7-2015

"A One-In-A-Billion Chance": The Transformative Effect of Stan Lee and Spider-Man on American Popular Culture

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“A ONE-IN-A-BILLION CHANCE”: THE TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT OF STAN LEE AND SPIDER-MAN ON AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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UNDERGRADUATE

PHI ALPHA THETA MEMBER SINCE 2013

ENTRY FOR THE 2015 PHI ALPHA THETA PAPER PRIZE AWARD

Few fictional characters enjoy as recognizable a place in the pantheon of American pop-culture icons as Spider-Man. Marvel historian Les Daniels calls him, "Marvel's most famous character," and, "the epitome of the radical innovations that characterized the Marvel age [of comics]."[1] The first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* begins with the daring claim, "There's never been a story like this one—because there's never been a hero like—Spider-Man!"[2] Spider-Man's alter-ego, Peter Parker, even refers to his origin as, "A one-in-a-billion chance. An accident that couldn't happen, and yet it did."[3] Marvel editor Stan Lee created the character on a whim for the last issue of *Amazing Fantasy* in 1962. Readers responded overwhelmingly positively to the offbeat new teen superhero who Jordan Raphael would later describe as, "Holden Caulfield who punches bad guys."[4] In response to popular demand, Lee gave the character his own series: *The Amazing Spider-Man*, in 1963. Together, Stan Lee and Spider-Man transformed the comic book industry and influenced the larger course of American popular culture. Lee's 1963 to 1972 run of the comic redefined the modern American Hero, affirmed teenage identity in American society, and used entertainment as a platform to discuss national issues while undermining industry censorship.

Both Lee and Spider-Man have enjoyed widespread recognition and acclaim dating back to the mid 1960's. As early as 1965, an article in *The Village Voice* identified Spider-Man as, "The most popular Marvel hero," and praised Marvel Comics as, "The first comic books to evoke, even metaphorically, the real world."[5] A 1971 issue of *New York Times Magazine*

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[1] Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 94-95.
[2] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #1*, (New York: Marvel, 1963), 1.
[3] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #94*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 2.
[4] Raphael Jordan, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 102.
[5] Sally Kempton, "Spider-Man's Dilemma: Super Anti-Hero in Forest Hills," *The Village Voice* (April 1, 1965): 5, 15.

praised, "Lee's comic anti-heroes: Spider-Man [etc.]," for making comic books relevant again to America in the 1960's.[6]

Despite the accolades he received in the 1960's and 1970's, Lee defies easy categorization in the history of comic books. In *Of Comics and Men* (2010), Jean-Paul Gabilliet defines four generations of comic book creators and places Stan Lee, who began work at Marvel (then Timely Comics) in 1939, in the first generation, despite the fact that all of Lee's most famous work, including Spider-Man, occurred during the 1960's, the time period that Gabilliet defines as the third generation of comic book creators.[7] Superheroes had been a comic book staple since the first appearance of Superman in 1938, but had declined sharply in popularity after the end of World War II. Depression-era superheroes like Superman were caricatures that, in a simplistic but revealing way, appealed to a generation who had almost lost hope. By the 1950's, however, many Americans, including Stan Lee, found these heroes unrelatable, with none of the human flaws that make characters feel realistic. DC Comics attempted to revive the superhero genre with *The Justice League of America* in 1960, but their recycled heroes were mere paragons of justice and altruism, and lacked individual identities.[8] Nor were Marvel comics faring any better. Lee felt unfulfilled at Marvel in the 1950's because, "We were a company of copycats," but after he began creating characters like Spider-Man in the 1960's, he "never seemed to develop that old bugaboo: 'writer's block.'"[9]

In recent years, authors like Andrei Molotiu have asserted that Steve Ditko, the illustrator for *The Amazing Spider-Man* issues #1-38, deserves to be credited as a primary creator of

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[6] Saul Braun, "Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant," *New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1971): 32.
[7] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*: *A Cultural History of American Comic books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 160.
[8] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 8, 9, 22, 57, 134, 185, 204.
[9] Stan Lee and George Mair, *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*, (New York: Simon & Schuester, 2002), 64, 85.

