Once”, this popular culture phrase simultaneously refers to accepting the inevitable end of life and pardoning the dismissal of caution before action.
31 Campbell refers to such a path when he writes, “the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path” (Campbell, 18).
hero, but precisely the reverse."32 We cannot do it on our own. Batman and Superman, the icons of American myth, must step out of their comic strips and movie screens to lead man forward in thinking and belief.

This moral crossroad facing America was recently explored in the 2016 film *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* where a villain personifying both Friedrich Nietzsche and Lucifer pitted the two contesting ideologies of Batman and Superman against each other. The heroes and movie identified the complex chasm between religious and secular thought, and the clash that followed the unification of these two mindsets was resounding. Lex Luthor, the archvillain driven by a will to power, typefies Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* by working to accumulate as much knowledge as possible to rule, unflinchingly coordinating terrorism, losing faith in God and Goodness, and orchestrating a situation in which God can be killed once and for all. As Nietzsche himself wrote, “a religion as Christianity, which does not touch reality at a single point and which goes to pieces the moment reality asserts its rights at any point, must be inevitably the deadly enemy of the ‘wisdom of this world,’ which is to say, of *science*.”33 Lex Luthor understands himself as the one person who sees through the facade of religion to the core truth that is obtained through science and knowledge. Everyone else in Metropolis views Superman as a god, but Luthor desires for them “to see the fraud [Superman is], with their eyes, the blood on [his] hands.”34 He aims to force the rest of the city to lose hope in any divine power just as he has, and in order to accomplish that, he must tear Superman down. Luthor’s worldview is illustrated explicitly by the movie when the he points to a wall painting of St. Michael

32 Campbell, 337.
descending from the heavens to conquer Lucifer scrambling up from below.\textsuperscript{35} As the film focuses on the painting, Luthor reveals his outlook on life when he says, “that should be upside down. Because we know better now don't we? The devils don't come from hell beneath us. No. No, they come from the sky.”\textsuperscript{36} To Luthor, Superman is not a savior, but a demon. So by spurring on the fears of the people and arranging a battle between Batman, the hero whose mask symbolizes the will of the people, and Superman, the false god, Luthor is capable of destroying all trust and hope in the city and heralding in an age of distrust and terror.

Uncertain yet riled up by Luthor’s tricks, Batman feels driven to confront Superman and kill the Kryptonian hero because he blames the recent suffering of the world on Superman’s interference. If such an alien had not been around, many more people would still be alive. This is the only way Batman can rationalize the horrific events since there is no higher power at play or reason to hope for a victorious Good. Alfred the butler tries to talk Bruce Wayne out of such a plan that targets the innocent, but the retort he receives is scathing. Bruce Wayne is unwilling to compromise despite foreseeing such evil, asking, “How many good guys are left? How many stayed that way?”\textsuperscript{37} Batman understands that Superman could be considered to be doing good at the present moment, but eventually, such a powerful figure would inevitably turn away from truth and justice. Superman is the incarnation of Batman’s fear of unchecked power usurping all goodness and unleashing unprecedented evil. It is Batman’s duty therefore as the strongest of men and representative of the people to destroy Superman before anything disastrous can happen. He tells Alfred that he must fight this inevitability because “this may be the only thing I

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. Revelation 12:7-9. This artwork in \textit{Batman v. Superman} is very similar to a Gustave Doré painting called \textit{The Triumph of Christianity Over Paganism.}
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Batman v. Superman}, 34:01.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Batman v. Superman}, 58:31.
do that matters.”\(^{38}\) None of his past victories are significant because “criminals are like weeds… pull one up, another grows in its place. This [mission] is about the future of the world. This is my legacy.”\(^{39}\) Even if there is nothing left of him or for him after confronting Superman, Batman is committed to his decision. This is how he can make sense of the world, and by possibly defeating Superman, he could change his story’s ending and push the whole world momentarily closer toward the Good.

