Villainous Disability: Gazing the Deformed Bodies of Supervillains in Comics

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Abstract

Comics and the comic world (as shown in the adapted versions of movies) has been fascinating the adult and children equally for quite a long time. The super hero movies are being watched only for the pleasure of seeing the hero win over the dark forces and how these heroes with the help of their superpowers save the world from an imminent danger or an alien attack. The movie is so well organized that we tend to always see the world only from the perspective of a hero. The villain or the super-villain or the anti-hero is always othered here. Othering happens in the pretext of the man's tendency to see things in binaries. When the hero's counterpart arrives, the viewers wait for the thrilling moments and action sequences. But less do we know about how the anti-hero or the villain came into being. What social circumstances and mental conditions made them fall into such villainy? This paper explores the questions of all sorts and inspects into the politics of moulding a super-villain amidst heroic deeds of the super-hero. Disability studies amalgamated with Cultural Studies provides an apt platform to see how a societally-crippled man or woman turns into a villain. Understanding villains psychologically and socially forms the core of this research.

Keywords: Dualism, Othering, Super-villains, Disability Studies, Cultural pretext.

Introduction

Comics and the comic world (as shown in the adapted versions of movies) has been fascinating the adult and children equally for quite a long time. The comic books, strips and their adaptations are so organized that we tend to always see the world only from the perspective of a Superhero. The villains are defined as infiltrators of evil. They are very often portrayed as monstrous hideous figures with deformity. The audience gaze upon their disabled body and defame them. The Super-Villain is always othered based on the societal code because of their disability. We are uncertain about how these disabled yet powerful, mighty villains came into being and what psycho-socio-cultural circumstances and mental agony made them fall into such villainy.

Comics are often conceived as juvenile or silly and therefore they are marginalized because of their dismissal as "semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (McCloud 3), evoking unrealistic ideas and

unbelievable circumstances. Despite this Comics enjoy colossal ability to portray disability, thereby at the same time embracing and endorsing sure views of disability and its related characteristics. Readers can experience social attitudes towards, consequences of, and ideas surrounding disability through the visual representation of a character's disability, which may situate the perception of disability during a particular context influenced by the comic itself. We have a propensity to believe that disability is often portrayed in comic books and would be examined in terms of the villains' body and appearance.

Physical disability has been the first kind of disability represented in Comics however, examination suggests that study of mental and emotional disabilities might even be known and derived moreover. This thesis is constructed on the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thomas, writer Davis et al. to gauge representations of disabilities in Comic book heroes. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson notes that, "disability is always ready to disclose itself, to emerge as some visually recognizable stigmata, however subtle, that will disrupt social order by its presence" (347).

Disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue in their study *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* that disability has been used as an external indicator of one's moral status since at least Aristotle's writings, and possibly earlier. This particular human perception, also described as the "what is beautiful is good" effect, contributes to the unconscious presumption that entities who are conventionally beautiful as per their society's expectations are more credible and ethical than those who are less physically appealing.

Disability manifests itself visually through the gaze. The socially awkward concept of staring is usually the product of both the impaired body and the visually enticing masculine body; hence, the look and the stare are intrinsically involved in the understanding of the Super-Villain's body. These comic books depend on their critical visual material as a "disability-defining medium" (Garland-Thompson 340) in order to turn the gaze, using a term normally associated with femininity (men looking at women) and focusing on the male body as the target of the glare. The disabled body often confronts with the gaze of able-bodied individuals.

The idea that disability limits power and influences is twofold: physical power is constrained by the lack of disability, but power is also restricted as a result of the related disparity by which able-bodied persons are characterized as "normal." Negative societal traits are applied to disabled people, creating a pity environment that surrounds them and limits their ability to see themselves as powerful. Society also regards disabled people as pitiful, dysfunctional, or frail, reinforcing the widely held belief that disabled people's standard of living is substantially reduced.

Despite the superhero's morality, he also requires a villain to tussle in order to be considered a hero rather than a threat to common people – much like the hero in myth. If heroes and superheroes are treated as such, it is not because they are dissimilar from mutants, but because the mutant absorbs the horrific characteristics of the hero. To use a Jungian word, the superheroes battle their shadow, their darkness, by battling the beast.

The villain demonstrates to the hero what he might become, preventing him from being a monster himself. Fighting his Doppelgänger, the superhero battles his own monsters and exorcises his dark side. However, the villain is also needed by the superhero for another cause. It is the Social system that determines who a monster and hero is: As much as the superhero tries to fight the beast, as long as he is desired, he is regarded as an avenger, a savior. Being said, if the monster vanishes or is killed, the hero takes his place since he is already partially monstrous.