Spider-Man alongside Lee.[10] The argument rests on an analysis of the "Marvel Method" which Stan Lee admitted to creating in the 1960's "out of desperation" to keep up with deadlines.[11] Traditionally, comic book writers wrote detailed descriptions of artwork in the script for the artist, but in his new system, Lee gave the artist general plot points, let them draw the issue, and then wrote the dialogue to fit the art. In his autobiography Lee conceded that the Marvel Method meant that Ditko did create many of the plots for *The Amazing Spider-Man* independently.[12] Issue #25 even specifically credits Ditko with creating the plot for that issue.[13] While working on *The Amazing Spider-Man* Lee and Ditko's relationship continued to worsen until Ditko finally quit after issue #38. The exact reasons for Ditko's departure are unclear, but some have suggested that he left over creative differences with Lee regarding Peter Parker's status as a wholly good protagonist (Ditko's view), or as a protagonist possessing both good and evil tendencies (Lee's view).[14] The continued debate over Steve Ditko's role ignores the reality that Stan Lee continued to shape Spider-Man's persona for over half a decade and seventy-two issues after Ditko left. Thus despite Jordan Raphael's depiction of Lee as a "co-creator" of Spider-Man, a title Lee himself wryly accepted in his autobiography, when examining the larger impact of Spider-Man on American popular culture, it is appropriate to refer exclusively to Stan Lee as the creative force behind the iconic web-slinger.[15]

Beginning in that fateful final issue of *Amazing Fantasy #15* Lee made it clear that Spider-Man would define a new type of superhero. He referred to previous superheroes as, "long

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[10] Andrei. Molotiu "Abstract Form: Sequential Dynamism an Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and in Steve Ditko's Amazing Spider-Man," In *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods.* eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 93-94.
[11] Lee, *Excelsior,* 143.
[12] Ibid., 146.
[13] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #25,* (New York: Marvel, 1965), 1.
[14] Anthony Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre,* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 104.
[15] Raphael, ix.; Lee, *Excelsior,* 131.

underwear characters," but promised that Spider-Man would be, "Just a bit different."[16] To achieve this, he built off of his groundbreaking success: *The Fantastic Four*. In 1961, Marvel Comics owner Martin Goodman decided that Marvel needed a team of superheroes to compete with DC's Justice League, and tasked Lee with the project. Ironically, convinced that his career was at a dead-end, Lee was on the verge of quitting his job at Marvel when he received the assignment. According to Lee, his wife Joanie convinced him that this was his golden opportunity to do what he had always wanted to do and write, "Characters who have interesting personalities, who speak like real people."[17] Thus inspired, he set about developing *The Fantastic Four*, a team of flawed but relatable superheroes, in 1961.

While *The Fantastic Four* was Lee's first foray into the hitherto nonexistent realm of realistic superheroes, historian Bradford W. Wright argues that it was Spider-Man that created a new superhero archetype. He defied the conventions of the genre by not immediately dedicating himself to helping humanity upon gaining superpowers.[18] Peter Parker first created and donned the Spider-Man costume as an elaborate attempt at showmanship to make money, not to be a hero.[19] Only after his Uncle Ben was murdered by a man Peter had refused to stop from fleeing the scene of an earlier crime did Peter vow, "I'll never again refuse to use my spider power whenever it can help the cause of Justice," a vow that proved easier for Peter to make than to keep.[20] While comic book production in 1962 had fallen by 50 percent from its peak in the 1950's, the new brand of anti-hero that Spider-Man exemplified helped Marvel's sales to double between 1962 and 1967, despite continued declines in much of the rest of the industry.[21]

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[16] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, (New York: Marvel, 1962), 1.
[17] Lee, *Excelsior*, 112-113.
[18] Wright, 210, 212.
[19] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, (New York: Marvel, 1962), 6.
[20] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #94*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 6.
[21] Wright, 182, 223.

