

Modern Heroes: Classical Mythology and Classical Values in the Contemporary Acquis, the Case of Captain America

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Abstract

This article aims to establish a comparison between contemporary literature and classical mythology. The endurance of some milestones, values and common ideals allows the tracking of collective guidelines among the various literatures and among the different moments of history. This is how we approach a hero of contemporary fiction, Captain America. We seek in its history and its idiosyncrasy the possibility of the permanence of common archetypes of classical mythology.

Keywords: Captain America, Classical Mythology, Heroes, Archetypes.

1. Introduction

The presence of myths and heroes in society has followed a constant *ethos* that has been also part of literature and its development throughout history. Its role and outstanding significance, over time and in various civilizations, needs not to be discussed given the fact that it is widely acknowledged.

The present study proposes an analogy between two specific moments and two specific literatures, classical mythology and contemporary fiction, specifically the comic or graphic novel. In antiquity, myths and mythological cycles were closely linked with religion. The pre-eminence of religion in the social, political and economic sphere was complete, with a constant interrelation and exchange between these various categories. In addition, fables¹ also played a determining role within the various social domains and in the religious practices of any given community as well. These narratives, most of them transmitted

orally, had a particular structure and, primarily, addressed a distant but still prestigious past. These survived in the collective consciousness through generations.

The presence and significance of these narratives in society through ritualization and sacralization was such that belief might have been, or rather, have seemed indivisible from the ritual or the religious practice. In addition, the supposed passage from the myth to the *logos* was not complete and, as García Gual affirms, it seems that it was not absolute, much less, since legends were still used to explain what could not be done otherwise (29 - 36). Fables thus fulfilled a primordial function in the ancient world: they supported religion and were a necessary element in the sacralization of rituals, sacrifices and various religious practices, which moreover were essential for the social cohesion of these communities. Likewise, it also seems that they were used with a moral purpose, since they served to explain and understand both social and individual behaviour, as well as other aspects of reality.

Over time, legends distanced themselves from religion, yet they did not disappear; they remained as part of culture and social traditions, no longer sustained according to a system of beliefs. Myths from the past have survived not only in their original forms but they have been synthesized in contemporary narratives, seen in the present work as reminiscences of mythological pasts when heroes epitomized attributes that went beyond the comprehension of mere mortals. As societies evolve, so do these fables; they have transcended as their messages continue to communicate and reflect the new reality perceived by contemporary communities, producing social values that affect it in a relation of continuous exchange (Barthes 109). In their evolution, they are integrated into new and other forms of narratives, recalling the transformation from myth to *logos*, as myths are thus combined with literature. Such transformation allows them to remain as a valuable cultural aspect in the everyday reality of different societies without the need to be perceived as myths (Mullen, 48).

The importance of myths transcends the barriers of conscious life, as these narratives extend their roots into the depths of the so-called unconscious, as Carl Jung argued. Thus, a new model of psychology called analytic was born, which contributed to psychotherapy (Alonso, 55-70). Jung is the psychoanalyst who first spoke of the existence of a "collective unconscious" whose nature is universal and that contains archetypes, models of thought or behavior that persist in the collective mind ("Collective Unconscious"). Myths and legends are two of the forms in which these archetypes find expression, since, according to Jung himself, myths are "the psychic manifestations that reflect the nature of the soul." (my translation) ("Arquetipos", 9-11) Thus, the presence of these archetypes is certain both in myths and legends, as well as in contemporary narratives like those here studied, as the superhero story similarly partakes of these constructs. In addition, Jung's theories have served authors to further use and exploit these archetypes. For instance, Russell resorts to Jungian archetypes when he establishes a comparison between Batman and Captain America:

The number of Archetypal moments observed shows a strong relationship between Batman and Captain America and the Jungian hero. By perpetuating this hero type, a large percentage of society has shown that it is important to have these heroes in the

collective consciousness. [...] By understanding the origins of the concepts, it is possible to understand the significance of their continued recurrence. (Russell, 129)

The author highlights the transcendence of the hero archetype and its presence in the collective unconscious, the values that emanates from it and its survival. The same could be approached from another framework, Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, in which we can trace the points in common and clear connections that exist between the characters of comic book stories and the heroes from ancient myths. Although they evolve in form, those general patterns are maintained in substance, answering the same motives and producing similar effects over the centuries (Campbell, 10-22; 212-214). That is why contemporary literature, in its various expressions, offers timeless models of legends, stories and myths that are always present in the cultural heritage of our societies, but exhibited in such a way that the mythical roots are hidden under their literary and graphic re-imaginings in comic book stories. The significance of classical mythology over Western culture cannot be questioned; myths have been a constant motif in this artistic tradition across the various disciplines that it encompasses.

