

In 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham almost destroyed the comic book industry. The respected psychiatrist studied a patient's environment and social background believing they have a profound influence on the psyche. When he began practicing in the twenties, his ideas were considered revolutionary. While working at numerous psychiatric hospitals and treating primarily juvenile delinquents, Dr. Wertham noticed a common link between his youthful patients. He found that nearly every child brought to him voraciously read comic books. After publishing some articles, Dr. Wertham composed a four hundred page book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, presenting his argument that comic books are a primary cause for juvenile delinquency, sexual misconduct, and other socially deviant behaviors. Though an allegedly academic study on the adverse affects of comic books on juveniles, primarily under the age of twelve, Dr. Wertham failed to provide specific references for his claims. He did not footnote the comic books he quoted or used images from; he did not document his system of study by providing the amount of juveniles in his study and how each was treated. He used his credentials and experience to elicit trust in his poorly supported evidence.

When conducting a psychological experiment, as Dr. Wertham claims to have performed, one must document their process in order for other scientists to repeat the study and thus verify its validity. Proper scientific documentation requires the amount of people included in the study; how they were recruited; the demographic of the people being studied; how each person was studied by listing the questions and tests they were given. When conducting any scientific study, as Dr. Wertham's is defined, one wants a diverse sample population of people and to treat each one as similarly as any other. This

lessens the risk of other factors contaminating the study, like race or a rude interviewer. Furthermore, if the experiment is documented properly, other scientists can repeat the experiment. If the first scientist did his or her experiment properly than any further experimentation will reach the same results (DiRocco)

Dr. Wertham did not provide all of this information. Inferences can be made from ways Dr. Wertham reached his conclusion. It is apparent that he has much dialogue with juveniles. Unfortunately, because Dr. Wertham does not provide pseudonyms for the juveniles or dates for the interviews, he could be quoting from less than ten juveniles throughout his entire book. Moreover, Dr. Wertham does reveal where some of his patients come from. Everyone that he studied or quoted was referred to him because of their delinquent behavior, meaning he did not have any representation of juveniles who did not commit deviant acts. Considering that 90% of children under eighteen years old and 25% of high school graduates admitted to reading comic books during the early fifties (Wright, 155), Dr. Wertham did not conduct a fair study of the juvenile population. Almost one hundred million comics were printed a year, and Dr. Wertham himself admits children trade comics instead of purchasing them.

The difficulty in arriving at accurate figures about comic books is considerable. One must distinguish between comic books printed, published, sold and, of course, read. The last item, the pass-on circulation, is most important, for many comic books after having been sold once for ten cents are not only traded for others, but are also sold repeatedly at lower prices: eight cents, six cents, two cents and even one cent. (Wertham, 28)

For Dr. Wertham to not study juveniles who read comics but do not commit delinquent acts nearly negates his entire argument. He presents a manipulative argument using dozens of anecdotes and quotes from juveniles and other psychologists. This is an

example of an early anecdote Dr. Wertham uses to create the devastating image of comic books:

Some time after I had become aware of the effects of comic books, a woman visited me. She was a civic leader in the community and invited me to give some lectures on child guidance, education and delinquency. We had a very pleasant conversation. It happened that on that very morning I had been overruled by the Children's Court. I had examined a boy who had threatened a woman teacher with a switchblade knife. Ten years before, that would have been a most unusual case, but now I had seen quite a number of similar ones. This particular boy seemed to me a very good subject for treatment. He was not really a "bad boy," and I do not believe in the philosophy that children have instinctive urges to commit such acts.

In going over his life, I had asked him about his reading. He was enthusiastic about comic books. I looked over some of those he liked best. They were filled with alluring tales a shooting, knifing, hitting and strangling. He was so intelligent, frank and open that I considered him not an inferior child, but a superior one.

I know that many people glibly call such a child maladjusted; but in reality he was a child well adjusted to what we had offered him to adjust to. In other words, I felt this was a seduced child. But the court decided otherwise. They felt that society had to be protected from this menace. So they sent him to a reformatory. (Wertham, 11-12)

Consistently, Dr. Wertham blames the seduction of comic books for the delinquent behaviors of juveniles. He outlines how juveniles learn to shoplift, break into houses, commit murder, and get away with these crimes from comic books. He quotes juveniles who present Dr. Wertham with the comics that they learned these actions from.