Beyond creating a new superhero archetype for the comic book industry, Spider-Man's success also began to redefine the larger mythos of the American hero by reflecting the fracturing Cold War consensus of the early 1960's. Spider-Man's early days as a superhero, "mirrored an era still dominated by Cold War diplomacy and a citizenry still more concerned with personal gratification than public service."[22] Prior to his uncle's death, Peter was a disillusioned young man who made statements like, "I just look out for number one," and, "The rest of the rest of the world can go hang itself for all I care," but after the fateful accident Lee editorialized that Peter learned an important lesson: "With great power there must also come great responsibility."[23] This narrative style exemplified the rejection of the Cold War consensus of the 1950's.[24] Unlike other Superheroes before him, Spider-Man's power was not automatically a force for good; he had to choose to use it for good. This choice placed him into conflict with villains like Doctor Octopus, who arrogantly soliloquized, "I have the right to do anything—as long as I have the power!"[25] By implication, *The Amazing Spider-Man* made the daring statement that the United States' power did not automatically grant it the moral high ground; its actions determined its goodness.

Under Lee's writing, the comic also subtly attacked the myth of American invulnerability. Spider-Man experienced his first defeat in the third issue of the comic at the hands of Doctor Octopus.[26] When his Aunt became deathly ill, Peter reacted with frustration that even with all his power he was unable to help her.[27] As the Vietnam War worsened, Spider-Man depicted on a personal level, what Americans saw playing out on a global scale. Purity of motive

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[22] Salvatore Mondello, "Spider-Man: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition," *Journal of Popular Culture* (X, no 1, 1976): 235.
[23] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, (New York: Marvel, 1962), 8.
[24] Wright, 215.
[25] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #3*, (New York: Marvel, 1963), 7.
[26] Ibid., 9.
[27] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #31*, (New York: Marvel, 1965), 9.

did not guarantee victory, and despite their considerable power, Spider-Man and America could not always save the day.[28] As public support for Vietnam waned, Spider-Man also began to doubt in one issue if he was fighting for the right reasons when he learned that public opinion was against him, but he concluded that he had a duty to use his power for good.[29] Spider-Man became a, "symbol of the modern dilemma," whose popularity caused the archetype of the American hero to shift.[30] Younger generations began to expect flawed heroes whose grasp on a moral high ground was uncertain, and whose moral actions did not necessarily lead to victory.

In doing so, Spider-Man came to symbolize the growing pains of both America, and Marvel's target audience.[31] Lee reminisced, "Since he was like a teenage everyman, when he spoke to those who were discouraged and disenfranchised, his words rang true."[32] Peter Parker was not just a "teenage everyman," however; he was the first teenage superhero to have his own comic book title. The concept of a teenage hero would have been inconceivable just twenty years earlier; in the 1940's, the term "teenager" did not yet exist.[33] By the early 1960's, however, the first baby boomers reached adolescence, and caused the numbers of the newly established demographic of teenagers to skyrocket.[34]

Comic book producers, however, had inadvertently shut themselves out of the lucrative teenage market. In response to criticism in the 1950's, the industry established a self-censorship regime that resulted in increasingly bland titles which drastically reduced comic books'

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[28] B.J. Oropeza, "The Perfectly Imperfect Spider-Man," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 128.
[29] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #4*, (New York: Marvel, 1963), 21.
[30] Kempton, 16.
[31] Wright, 180.
[32] Stan Lee. "Forward," in Steve Saffel, *Spider-Man: The Icon*, (London: Titan Books, 2007), 6.
[33] Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics," *Journal of Popular Culture* (40, no 6, December 2007): 970.
[34] Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell us about Ourselves and Society*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 141.