Espino Martín exposes how in the twentieth century myths are re-used as a peripheral element. According to the author, though they had lost its importance in their transition to the *logos*, they are increasingly used in fiction but no longer to be held as beliefs *per se* (45-54). Within contemporary fiction, the comic book does also partake from myth and the significance of this media should not be disregarded since it has become a powerful agent of cultural transmission as it is one of the genres par excellence in the market. Although the American industry has been the motor and principal agent in their popularization, one should not forget the roots of its elements, which extend beyond American society and culture. Santos Iglesias remarks that, according to the theory of polysystemic transfers, the elements of European culture have migrated to American in a continuous transmission of components through peripheral systems (339). Similarly, the study of Unceta Gómez points out the existing connections and parallels between classical mythology and the American comic, also seen as representative of American society and culture (333-344).

These relationships show us that it is more than possible the establishment of close links between different types of myths and legends throughout the ages. That is why I propose a study of Captain America as a modern adaptation of the classical Greek hero from myth and literature.

2. Captain America's Comic

Narratives have the ability to update themselves to tell their stories effectively and to attract all kind of audience. Since its birth in the 1930s, the comic book has enjoyed a reputation that has been increasing over time, gaining more and more followers. Currently, the circulation of the graphic novel seems to keep growing and it is possible that this trend continues, increasing the diversity of its readers.

According to Peitz, comics have a prevailing presence in today's fiction. (4-6) However, in the beginning, they had many detractors. In the mid-twentieth century comics were seen as a negative influence for young people due to their influence on the social and

moral standards they transmitted. Eventually, this social opposition declined considerably after the 80s, when thanks to merchandising and the film industry superheroes achieved a significant popularity that caused a re-valuing of their worth. Given their current acclaim and cultural significance, comics are increasingly becoming the object of study and analysis for many researchers as they serve to evince the economic, political and sociocultural changes (Wright, 36).

Considering the aforementioned claims, the case of Captain America is going to be studied as a paradigmatic example of this trend, taking into account its characterization as the epitome of American cultural values and its way of life. The origin of the hero and the comic series dates back to the middle of the 20th century, being in close relation to historical events as the creation of this comic book hero had a specific purpose. In the middle of World War II, the nation needed a boost in morale both for its troops and its civilians. Americans were looking for a symbol that would emphasize their core patriotic sentiments and values and that would stand in stark contrast to the ideas of the Nazi regime. Thus, the creation of Captain America answered this need, as the champion that embodies the American ideal of freedom, martial comradeship, duty and morality. Such a figure would help to strengthen the image of the country, highlighting and promoting those ideals through a comic both within American and abroad, partly aided by the developing advertisement industry and its reliance on the graphic image.

This is how the owner of Timely Comics, currently known as Marvel, decides to create a new character that he entrusted to artists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, who gave birth to Captain America (Díaz, 22-23; Roach, 111). Although the figure and the comic were quite prominent throughout the conflict, the audience's interest diminished considerably at the end of the war. The authors tried to recover this character by resorting to different twists in the comic's plot, but they finally abandoned him in 1949. Shortly after, in 1953, the comic writer Stan Lee brought him back, but still did not resume his former relevance. Not until 1964 did Lee managed to restore Captain America to his former glory, when he recaptured his personality successfully and introduced Captain America into the so-called Marvel Universe also constituted by new and alternative superheroes (Daniels, 84-87; Roach, 112).

Since then, its authors, editors and writers have striven to update the character and provide several important twists in its story in order to keep up with the times and social changes. Thanks to this constant revisionism, the success of Captain America comic series has been transposed into the big screen, as his latest film adaptation have catapulted Captain America into worldwide fame, albeit in a slightly altered version of his life and original story that, nonetheless, maintains the ideals he stands for intact.

3. Captain America as an American hero

One of the most relevant aspects of this modern paladin is his connection with the American ideology and its symbolism. In such paradigm, and taking into account the ideas previously discussed, a superhero could be considered a mythological construction, which, in the case of American comics, would synthesize the myths and the cultural references of America for the character's design. (Miettinen, 182-189). Reinolds argues that superheroes embody values of justice and truth, which are part of American ideals.