But while Batman is in his corner, gearing up in his batsuit for what might possibly be a hopeless battle despite his human excellence, Superman is alone on his side of the ring, facing a much more turbulent and uncertain reality. The arms of his city that previously welcomed his acts of justice have been snatched away as trust tumbles into an antagonistic tide of loathing when people start to question who Superman really is. Protests against his involvement in government affairs explode as spokespersons call his motives into question. News programs demand to know his identity and motives for saving people. One reporter even comments that “human beings have a horrible track record of following people with great power down paths that led to huge human atrocities,”\(^{40}\) implying that by deifying Superman, the city has set itself on an irreversible course towards further destruction. All of these conflicting, spiteful, and relentless arguments that urge a “question everything, believe nothing” mindset force Superman to reconcile with his own identity and motivation for heroism. In these scenes of despair and doubt, the figure of Christ appears. From the beginning of the movie, references to the Christian Gospel stories are tied into Superman’s storyline, but at this pivotal point, humanity’s betrayal of Christ is revoced by Superman after Lois Lane insists that the “S” symbol across his chest means something: Superman shakes his head, saying, “it did on my world. [But] my world

---

\(^{40}\) *Batman v. Superman*, 46:17.
doesn't exist anymore.” The anger and distrust of the mob has destroyed the sanctuary Superman constructed for himself in order to follow his life mission of serving humanity just as the roar of the people calling for Barabbas’ release and Jesus’ death must have distressed Christ. Then the difficulty within both Christ’s and Superman’s mission is pointed out by Clark Kent’s mother when Martha reminds him that “people hate what they don't understand. But they see what you do, and they know who you are. You're not a killer, a threat.” Martha’s next words call to mind the power of free will that Jesus held in Gethsemane before His arrest: “Be their Clark. Be their monument. Be their angel. Be anything they need you to be. Or be none of it. You don't owe this world a thing. You never did.” The choice is solely Superman’s, and this hero of America iconically steps into the sandals of Christ when he refuses to quit his mission. He holds supreme autonomy both as a god and man, but instead of choosing to do evil or simply nothing at all, Superman holds fast to his pursuit of the Good. Despite the cries of the crowd, Superman still sees them as worth fighting to save.

The individual decisions of both Batman and Superman lead to the ultimate clash between their two ideologies, an event described by Lex Luthor as “the greatest gladiator match in the history of the world. God versus man. Day versus night.” The god of Metropolis flies off to fight the will of the people, and such a contest would have likely lasted longer if not for Batman’s hidden trick: a spear of Kryptonian rock, the one mineral that can harm Superman. As he brings Superman down, we can hear Batman once again rationalizing his actions. He taunts and questions Superman’s humanity and virtues and then transforms Superman verbally from

---

41 *Batman v. Superman*, 1:15:44.
43 *Batman v. Superman*, 1:06:36.
44 *Batman v. Superman*, 1:06:54.
46 “You’re not brave. Men are brave” (Batman taunting Superman, 1:41:00).
an alien-human into a thing: “you were never a God. you were never even a man.” By saying this, Batman vindicates himself against his moral code; he was just performing his duty to the people by dispatching this thing. This was how he could force the world to make sense and justify himself according to his own ethic, a pattern that Luthor was counting on when he pitted these two heroes against each other.

But what Luthor did not account for was Batman being swayed by something more powerful than any cynical or nihilistic thought: the value in dignity. Before Batman can kill Superman, Clark Kent says his mother’s name, Martha. Batman freezes because perhaps not so ironically, his own mother’s name was Martha. In this single word, Superman’s humanity comes alive. Regardless of the fact that he came from another planet and has superhuman abilities, he has a mother, just like Bruce Wayne. Batman cannot shrug off this fight now because the truth has spilled into the open. Clark Kent is a man, and just like any good man, he is trying to save his mother whom Luthor coincidentally also kidnapped. This bond of parents and common love breaks the bellicosity between these two giants, and within seconds, they both turn to focus on the person truly at fault: Luthor. The duel of the movie title thus evolves into a final battle: Superman and Batman together, god and man, facing the man representing both Nietzsche’s Übermensch and the devil Lucifer.