popularity among teenagers.[35] The superhero genre further alienated teens by consistently depicting them as kid-sidekicks to adult heroes. Lee broke new ground in 1961 with *The Fantastic Four* by depicting the teenaged Johnny Storm as a full member of the team, not a sidekick, but he was determined to go even further with Spider-Man.[36] His boss, Martin Goodman, insisted that teenagers could not be serious protagonists and called Stan's pitch for Peter Parker, "a comedy character, not a hero."[37] But Lee was convinced that teenagers would buy a comic where the hero, "could be your next door neighbor. Despite his super powers he still has money troubles, dandruff, domestic problems, allergy attacks, self-doubts, and unexpected defeats."[38] His approach worked. Just three years after *Amazing Fantasy #15* hit the shelves, Sally Kempton wrote that old comic books like Batman were enjoyable to read, "Only if you continually remind yourself that you liked him when you were twelve," but that even audiences as old as college students enjoyed Spider-Man.[39]

Part of the comic's appeal lay in its relatable depictions of puberty. Marvel historian Les Daniels writes that Peter Parker was, "Bright, imaginative, but nonetheless an alienated adolescent, [he] might well have been a typical comic book reader."[40] The entire premise functioned as metaphor for puberty; by putting on the mask, the adolescent Peter Parker was able to become Spider-Man, rather than Spider-Boy.[41] While metaphorical depictions of puberty were common, such as one issue when Spider-Man expressed, "hatred of what I've become," and another when he lamented, "Nothing turns out right. … I wish I'd never gotten my super

[35] Wright, 179.
[36] Wright, 204.
[37] Lee, *Excelsior,* 127.
[38] Stan Lee, "Introduction," in Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades*, 9.
[39] Kempton, 5.
[40] Daniels, 96.
[41] Fingeroth, 140.

powers," most of the title's pubescent content was literal.[42] Occasionally it took the form of pubescent fantasy, such as one issue when two girls clamored for Peter's affection at the same time, and another when he defeated in a boxing match a boy who bullied him in front of the whole school.[43] More often, however, the series depicted the challenges of puberty. In one issue, Peter was so unhappy that he wondered if he might have depression.[44] Issue #18 went even further. For the first time, Spider-Man's foe was not a physical villain, but his own self-doubt.[45] Through its depictions of puberty, the title began to resemble a soap opera, as fans eagerly awaited each new release to read not only of Spider-Man's heroic exploits, but also of Peter Parker's latest challenges.[46]

Peter Parker's coming of age story resonated not only with pubescent high schoolers but also with post-pubescent college students. One of the few comic book characters to actually age in their series, Peter graduated in high school in issue #28.[47] In issue #46, he moved out of his Aunt May's house and into his first apartment.[48] Sociologist Paul Lopes argues that Marvel heroes like Spider-Man became popular among college students because they depicted a world that humorously reflected what those students saw as an increasingly absurd reality.[49] Spider-Man's relatable depiction of college life caused his popularity to grow on college campuses throughout the 1960's. By 1966, over 125 colleges had chapters of Marvel's official fan club:

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[42] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #93,* (New York: Marvel, 1971), 8.; Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #1,* (New York: Marvel, 1963), 10.
[43] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #17,* (New York: Marvel, 1964), 1-21. ; Stan Lee and Steve Dikto, *The Amazing Spider-Man #8,* (New York: Marvel, 1964), 6-8.
[44] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #46,* (New York: Marvel, 1967), 20.
[45] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #18,* (New York: Marvel, 1964), 22.
[46] Wright, 212.
[47] Ibid. ; Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #28,* (New York: Marvel, 1965), 17-20.
[48] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #46,* 20.
[49] Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 65.