Further studies as to the effects of comic books are limited. Since the fifties, comic books have become over shadowed by rock and roll, video games, films, and television, all of which have been blamed for juvenile delinquency and other social problems. Also similar to comic books, alleged studies for these mediums have been harshly manipulated. Violent video games have been blamed for influencing crimes such as the Columbine shootings, though since 1997, video game sales have increased from 133 million to 225 million in 2001, a 69% increase (Interactive Digital Software Association). In contrast, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program, a subdivision of the Department of Justice, has listed a 21% drop in their Violent Crime

index from 1997 to 2001, which includes murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, and assault. There was a 20% drop in all crimes between 1997 and 2001.

There are not easily found studies promoting the benefits of video games, whether there are benefits or not. Likewise, studies to disprove Dr. Wertham's findings are rare. Diamond Comic Distributor, the largest distributor of comic books in the United States, has started a campaign to include comic books in public libraries. The distributor lists numerous quotes on its web site to promote comic books, including one from Dorrell & Carroll from the *School Library Journal*; "The presence of comics in a junior high school library resulted in a dramatic 82% increase in library traffic and a 30% increase in circulation of non-comic books" (Diamond Comic Distributors). The scientific reliability (how consistent these statistics are) and validity (how certain these statistics measure what they were intended to measure) of these numbers requires further study (DiRocco). The strength of a scientific experiment is that when repeated, the results match past experiments. Dr. Wertham made his study of comic books unable to be repeated and thus, by definition, not a study.

In truth, the popular trend of comic books during the forties and fifties included extreme violence and explicit sexual scenes. They contained advertisements for guns and knives. Dr. Wertham's claims that comic books had inappropriate images for young children were not unfounded. However, his claims that comic books were one of the leading causes of socially delinquent behavior were unproven, overblown, and manipulative. Comic books became the first entertainment form that juveniles could obtain themselves – before television, rock and roll, and video games (Wright, xvi). Comics cost ten cents, allowing children to go to the corner store and buy whatever they

chose without their parents screening their purchases. As a result, children could see in comics what films and books did not show, since both were censored by adults and committees. Comic books had no such censorship.

The state of comic books during Wertham's time called for rapid production of high profits. Few titles from before the fifties are considered masterpieces within the industry. Artists and writers were young and untrained, most still in their teens. When one innovative publisher discovered a popular new genre, every publisher latched on, which is why violent crime and horror comics became so popular. Additionally, female characters in revealing clothing and bondage situations helped sales. Violent scenes included monsters using body parts to play baseball and covers showing decapitated head.

One cannot fault the comic book industry for catering its products to the demand. The Constitution gives them the right to create whatever they want, though numerous states passed legislature that restricted the making of violent comic books in the fifties. Subsequent youth cultures like rock and roll, movies, television, and video games have all spawned similar arguments. Like Dr. Wertham's scapegoating of comics, doctors, parents, and politicians have tried to blame forms of media for society's problems. In past centuries, civilizations have blamed these problems on God or other superstitions. Violence and socially deviant behavior has existed since civilization began while comic books had only existed for twenty years when Dr. Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*. To attribute the millennia old practice of violence to a few decades old medium is bad science.

The problem with Dr. Wertham's argument is not that he saw problems in comic book imagery, but that he presented his findings with a dramatic horror and a lack of scientific evidence. Furthermore, he did warp numerous pieces of evidence to suit his purposes. He provided quotes from comic books to present examples of racism and social injustice. Dr. Wertham did not identify any of the sources of the quotes, although his broad claims in this respect are, again, warped. First, most of the artists in the comic book industry were Jewish (Kaplan). Captain America, created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, both Jewish, began fighting Nazis almost a year before the United States entered the war as an example of the Jews' political expression. The creation of a protectorate has existed in Jewish Mythology for centuries in the magical character, the Golem. Arie Kaplan, in a three-part on how Jews started the comic book industry, quoted comic book legend Will Eisner about the super hero in Jewish culture.