Upon realizing that his plan had failed, however, Luthor declares that he “gave the Bat a fighting chance to do it, but he was not strong enough. So, if man won't kill God… the devil will do it!” Harnessing his technological prowess and expansive database of knowledge, Luthor decides to send a resurrected alien against the duo and the city. The fight that commences is filled with all sorts of explosions and martial arts, but the resolution is both fitting and ironic. In

order to defeat Doomsday,\textsuperscript{49} an alien that has a fatal vulnerability to the Kryptonite spear Batman created, Superman must use the Dark Knight’s weapon to silence Doomsday, but the act costs him his life. This conclusion to the catastrophic arrival of an otherworldly demon is fitting because both Batman and Superman were required to join together to defeat the monster. Lastly, in giving his life, Superman manifests the sacrifice of the Cross and proves to Batman that not all good men turn sour. And yet, as the other heroes realize the cost at which the battle was won, there is a sense that Batman’s notion of evil’s inevitable triumph may prove to be true. Was Superman’s sacrifice for humanity worth it even as Lex Luthor concludes “now God is good as dead”?\textsuperscript{50}

The city mourns the loss of her hero, the hero whom just a few days earlier, she had politically and verbally chastised. With his death, however, her understanding of heroism has evolved. Symbolically, in place of the original Superman memorial that was demolished in the Doomsday battle, the city erects a new plaque that reads “if you seek his monument, look around you.” The motives of Superman are now unquestionable after his death, and in honor of his love, the city has aptly recognized that the people are his memorial. They are the icon of his duties and campaign for Good because they were part of who he was. Superman was part-God, part-man, and the movie hints that even Batman has altered his perspective when he speaks to another hero who allied with him and Superman during the battle:

BATMAN. We have to stand together.

WONDER WOMAN. A hundred years ago I walked away from mankind. From a century of horrors. Man made a world where standing together is impossible.

\textsuperscript{49} An ironic name for a villainous creature given the unique perspectives of Batman and Superman.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Batman v. Superman}, 1:56:43.
BATMAN. Men are still good.\textsuperscript{51} Superman changed the world, and not just by saving individual lives. He transformed believers of inevitable doomsday to believers of Good. And if he changed the mind of Batman, then he most certainly influenced the thought of the greater people.

Before the film ends, however, and before you can draw the same conclusion that Luthor did in saying, “God is good as dead,”\textsuperscript{52} the most important scene of the movie appears. It does not even last a full second, but it needs no longer. Lois Lane walks away from Clark Kent’s grave after ritually tossing soil upon the coffin, and after she turns, the soil starts to levitate. The message of the movie and its creators’ understanding of the moment now facing America is clear: there is hope. And hope can do powerful things.

\textit{Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice} is a recent artistic piece that joins two characters together in a single storyline that reflects our own twenty-first century situation. Man and god have been clashing since the Enlightenment, but in pursuing the end of such a battle, this movie points to the following conclusion: man would “triumph” over god after god sacrifices himself for man. But while secularism urges such a statement to end with a period, the film corrects itself and us in the final scene’s implication: man “triumphs” over god after god sacrifices himself for man, and then god returns. That is the conclusion of a battle between the worldly and divine because just like it was written in the Greek myths, the divine don’t bow to man’s whims. They act according to their own law and are always present in some form even as man’s understanding of them changes in the advancement of society. In this message of hope at the movie’s end, director Zack Snyder refutes any idea that Superman is defeated and that the Dark Knight will be alone. Instead, Batman won’t ever be alone in his autonomy or need to despair because

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Batman v. Superman}, 2:19:16.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Batman v. Superman}, 1:56:43.
Superman has shown him how “men are still good.” Superman is a beacon of contradiction that illuminates the path to follow in the dark night of today’s secularism and perilous autonomy.