The Merry Marvel Marching Society.[50]

Teenage readers could also relate to Peter Parker's perpetual financial woes. In the opinion of many, even in President's Johnson's cabinet, the newly raised minimum wage had made it harder for teenagers to find jobs in the early to mid-1960's.[51] Though he was middle-aged by the 1960's, Lee grew up in poverty during the Great Depression, and channeled those experiences into his writing in a way that teenage audiences could connect with.[52] After his uncle's death, but before he resolved to become a hero, Peter briefly considered using his powers to turn to a life of crime in order to support his ageing Aunt.[53] Peter finally found a job as a freelance photographer, but his pay was frequently terrible, and his boss, Newspaper publisher J. Jonah Jameson, was a nightmare.[54] Lee also used the nation's larger economic woes as source material. In one issue, Spider-Man sardonically admonished a villain for destroying a chair because of what the cost of fixing it would be due to inflation.[55] On a metaphorical level, Sally Kempton argues, "Spider-Man's battles are unfailingly personal, hand-to-hand combats between a young man of precarious courage and the powerful social forces which threaten to destroy his hard-won security."[56] Spider-Man's struggles were a fantastical reflection of the struggles of many teenagers throughout the 1960's.

Lee's Spider-Man was not all doom and gloom, however. Despite the realism of the series, Peter's continued hope that his future could be better than his present circumstances infused the comic with a positive attitude. Danny Fingeroth argues this represents an exclusively

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[50] Steve Saffel, *Spider-Man: The Icon,* (London: Titan Books, 2007), 51.
[51] Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960's,* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 100.
[52] Lee, *Excelsior*, 7.
[53] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #1*, 3.
[54] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #2*, (New York: Marvel, 1963), 1-20.
[55] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #73*, (New York: Marvel, 1969), 6.
[56] Kempton, 16.

teenage perception of hope.[57] No matter how many times he was knocked down, Spider-Man always got back up again with the attitude, "Sure I've had my share of bad breaks! Who hasn't? But I've been wasting too much time in self-pity!"[58] While Peter continued to age in the series, he continued to exude this aura of teenage optimism. In one issue when he resolved to quit being Spider-Man, he explicitly equated the event with a teenager becoming an adult. By the end of issue, however, he took back up the alter-ego, symbolizing for the series that while Peter may continue to age, he would never fully grow up and become a mundane adult.[59]

Through relatable depictions of challenges and optimism of adolescence, Lee's writing affirmed the teenage identity at a time of great generational conflict. Comic books were uniquely suited for this task because they helped set the course of consumer culture for younger audiences, and the censorship debate over comics in the 1950's had been, "One of the first and hardest-fought conflicts between young people and their parents in America."[60] Psychologist Fredric Wertham wrote in 1954 that, "chronic stimulation, temptation, and seduction by comic books … are contributing factors to many children's maladjustment."[61] Though not a new phenomenon, juvenile delinquency received a renewed focus when Robert Kennedy was appointed Attorney General in 1960.[62] In this context, it is little wonder that Spider-Man was seen as a menace by many adults within the comic.[63] Peter Parker's employer, J. Jonah Jameson, Spider-Man's most vitriolic opponent, often seemed to echo anti-comic book advocates like Wertham with statements like, "He is a bad influence on our youngsters," "Spider-Man must be outlawed," and,

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[57] Fingeroth, 148-149.
[58] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #18,* 21.
[59] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #50*, (New York: Marvel, 1967), 1-20.
[60] Wright, xiv. ; David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 7.
[61] Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent.* New York: Rinehart, 1954.
[62] Matusow, 107.
[63] Fingeroth, 146.

"The youth of this nation must learn to respect real heroes."[64] All the undeserved hatred caused Spider-Man to lash out on one occasion by echoing sentiments that many alienated teens felt: "If they call me a menace, and treat me like a menace, I might as well be a menace."[65] At his core, however, Peter Parker, like most teenagers, was frustrated by a world gone mad around him, not a delinquent.