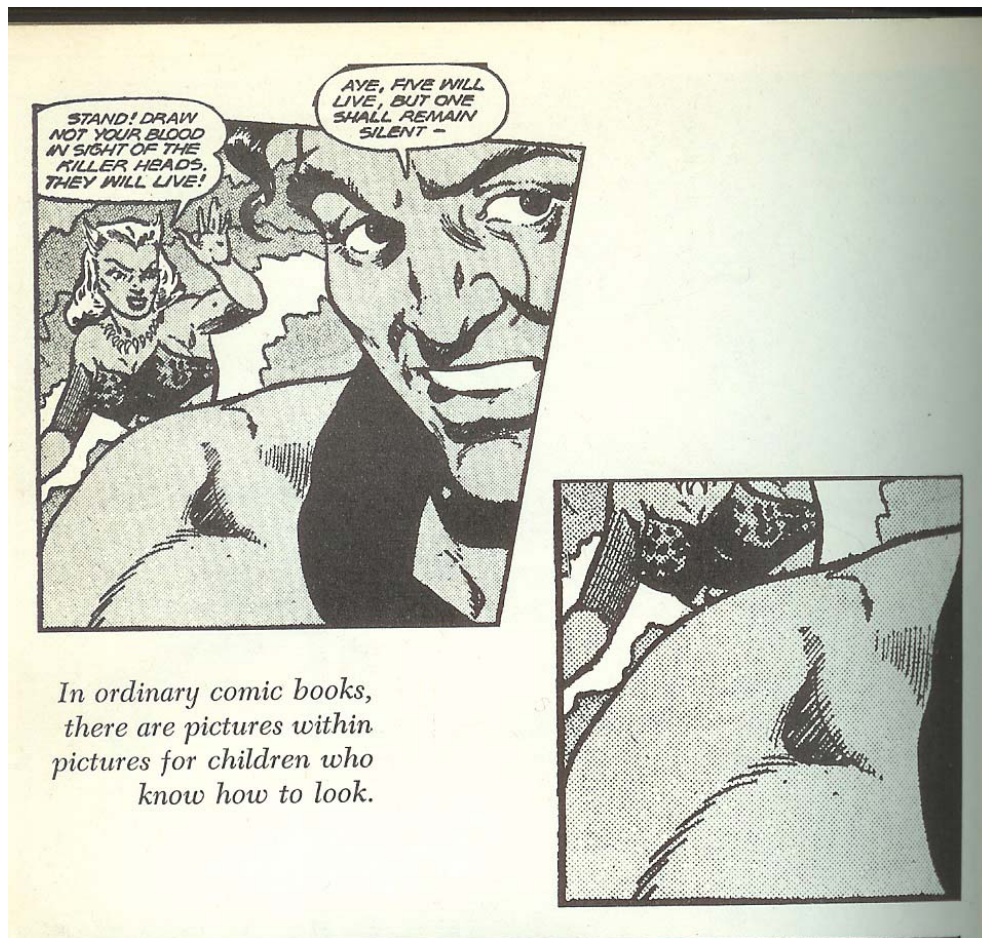
The Golem was very much the precursor of the super-hero in that in every society there's a need for mythological characters, wish fulfillment. And the wish fulfillment in the Jewish case of the hero would be someone who could protect us. This kind of storytelling seems to dominate in Jewish culture. (Kaplan)

The Jewish creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, named their character Kal-El, which means "all that is God" in Hebrew. A Hartford Courant editorial attacked comics as being "the filthy stream that flows from the gold-plated sewers of New York" which was treated as the definition for Jewish business (Kaplan 21).

One of the largest publishers at the time, DC Comics, used its variety of superhero characters to combat racism and social injustice. The Green Lantern fought racist villains, from whom some of Dr. Wertham's quotes may have come. Superman stopped men from beating women and other social injustices while Batman combated political

machines. The most popular and most criticized publisher, EC Comics, also strengthened its comic line with early moral tales that later influenced the “Twilight Zone” and “Alfred Hitchcock Presents”. Many of their titles dealt with racism and political issues. One story told of a wrongly accused black man who is to be tried, but murdered by the sheriff instead. The real killer comes forward too late. The final words of the narrator are “for any American to have so little regard for the life and rights of any other American is a debasement of the principles of the Constitution upon which our country is founded.”

Dr. Wertham’s biggest tactic was creating the impression that the comic book industry acted as a conspiracy – that juveniles who read the comics near where secret messages were hidden and those comic books had other motives other than entertainment.