According to the author, they would be like the founding fathers of America, recovering the country's founding values to establish the principles proper to American society. (74).

Obviously, Captain America epitomizes these principles perfectly. As such, it has been studied by researchers who have analyzed its importance and transcendence within the conception, creation and development of American identity. Dittmer, for instance, has pointed out how this champion has helped the construction of the American identity, thanks to a symbology easier to identify and much more relatable for American citizens than, for instance, the country's symbol of the eagle (626-643).

Captain America is a much more accessible and more real symbol as he is a soldier, whose willingness to die for his country perfectly represents the martial consciousness that characterizes the complex American military and industrial system. In addition, Dittmer understands the importance of what he calls as "geopolitical limits", and how this is fundamental in the constitution of uniqueness, analyzing its link with our hero. (626-643).

"Thus, Captain America not only defines what America is, but it also firmly ensconces the reader within its geo-graph. The reader, tacitly assumed to be American, is reminded of his or her individual identity as an American and is told what that means in relation to the rest of the world (...)" (Dittmer, 641).

His studies have helped to understand how superheroes have supported society's interpretation of the role played by the United States in the geopolitics and in its use of economic, diplomatic and military power (Dittmer, 2013). Peitz also highlights the importance of this figure as an identification of an American symbol during World War II, which has contributed to the cult of the flag. Bearing this in mind, Captain America is an essential element in the constitution of American morality and identity, a role prefigured by the heroes of the classical world, who similarly served to embody the ideals and moralities of their communities.

4. The Story of Captain America and the Myths of Classical Antiquity

As it happens in any myth or epic worth its salt, the story of any character is complex and has several distinct versions. Comics were updated, occasionally re-booted several times, and some of the numbers in a comic series might be removed with modifications of the plot. These transformations in their narrative are still happening currently; much more in fact after their adaptation into the big screen.

Regardless of this variation, the main aspects of Captain America, his biography and the plots of his comics have remained steady. The main story of the character is that of an aspiring soldier who wants to participate in World War II. Later depictions have added a backstory for Steve Rogers, Captain America's first identity, in which the young man comes from a poor family and is first fatherless and, shortly after, also loses her mother. Despite these hardships, the boy develops a great sense of duty and morals that impel him to want to face the Nazi threat that looms over the country and the whole world. His ideals and strength are what moves him to enlist in the army despite his poor physique. His chance to enter into the army presents itself through the participation in a scientific experiment of a serum, which eventually gives him superhuman strength and agility, turning the young Steve Rogers into a hero, Captain America. As the creator of this serum dies its production is stopped, making Rogers the only super soldier.

Initially, circumstances force him to maintain his secret identity. However, shortly after, he is discovered by another recruit, Bucky, who becomes a friend and inseparable companion of the Captain. Together they fight against spies and saboteurs and, not long after, he gets to face the man who will become his archenemy, Red Skull. This individual is key within Hydra, a terrorist organization initially composed by Nazis, at least at the beginning as in the story's evolution it will gradually stop fighting against the Nazis and will face other enemies as new political scenarios and conflicts arose, shifting towards the Cold War. Also appearing on stage is his girlfriend, Betty Ross. Soon after, he decides to graduate and become an educator, although he will return to the fight once again when his enemy reappears, this time as an ally of the Communists.

In other versions of his story Captain and Bucky, having been friends since childhood, disappear at the end of the war.

At first, Bucky is presumed to be dead, though later on it is discovered that he is alive, while Captain America is thrown into the icy waters, where he remains frozen until he is found and restored years later. From this point onwards, he lives as a hero out of his time, anchored in a sense to the values of the American forties; a brave new world where he is to collaborate with the rest of heroes from the Marvel Universe.

As previously stated, even though the different storylines of Captain America evolve as socio-historical events take place or when the series writers change, the central aspects of the narrative as well as its core values remain constant. One of these essentially permanent features is the process underwent by the hero to acquire his powers and his new identity that equates a rite of passage.

The question of these ceremonies has been studied at large in classical mythology and literature.

It constitutes one more element within the mythological corpus. On many occasions they mark the conversion of a man into a hero.

This type of rituals are essential to progress from one phase to the next in the life of any individual and, by extension, in the hero's narrative becoming the means through which the hero can realize his or her full potential.

It is not the purpose of this work to delve into the importance of rites of passage in different cultures or historical periods. Needless to say, they are still something that the protagonists of these kinds of contemporary narratives need to undergo and, within the Marvel Universe, we find other examples such as Hulk, or Spiderman, among others. In fact, it could be argued that if this process of progression is something inherent or compulsory in the life of a common individual in the case of superheroes is much more significant.