As a middle-aged man writing a phenomenally successful teenage character, Lee became an important cultural balancing point. Salvatore Mondello writes, "*The Amazing Spider-Man* was used to skillfully bridge the generation gap which was tearing the nation apart in the late sixties."[66] Lee once said of Marvel comics, "We strive to stress realism in every panel," by creating, "A fantastic premise," and giving it, "as much credibility as possible."[67] By the late sixties, his quest for credibility led Stan to weigh in, through the medium of Peter Parker's teenage voice, on almost every major national issue of the decade. Unlike many teens, who identified with the growing New Left, Spider-Man's political ideology most closely aligned with the traditional American liberalism of the older generation. By putting the ideology of the older generation into the voice of the younger generation, Spider-Man helped keep traditional American liberalism alive among teenagers.[68]

From its inception the series reflected the growing fear of nuclear annihilation. Bitten by a radioactive spider, Peter's very superhero origin story reflects the fact that Lee created him in a consciously atomic age.[69] Spider-Man's bitterest foe Doctor Octopus also owes his origin to

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[64] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #1*, 5.
[65] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #69*, (New York: Marvel, 1969), 20.
[66] Mondello, 237.
[67] Lee, Introduction to *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades*, 9.
[68] Mondello, 237-238.
[69] B.J. Oropeza, "Introduction: Super Hero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 12.

nuclear radiation, displaying the new technology's capacity for both good and evil.[70] A wariness of science's potential for destruction, even beyond atomic fields, pervades the comic. After Dr. Conners, a scientist who accidentally transformed himself into the villain The Lizard, regained sanity he lamented, "I tampered with forces of nature which must not be tampered with."[71] The nation's Cold War fears were clearly evident in the pages of Spider-Man.

As the civil rights movement grew in prominence, Lee did his part to spread a message of racial equality. When asked in 1971 if there was a central message that he tried to promulgate in his comics, Lee responded that if there was it would be, "Don't be bigoted."[72] The comic book industry had long been a hotbed of both subtle and blatant racism. Anti-comic book activist Fredric Wertham testified before the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, "I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry. They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of four before they can read."[73] Under Lee's leadership in the 1960's, Marvel was one of the first comic book publishers to include African-Americans in their fictionalized America.[74] Spider-Man handled racial issues and bigotry both metaphorically and literally. When J. Jonah Jameson continued to spread hatred against Spider-Man even after he saved Jameson's son's life, Stan editorialized, "Unfortunately, if something is shouted loud enough there are always those who will believe it."[75] In the famous anti-drug arc, a black character made it clear that drugs weren't just a black problem, but that the black community was hit the hardest because, "too many of us got no hope."[76] The comic even

[70] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #3*, 3-4.
[71] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #6*, (New York: Marvel, 1963), 20.
[72] Tim Ferris, "Spider-Man Meets Pusher-Man," Rolling Stone (April 1, 1971).
[73] "Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, " (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1954).
[74] Wright, 219.
[75] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #1*, 14.
[76] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #96*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 15.

acknowledged the arguments of the black power movement as a black college student complained, "What's the point of bein' a success in whitey's world? Why must we play by his rules?" True to traditional liberal form, however, Lee did not endorse this view; the boy's father rejected his son's position and instead advocated education as the black man's, "weapon," against, "Bigotry, injustice, and want."[77]

The comic also expressed, and reflected the changing views of family, sexuality, and gender equality during the 1960's. Unlike earlier superheroes, who were depicted as self-sufficient men in a continuation of the frontier archetype of the American hero, Spider-Man was interdependent on others, in both romantic and familial relationships.[78] Defying previous comic book superhero trends, he freely expressed his romantic attraction to women and even considered proposing to his girlfriend.[79] Both Peter's familial relationships, and those of his friends, depicted the breakdown of the American nuclear family. Peter was raised by his Aunt and Uncle, and his friend Harry sought love and approval from his father Norman Osborn, the original Green Goblin, who cared more about his business than his son.[80] The influence of second wave feminism on American society was visible in the comic, as Gwen Stacy chided Peter in one issue, "What a male chauvinist pig thing to say," but sexism still pervaded the comic.[81] The female characters in the series exist almost exclusively as romantic objects of affection for Peter, the artist of the series later claimed, "[Stan] wanted the girls to be sexy and flashy," and Spider-

[77] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #73*, 12.
[78] Anthony Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre.* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109-112.
[79] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #99*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 2.
[80] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #40*, (New York: Marvel, 1966), 3-4.
[81] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #103*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 8.

man would occasionally make comments like, "That's the trouble with women; they can't keep their mouths shut."[82] The 1960's were a period of transition, but gender equality still had a long way to go in the pages of Spider-Man.