This interaction between the Superhero and the Villain reveals something else as well. If the superhero becomes a monster because he lacks a villain, it is not solely due to his own actions: the human world within which the superhero fights requires a monster to despise and kill. Universe can only be protected against an external threat, a chaotic environment that threatens it. Renè Girard explains this phenomenon within primitive cultures in *Violence and the Sacred*, but it also exists today, particularly in the image of the superhero, who is explicitly linked to myths and rituals from the past.

We can see the symbolic struggle and sacrifice against the Evil that threatens humanity in the battle against the beast and his defeats. Killing the beast seems to be a sacrificial act designed to expel the bad and liberate humanity from the brutality that threatens to destroy it. Of course, this is a lie since the evil that manifests itself in a monstrous figure is innate in humans. The demon – the sacrificial object – is therefore not the Other, but rather the evil aspect of mankind.

Arguably, the history of disabled villains can be traced all the way back to the origins of folklore and fairy tales. Many fairy tales use the portrayal of the elderly and disabled playing the part of villain.; They are normally motivated by envy towards their younger and more attractive counterpart, or they can be mean and manipulative like Rumpelstiltskin. This notion of the disabled villain becoming envious of the non-disabled and therefore directing their hate against them has persisted in the evolution of literature, film, television, and theatre.

A popular belief that exists across literature is that a disabled person is inherently motivated towards wickedness due to their disability. Many prior Puritan texts indicated that an infant born with a disability is humiliated because he or she is intrinsically sinful. However, William Shakespeare's Richard III is one of the

most popular examples of a Disabled Villain who thinks his condition gives him soul consent to commit adultery. Richard III represents everything a Disabled Villain stands for: that a disability tends to make you malicious and prevents you from loving or being loved, and that a disability is something that should be despised and denied.

There are several explanations for such characterization, the first of which is grounded in eugenics-based theories connecting disability or other physical abnormalities with a "normal" propensity towards hysteria, violence, corruption, and so forth. The Theory of Symbolism is always at play here, because a "crippled" body may be used to portray a "crippled" spirit — and hence, a disabled antagonist is normally pitted against a fundamentally virtuous and physically "perfect" superhero.

One of several main motivations for many of these tricksters is a desire for vengeance, against either societal structure as a whole or against a specific person. With such a disability, this person may be the supposed "hero" whose deeds forced them to have an impairment in the first place. The second motivation that normally fuels them is the desire for influence and authority over their own life and the lives of others.

The disabled villain manifests society's paranoia of disability and the notion that disability is some entity that should be ignored. As a result, there is also a very significant stigma in between disabled villain and disability, and the disabled villain appears to be a very pessimistic and detrimental trope in this regard; since it contributes to the myth that disability is humiliating, unpleasant, and something to be ashamed of. Although, in truth, that is not the case.

So, when victim is identified, however, the absence becomes complete. It is no longer simply stigmatized; it becomes an embodiment of all the societal ills, a dreadful Other. It is a behemoth that is already embodied as possessing a numinous spot, not fully relating to the social structure. But now that this behemoth has been magnified, it seems to be the only truth. The object becomes a psychopath the second it is selected, and it can be identified as a victim since it is, at least to some extent, indeed heinous.

When the villain is around, he takes on the role of the comic book hero's monstrous counterpart. To establish justice, he had to be crushed, banished, murdered – sacrificed. The superhero becomes an icon, a legend and a savior. That, however, is an absurd notion: the hero's monstrosity is simply concealed beneath the villain. If a villain ends up dead, the community will soon require a new beast, the hero himself. The superhero adopts the traits of the slaughtered beast and discovers those that he actually owned but were concealed by his double. There is still a contrast between evil as something that should be despised and vanquished and wicked as if it were something significant and distinct from good.

Throughout the various comics it has become a usual thing that physical disabilities have been deployed to suggest evil or depravity. The villain stereotype dehumanizes persons with disabilities. It reduces them to nefarious individuals driven to crime or revenge by resentment of their condition. Needless to say, we can really do without such negative stereotypes in a society where prejudice and discrimination against persons with disabilities still abound.

Comics should be seen as a medium of entertainment. Yes, they came into existence as a mode of resistance by their creators amidst their adverse life struggles. They needed a hero/savior figure who is enriched with all the idealized qualities and characteristics, which they did not possess, to confront their enemies (whom they displayed as villains in their comics). They attributed deformed/crippled or disabled figure to these villains so as to other them from the normative society consisting of ordinary, normal citizens and amidst them the ideal/idol Superheroes. But, to contrary this thesis works on the disabled bodies of Comics Super-Villains and questions the gaze of the society and audience.

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