Moral progress requires this compulsory step and the progression through various stages that involve an evolution and maturation of the individual. In his work, Kohlberg evidenced the necessity of diverse periods for the development of ethics. Even though the order of these stages is not the same from one individual to another, the birth and growth of morality follows several common steps. The development or passage from child to adult and even the various phases within both childhood and maturity need a process and a categorization, which in many cultures is represented by the rites of passage. (1-42)

The rite of passage represents a sort of rebirth for the hero as she or he is introduced into a new identity and reality, in which the hero's powers separate this figure from common humans. In that aspect, the rite of passage constitutes one of the features that link the comic book superhero with the protagonists of classical texts and myths.

Another of the key elements that bind these two kinds of figures is the hero's companion. In the stories of Captain America this is represented by his inseparable friend and brother-at-arms Bucky. This trope remains constant in the series, despite the changes of characters, as Sam Wilson replaces Bucky, performing the same functions in Captain's narrative arc.

The idea of a hero accompanied and aided by a mortal is also present in classic Greek narratives, represented by characters like Achilles and his beloved Patroclus. Beyond that, their ties were strong inside and outside the battlefield. Known are his struggles in Troy, narrated by Homer in the *Iliad*. In it Patroclus assumes the armor of Achilles and fights in his name. Confusing him with Achilles, Hector kills him, which provokes the wrath of the hero and his return to the fight (Grimal, 39-43).

In 2007, with Brubaker as the series' writer, an alternative story arc is proposed in which Bucky, believing that Captain America has been killed at the hands of Red Skull, puts on Captain's suit to fight and encourage his companions. Although later on it is discovered that Rogers has not died, Steve allows his friend Bucky to continue wearing his suit and using the Captain's identity, until Bucky's eventual demise (Roach, 111-115). Thus, we can draw a direct parallelism between Achilles-Patroclus and Captain America-Bucky.

The suit becomes a symbol for the hero and is an element more than enough to provide courage among his countrymen and support the ideal of heroism. At the same time, however, by wearing the hero's armor the sidekick attracts the wrath of enemies that may outmatch him but who also have to face him (a mere mortal) believing that he is the hero. Neither Bucky nor Patroclus are as strong, or agile as their beloved companions, so they suffer an inevitable death. In spite of the costume's capacity to partly represent the hero in reality that is not the case. In the end, only the true heroes can successfully overcome the challenges that the hero's identity (and not the uniform) entails. This feature also underlines the comradeship necessary in battle, indispensable to face the cruel reality of war.

Another feature that binds Captain America to the heroes of ancient Greece is his physique and strength, which matches that of Hercules. Hated by Hera since he was born, his existence was an incessant sequence of tests in order to gain a rightful place among the gods. The characteristic that always has stand out in the representations of Hercules is precisely the magnitude of his body frame and, more importantly, his immense strength.

Yet, superhuman strength is not the only aspect that link Captain America to the son of Zeus as they also share an enemy, the hydra. As we know, Heracles must confront this monstrous creature as one of the Twelve Labors he has to complete. The characteristic of this being was that new heads grew each time Hercules cuts one of them. In order to defeat it, he needs the help of his nephew Iolao (Grimal, 239-257).

The Hydra of Captain America's comics is not a monster but an organization that, nonetheless, is built upon the same principle that the monster symbolizes. In both comics and movies, the motto of this terrorist group is mentioned: "cut a head and two more will appear". Thus, the enemies of Captain are a clear reference to ancient Greek mythology

and literature as they use this background to underline the impossibility to be completely defeated. Of course that, in the end, Captain America prevails over Hydra but, like Hercules, he also requires the help of fellow heroes to achieve this feat.

A further analogy could also be established with another great hero from the classical world, in this case from Roman culture, Aeneas. Although the plot of Virgil's *Aeneid* might seem to yield no similarities between Aeneas and Captain America in truth they can be related through an aspect of Virgil's text, the significance of heroes in the constitution of a society's morality, identity, sense of belonging and the justification and celebration of its right to exert political and military power.