These two superheroes represent the divide between the residual religion of Judeo-Christianity and the pseudo-religion of secularism that is present in our world today, and the result of Batman joining forces with Superman reveals how a restoration of faith and hope is needed to remedy the ailments of modern society. Religion relieves the burden of autonomy that a nihilistic worldview invokes and also provides a means by which we can “hope in powers greater than ourselves to motivate us to action and sustain us in that action, however futile it might at times look.” But there is a danger in undertaking this task. When attempting to present better heroes specifically through the media, the tendrils of nihilism can seize good intentions and twist them into submission as ratings, reviews, and bottom line profits dominate the presentation of such content. Neil Postman identified this in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* when he wrote that “the danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows but that television shows may become the content of religion.” To avoid warping the perception of religion and accidentally instating a false god or nihilistic message, the creators of counter-cultural heroes need to intentionally craft a story that returns to the traditional purpose of myth: to captivate and draw one closer to the supernatural and deeper experience of man.

---

54 *Batman v. Superman*, 1:45:25. This is the lesson Batman says he learned from the death of his parents. This understanding reveals much about Batman’s motivation and outlook.
57 Cf. “Mythology, then, sought god through the imagination; or sought truth by means of beauty” Chesterton, 111.
Heroic quests featuring characters born with a selflessness and love for others are becoming more popular across all forms of media, and Superman represents such a virtuous character in mythology.\textsuperscript{58} He and others who have been loved in books and adored on the screen are symbols of hope in a world where “unrestrained capitalism always wins, where politicians always lie, where sports idols take drugs and beat their wives, and where white picket fences are suspect because they hide dark things.”\textsuperscript{59} The flowering cynicism that has taken root in America withers any hopeful thought that Good exists, but these heroes, even if only on television and in books, show how through adversity and trials, Good can prevail.\textsuperscript{60} There is a response to the selfish and self-destructive acts that lead to misery and ruin and yet are encouraged by secularism. Our modern myths reveal the answer to be sacrificial love.

This contest between secularism and religion cannot be resolved in one film such as \textit{Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice} because the tension has been building for years with disordered thought and argument. Just as Greek mythology evolved over the centuries and transformed alongside civilization, so will our present mythology require time to establish itself and exert its influence. But the nihilism and cynicism can still be challenged film by film to promote the deeper meanings of life that secularism so often casts aside. The philosopher Seneca once wrote, “choose for yourself a moral hero whose life, conversation, and expressive face all please you, then picture him to yourself at all times as your protector, and as your ethical pattern. We all need someone whose example can regulate our characters.”\textsuperscript{61} This moral hero, this role model to follow, won’t necessarily be a parent, sibling, or relative as the breakdown of the family unit in America becomes more definitive. This hero will likely appear on a screen, the

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. 1 Peter 5:1-3.
\textsuperscript{59} Waid, 5.
\textsuperscript{60} Cf. “[Christianity] met the mythological search for romance by being a story and the philosophical search for truth by being a true story.” Chesterton, 248.
\textsuperscript{61} Tom Morris, \textit{The Stoic Art of Living: Inner Resilience and Outer Results} (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2004), 55.
means of catechesis for those born after the year 2000, which means the tide against faith and
hope will have to be challenged likewise by the screen and its heroes on the edge of nihilism and
despair. Perhaps all we need is a Promethean hero to bring us fire from heaven, only this time we
need him to bring us sparks of faith. To change our perspectives and our culture, we need to look
at our heroes. Superman can be a portal that allows the foundations of faith to enter the
imagination.⁶² Through him, non-believers can be exposed to Christ’s story and His virtue. This
hero and others like him can bridge the gap between religion and secular society. And by doing
so, the words of Superman’s father, Jor-El, will be fulfilled: “You will give the people of Earth
an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in
time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.”⁶³

⁶² Cf. C.S. Lewis said that he wanted the Chronicles of Narnia to be “a pre-baptism of the child’s imagination.” Such a goal reflects his report on his own imagination’s baptism by George MacDonald’s Phantastes. See Lewis’ preface in George MacDonald: An Anthology (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1978) for further explanation.
⁶³ Man of Steel, directed by Zack Snyder (2013; Warner Bros. Pictures). Cf. Luke 21:25-28: “‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.’”


Subramanian, Courtney. “*Game of Thrones* Beats *Breaking Bad* as Most Pirated TV Show.” *TIME* Magazine, December 2013.