This image, taken from a gallery of comic book pictures, represents Dr. Wertham’s approach. He presents this shoulder muscle as if the artist secretly hid an anus “for children who know how to look” (Wertham). Dr. Wertham pushes the eye to where he wants it to look instead of giving a full impression.

Additionally, Dr. Wertham alludes to a comic book industry conspiracy to corrupt juveniles. He describes the juvenile drug addicts he has treated, all of whom were “inveterate comic-book readers” (Wertham, 26). Again, Dr. Wertham does not account for the millions of American children who were reading comic books at the time and not resorting to drug trafficking or violence. Furthermore, Dr. Wertham attacks the comic

book industry's attempt to fight drugs, claiming it is not a child's responsibility to fight drugs. In his eyes, the comic book industry can do no good.

Dr. Wertham's other manipulate strategy was to use his patients as weapons against comic books. He quotes children, naming them only by age, preventing true identification of how many he spoke with or in what increment of time. Dr. Wertham quoted one sixteen year old giving his opinion.

The guys, the big racketeers and stuff, they pay the guys maybe to put something in crime comic books that is good. The other boys think it is a good idea. So they start doing it and get into the Youth House, and when they get back they work for the racketeers. They make a lot of money and everything and stuff. They want the young boys to read the crime comic books to get ideas. The boys are about seventeen when the racketeers use them for dope and stuff, to peddle it, and to run the numbers.....(sic) I think crime comic books are there to make the kids into bad boys, so that they can make some money. I figure maybe these gangsters they say: a couple of years from now, when these guys grow up, I'll give them a number racket and I can be the big guy then. Sometimes they need gunmen to eliminate the other big guys. The comic book show about that, too, about racing and stuff. (Wertham 75-76)

Dr. Wertham also quoted children saying "You [Wertham] can't stand a chance against these comic-book publishers" (Wertham 75) and "[comic book publishers] got the police to put in a good word for the comic books" (Wertham 75).

These quotes are taken from members of Dr. Wertham's Hookey Club, a group of juvenile delinquents he formed to perform group therapy. These juveniles were all referred to him because of already delinquent behavior. In any case, their statements are damning of the comic book industry, of which they used to be consistent patrons along with the other ninety percent of children under eighteen. Unfortunately for the reader, Dr. Wertham leaves these children's assertions unsubstantiated with any credible source. He does not quote a policeman or policewoman who accepted payment for endorsing comic books, let alone refer to any police department endorsement of crime comics. He lets the child portray this endorsement as the comic book industry's manipulation.

Furthermore, Dr. Wertham does not provide any evidence of the criminal activities his sixteen year old accuses the comic book industry of partaking in, specifically working with racketeers to train and recruit young boys to turn them into criminals. What is the comic book industry's interest in such an endeavor? If it is financial, then Dr. Wertham should have provided evidence of kickbacks and favors. Sadly, Dr. Wertham fails to provide any credible evidence except by quoting already convicted juvenile delinquents.

Dr. Wertham also employed the assistance of other psychologists to support his position. He had children "copy anything they like out of their comic books" (Wertham 76) as a drawing. Wertham then took those copies and had other psychologists interpret the copies for mental health purposes, but Wertham did this "without telling that they were copies from comic-book illustrations" (Wertham 76). Wertham quotes this psychologists interpretation on a boy's copy of a pirate:

This drawing is bristling with phallic symbols - the sword, the outstretched arm, the big gun stuck under the belt, the conspicuous belt buckle and the shirt opened down to the belt; the way the legs are posed and the boots are drawn has some phallic quality, too. The actual genitals are extremely accentuated. The figure is that of a very glamorous man. He looks seductive. The whole body is emphasized more than the head, and there is very little attempt at control.

This child was preoccupied with sexual ideas. He is very aggressive sexually - not someone who would ask nicely, but who takes (rapes). (Wertham 77)

Wertham follows up this interpretation by saying the child's drawing "was a more-or-less exact copy of a comic-book illustration. All the features mentioned...were present equally – if not-more so – in the original comic book picture...This was just a run-of-the-mill comic-book illustration" (Wertham 77). Dr. Wertham uses this copy to interoperate the child's psyche, but this is not the work of a child. This is copy. The child was told to copy a comic book image, not come up with an original idea. As for the original artist, before accusing him of being a rapist, there is probably more evidence to support that the

muscular depictions of characters were more popular and not littered with Freudian paranoia. Are we to assume all comic book artists were rapists since most every comic book character was extremely muscular and wore tight clothing? In actuality, the tight clothing happened because it was faster to draw. This is an extreme example of how Dr. Wertham twisted the little evidence he appears to have to support his cause.