Vigilante superhero comics necessarily deal with crime, but Spider-man's depiction of crime and punishment reflected the changes of America's criminal justice system under the leadership of Chief Justice Earl Warren in the 1960's.[83] The newly increased protections for the accused were evident in the comic when Spider-Man was knocked unconscious in a fight, but a police captain ordered that he not be unmasked because, "He's not risking the court upsetting a possible conviction because he may have violated that character's civil rights."[84] The comic also pessimistically portrayed the prison system. One decidedly un-rehabilitated supervillain was released early for supposed "good behavior" but once free immediately returned to a life of crime, only to be stopped outside of the law by Spider-Man.[85] In an issue released within months of the real life Attica Prison riots, the web slinger attempted to stop a riot, but was told by a prisoner, "We're rioting to be treated like human beings," prompting Spider-Man to go on national television to denounce, "An antiquated system that makes prisons breeding grounds for crime."[86] Peter Parker also expressed the increased tension between teenagers and the police in the 1960's. On one occasion he vented, "The more I try to help the law, the more they hunt me, the more they hate me."[87] But in his characteristic balancing act, Lee, "Introduced Captain George Stacy, a retired policeman who understood teenagers … at a time when our more radical

[82] Saffel, 27. ; Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #62*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 17.
[83] Kenneth Pye, "The Warren Court and Criminal Procedure," *Michigan Law Review* 67 (1968): 249-268.
[84] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #65*, (New York: Marvel, 1968), 4.
[85] Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man #37*, (New York: Marvel, 1966), 2.
[86] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #99*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 7, 19.
[87] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #69*, (New York: Marvel, 1969), 20.

youth were calling cops 'fascist pigs.'"[88] Spider-Man expressed discontent with the criminal justice system tempered by the belief that it was not beyond saving.

Through Lee's writing, Spider-Man questioned ideas previously taken for granted in America, and thus won the admiration of the protest movement.[89] A 1965 *Esquire* poll found that college students listed Spider-Man alongside figures like Bob Dylan and Che Guevara as revolutionary icons.[90] Like many college students in the 1960's, the Vietnam War left Peter Parker bitter. When his friend Flash Thompson was drafted, and Peter wondered, "Which is worse? Staying behind while other guys are doing the fighting? Or fighting in a war nobody wants, against an enemy you don't even hate?"[91] In a darkly prophetic moment in a 1967 issue, Peter tried to convince himself that Flash would survive his time in Vietnam by half-heartedly muttering, "The good guys always win … Don't they?"[92] Lee also depicted the Army negatively when a visibly shaken up Flash returned from Vietnam and told his friends of how he tried to stop the Army brass from shelling an innocent community, but was unable to prevent the tragedy.[93] Despite the scathing depictions of Vietnam, Spider-Man still expressed reservations with the protest movement. Shortly after the real-life demonstrations at Columbia University, protests rocked Peter Parker's college. The issue did not support the protestors' methods, but was sympathetic to their concerns.[94]

By taking a stand on national issues in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Lee pioneered the use of comics as a platform to effect social change. In the process, he undermined the longstanding censorship of the comic book industry. After World War II, comic books came under attack for

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[88] Mondello, 234.
[89] Mills, 53.
[90] Wright, 223.
[91] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #83*, (New York: Marvel, 1970), 10.
[92] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #47*, (New York: Marvel, 1967), 20.
[93] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #108*, (New York: Marvel, 1972), 9-10.
[94] Wright, 234. ; Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #68*, (New York: Marvel, 1969), 9-10.