We have to recall that Aeneas was considered one of the heroes of greater relevance for being the mythical patron of Rome and the Romans, a descendant, moreover, of Venus, thus providing an outstanding lineage to the inhabitants of Lazio (Grimal, 156-157). His significant role in the construction of Roman morality was highlighted by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, a work that performed an essential role in the evolution of Roman history by contributing to the idea of the cultural and moral development of the time. In fact, the *Aeneid* was a commission made ex-trial by Augustus. He wanted to create in this way a Roman hero who embodied Roman ideals and morality and who would legitimized his dynasty and imperial rule. In a similar way, during the Second World War Captain America was an American creation made with a social, politic and moral purpose of vital importance for the nation in a historical moment of utmost relevance.

To finish with these monomythical parallelisms, I would like to mention paragons made by other authors. In connection with the various observations that have been made by several scholars in this regard, I will name Hafci and Erbay, who in their work also make a comparative analysis of several heroes with Greek myths and classical antiquity. In their analysis of Captain America, they find a more than clear relationship with Perseus. For the authors, a link can be established in several parts of the hero's story. Both Steve and Perseus are not born with their powers, but they acquire them along the initial stages of their narrative arcs. In the case of the Argive character, it is the gods who give him the help as he is the son of Zeus. Another fundamental element is the shield that both heroes use. In the case of Perseus, the shield is provided by Athena so that he can use it to defeat Medusa, the Gorgon whose head he had to deliver. For the Captain his shield is one of his most valuable tools, even more, it is a part of him as it symbolically represents him in part. Hafci and Erbay also compare the enemies of these two heroes, Medusa and Red Skull, analyzing the possible similarities between them. Finally, they relate the two heroes for the courage they demonstrate and their value, based on honor and benevolence. (497-510).

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, myths and mythology play an important role in society regardless of the historical period in which they are created or exist, as they are present in one way or another. They have been able to be adapted over time, changing some of their social functions, but remaining and lasting in different ways. They reflect the identity, morality, the collective unconscious of any given community, surviving in their transference from one culture to another throughout the years. This is why we can extract the common

patterns that bind them, since, after all, societies and cultures all drink from the same sources that provide them with general guidelines, identities, moralities, thoughts and common models. This allows the extraction and extrapolation of values, archetypes as Jung called them, that can be found at any time and in any civilization.

As a result, the same paradigm defines the contemporary world, which is likewise constituted by our own everyday myths that are wrapped in literary fiction and adorned with images that allow instant access to the message. Cinema and comics are, perhaps, one of the best representations that we have concerning the contemporaneity of the perception and depiction of myths. They are somewhat hidden, under a secular disguise that contrasts to their relation with belief, ritual and religion in Antiquity, but in their own way, they persist. That is why through works of comparative literature, which help us to establish parallels between current events and other historical moments, we can trace the mythical roots of the different artistic expressions and productions of contemporary Western culture and its indebtedness to the Greek and Roman traditions.

Within modern fiction, Captain America encompasses a series of ideals deeply entrenched in society. It represents core attributes and values of American civilization, making him one of the best examples to establish a comparison with other mythical and literary heroes that fulfil a foundational purpose. The character's values epitomize the social change that has taken place in the United States in the last century but maintaining in its background ideals present in European culture since ancient times. In this way, we are able to discern the essence of his narrative, noticing the importance of the rites of passage and of his conversion from common citizen into a hero, signaled by the acquisition of superhuman powers. These increased capacities and skills connects characters like Captain America with heroes like Hercules, who fight and use their extraordinary strength for a noble cause and help others. In his quest, Captain America is helped by other comrades like Bucky or Sam Wilson, reflecting the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus. The death of the hero's companion is a trope still recursively used to show the suffering, the sacrifices and the revenge of the hero. Thus, the value of camaraderie and loyalty is extolled, especially in combat. But we can also glimpse similarities with Aeneas, the Roman hero, the founding father of Rome, who served to convey and celebrate Roman patriotism and the ideal to which each Roman citizen might have aspired.

These are but a few examples of the figures that embody the archetypes that underlie our popular culture, which keep alive the memory of ancient Greek and Roman myths. Their form and appearance have changed, but not their background. They continue to maintain values, points in common, which evinces that our civilization has not really been substantially transformed. Regardless of the evolution that Western culture and the societies that constitute it have experienced, myths and their heroes, in one way or another, still accompany us and surely will be part of our future. Let's hope at least that those values they portray are the best that our civilization can achieve.

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Notes

¹ For purposes of clarification, throughout this work ‘fable(s)’ is used to refer to “a legendary story of supernatural happenings” (“Fable”) and not to the specific literary subgenre of the fable.

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