One of Dr. Wertham's most embarrassing arguments is the use of homoerotic undertones in certain comic books, particularly Batman and Robin and Wonder Woman. Though few in the comic book industry have failed to uncover these undertones, Wertham's use of them as an anti-comic campaign forces him into a category that he accuses comics of being – prejudice. Dr. Wertham quotes homosexuals who wish to be either Batman or Robin. Additionally, he quotes a young child who was ten or eleven and started having homosexual fantasies as a result of Batman and Robin. During the 1950's, homosexuality was still an incredible taboo. Brown versus the Board of Education, the case that decided black and white segregation was unconstitutional, was decided the same year Seduction of the Innocent was published. The Stonewall Riots, which marked the start of the Gay Rights Movement, still had almost twenty years to wait.

Additionally, during the fifties, homosexuality was considered an illness – something that developed through mental disorders or environmental factors. These beliefs came out of another flawed study where psychologists found that all of their homosexual patients had emotional problems and decided certain emotional problems led to or caused homosexuality. However, these psychologists also failed to research a control group. The only people they studied were those who sought out mental health

care, thus had emotional problems (DiRocco). Dr. Wertham attributes comic books like Batman and Wonder Woman to the cause of homosexuality in juveniles. Wertham states “the Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies, of the nature of which they may be unconscious. In adolescents who realize it they may give added stimulation and reinforcement” (Wertham 191). Wertham, in his usual manner, made broad statements without evidence to support the homosexual influence of comic books.

In a number of cases I have found this sequence of events: At an early age these boys become addicted to the homoerotically tinged type of comic book. During and after comic-book reading they indulged in fantasies which became severely repressed. Life experiences, either those drawing their attention to the great taboo on homosexuality or just the opposite – experiences providing any kind of temptation – raise feelings of doubt, guilt, shame and sexual malorientation. (Wertham 189)

Dr. Wertham is not saying homosexuality is a part of life. He depicts it as a painful and humiliating life style. In addition, Wertham again reveals the consistent reading of comic books in homosexuals. He still fails to account for the ninety percent of children under eighteen also reading these comics and not becoming homosexual. Batman was one of the most popular titles during this period.

Wertham’s attacks on Wonder Woman are likewise ironic since she was created with the intention of being an example to young women. Dr. Wertham calls Wonder Woman “a crime comic which we have found to be one of the most harmful” (Wertham 64). Wonder Woman was created by a psychologist, William Moulton Marston, whose work with blood pressure led to the invention of the lie detector. With no female super hero at the time, Marston created one “he believed would set a positive example for America’s children” (Kaplan, 20). Wonder Woman required neither a male’s assistance in fighting crime nor one to marry. Dr. Wertham interpreted Wonder Woman as a lesbian symbol looking to demean the family structure. Wonder Woman did spend much

of her time being tied up, something Wertham associates with an inappropriate sexual fantasy. Ironically, recent Wonder Woman comics have revealed Wonder Woman to actually be a bisexual and vocal activist of many controversial issues including abortion and the death penalty.

Dr. Wertham saw a scapegoat in comic books. He played to his own ego by describing his credentials and experience to create the aura of trust. He puts the comic book industry in the blackest light. Though the comic book industry certainly deserved criticism, Dr. Wertham set out to crucify the business. He presented the industry as a force attempting to corrupt the youth of America. He created blanket impressions of the tiny sample population he gained only through referrals. He did no true research on the subject yet damned the industry causing sales to plummet from the hundred millions to the hundred thousands in a few, short years; drops that the industry has yet to recover from. Dr. Wertham knew what parents feared and gave them a place to focus their fears – a claim at a guarantee to keep their children safe from the evils of the world. The champion of parents did his duty with manipulations and warping of the facts, acting more like a villain would than a hero should.

Annotated Bibliography

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