supposedly corrupting America's youth. By the end of 1948 comic books were banned or censored in fifty cities.[95] Dr. Fredric Wertham became the loudest proponent of comic book censorship. His 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, contended that crime comics negatively impacted children emotionally, and all comics were bad for reading development. Despite his publisher's claim that the book was, "thoroughly documented by facts and cases," most of Wertham's arguments rested on anonymous sources and his own personal experiences.[96] Lee later referred to the work as, "Seduction of the Gullible."[97] In response to the criticism of Wertham and others, the comic book industry created the Comics Magazine Association of America to develop a code of self-censorship for the industry. Many assumed that the resulting Comics Code Authority would be wield little actual power, but under the leadership of prominent New York Magistrate Charles F. Murphy it sanitized the entire industry within two years, and distributors began to refuse to print, ship, or sell comic books without the code's seal of approval.[98]

The Comics Code Authority maintained its hold on the industry until a 1971 Spider-Man arc, "Changed the face of comic books forever."[99] Through the influence of advocates like Timothy Leary, drugs like LSD gained popularity throughout the 1960's.[100] As part of its campaign against drugs, President Nixon's Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, approached Stan Lee because of his reputation for tackling social issues in comics, and asked him to write an anti-drug issue of Spider-Man; he agreed to the project.[101] Stan later recalled, "There was no preaching in the copy because that's the surest way to turn kids off. Spider-Man

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[95] Wright, 98.
[96] Wertham, v, 10, 262-263. ; Wright, 157-158.
[97] Lee, *Excelsior*, 91.
[98] Hajdu, 305-310. ; Wright, 172-177.
[99] Daniels, 152.
[100] Matusow, 288-290.
[101] Wright, 239-240.

simply saw his friend [Harry Osborne] going out of his mind because of whatever drug he took."[102] Allegorically mirroring the development of America's drug problem, Harry started abusing entirely legal sleeping pills before turning to harder stuff.[103] Confronted with the seriousness of substance abuse, Peter soliloquized, "My life as Spider-Man is probably as dangerous as any, but I'd rather face a hundred super-villains than toss it away by getting hooked on hard drugs."[104]

Proud with the final product, Lee submitted the issue to the Comics Code Authority for approval, but was denied on the grounds that comics were not allowed to depict drugs. When he explained the Nixon administration's request and was denied a second time, Stan came to a decision; "at that point I figured the Code office was wrong."[105] He published issue #97 without the Code's seal of approval.[106] The issue sold well, despite lacking the seal, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Stan reminisced, "I got letters from parents and teachers and religious leaders who all commended us."[107] The Code buckled after this act of defiance and liberalized its requirements. Though few rules were actually changed, the 1971 revision symbolized a greater attempt to allow more socially relevant content in comics.[108] Lee's vision was catching on.

Stan Lee stopped personally writing Spider-Man in 1972 as he transitioned into a promotional role for Marvel Comics. Since then, the character has expanded from comics to every pop culture medium imaginable, from newspapers and novels to video games, television shows, and movies. Peter Parker's life and adventures remain as relevant today as when he first swung onto the pages of *Amazing Fantasy #15*. Many writers have left their mark on the

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[102] Lee, *Excelsior*, 97.
[103] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #97*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 10-20.
[104] Stan Lee and John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man #96*, (New York: Marvel, 1971), 14.
[105] Daniels, 152.
[106] Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #97,* cover.
[107] Saffel, 60.
[108] Lopes, 68.

character, but none have impacted American culture through the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man* as substantially as Stan Lee's initial 110 issue run. Under his authorship, Spider-Man redefined the American hero to reflect the morally ambiguous reality of the modern world. In the process, the character came to represent the hopes and struggles of teenagers of the 1960's, affirming their identity as a distinct social group. Lee also pioneered the use of popular media as a platform to discuss real-life national issues, a technique that is now standard in almost every form of fiction. In doing so, he undermined the self-censorship that had previously defined the comic book industry, thereby enabling comics to become the cultural icon that they are today. It was a one-in-a-billion chance, but Stan-the-Man and Spider-Man succeeded in radically altering the very core of modern American popular culture.

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